

San José State University
English Department
English 242, Nonfiction Writing Workshop Fall 2018

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Office Hours:	T/TH: 11-11:45; T, 3-3:45
Class Days/Time:	Tuesday: 4:00-6:45
Classroom:	FO 104

Course Format

This is a discussion/writing intensive course. Students will read extensively about the practice of creative nonfiction, read examples of the genre, and write/revise their own creative nonfiction weekly.

Course Description

Creative nonfiction is a booming field. The term includes a wide range of prose: memoir, travel writing, biography, science writing, nature writing, personal and lyrical essays, feature writing. In this class we will focus on part of that range, with an emphasis on three fields of nonfiction: writing about place (ecological awareness), about self (memoir), about events historical and contemporary (integrating history/research). The goals of this course are to help you improve your writing; to practice research, as well as interview and observational skills; to recognize the strengths of published work; and to discuss your own and others' prose. But first and foremost, it is a writing course.

Through October, each student will turn in weekly (almost) short pieces, 3-4 pages each week. Each student will post/send to group his/her weekly prose by **Monday at noon**. The class will be divided into 2-3 groups, and each group will read the groups' essays and write a 200-word critique of the essays for each class workshop. In class workshops, students will discuss critiques of short pieces.

By mid-October, if not before, each student should have ideas about a longer piece—it may grow out of one of the short pieces or you may develop a new idea or work on a longer work in progress. Each student will meet with me to discuss the longer prose work (10 pages). These longer pieces will be discussed in November workshops, as indicated on the syllabus.

Our weekly sessions will have three parts. In the first 45 minutes or so we will discuss readings and focus on a kind of writing and/or the writers' techniques. Another 45-60 minutes will be devoted to workshops; the class will be divided into three groups to critique each other's writing. In the last part of class, the group will discuss any topics, problems, issues, etc. that the individual sessions have raised.

Course Learning Outcomes

The goal of this course is to introduce students to a variety of approaches to creative nonfiction. At the end of the course, students should:

- a. Recognize and appreciate various genres of creative nonfiction, with a focus on three types discussed extensively (place, memoir, essay incorporating research) and another types selected by individual students for the longer essay. In the early part of the semester, class discussions will focus on writing about Place, writing memoir; writing about historical/contemporary events. In long papers, students can focus, in addition, on travel, food, sports, science or biography.
- b. Appreciate longer works of creative nonfiction and attend readings of published writers who come to SJSU. (Note: 4-unit enhancement. Writers TBA. *Reed* launch, Sept. 21)
- c. Practice writing short pieces in several genres, with the goal of appreciating the challenges of each. This is satisfied by writing assignments throughout the semester.
- d. Improve his/her own writing by working on clarify, precision, interest, voice, etc. Satisfied by essays written throughout the semester, revisions and final long essay.

Required texts

Creative Nonfiction, 2nd edition, Philip Gerard

On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: *The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, William Zinsser

Killers of the Flower Moon

This Boy's Life, Tobias Wolff

Recommended: *Educated: A Memoir*, Tara Westover

Course requirements and assignments

A. Class participation, 25%: This grade is determined by written/oral comments on your peers' writing during workshops, student presentations, discussion of prose readings and a writer's journal.

Presentations: Working in pairs, students will present a 10-minute talk on the reading for the week—focusing on the required reading but noting any important ideas gleaned from the selected essays assigned. Please comment on specific strengths of the readings and how the material can be useful in our own writing.

Discussion and Workshops: Since this is a collaborative class, attendance is key. Please attend each class, arrive on time, post weekly writing by Monday at noon, and come prepared to discuss readings of other writers, your peers and professional writers.

Writer's journal: Please bring your journal to each class. Your journal will contain scraps of dialogue, your observations, ideas for essays, thoughts, responses to books you read, ideas to research—comments on websites like Creativenonfiction.org, etc. See Didion.

B. Short creative work posted online for class workshops (8), 25%. For the first part of the semester, please turn in **online** a 750-1200 word piece by Monday at noon. The deadline is important, as it will give other students ample time to read your work. Work not submitted on time will receive lower grades.

Each student will write 8 short pieces. I will also comment on your work weekly, unless you ask me to not to write comments, and I will indicate your grade with a number, 1-4 (see below).

Post here (private): [English242.editme.com](https://www.editme.com)

Use this format for heading:

NAME_ASSIGNMENT 1_TITLE

C. Longer essay, drafts and in-class workshops, 25% Please schedule a conference as soon as you have an idea about your longer piece.

D. Portfolio: 25 % Any revised short pieces + final draft of longer work. The portfolio will be turned in at end of the semester and will include:

- a. 8 short pieces, original + any substantial revisions of weekly work (marked clearly as revisions—you may choose to revise one, some, or all. The final portfolio is based on quality, not quantity)
- b. polished draft of longer essay (minimum, 10 pp)
- c. journal. **You may opt for me not to read all of your journal;** I may ask you to read from it during a conference, before class, after class. For your portfolio,

you may turn in entire journal OR show me entire journal and include in portfolio 5 of your best ideas/notes/observations

- d. Review of one SJSU reading/campus read event (other readings with instructor permission).

Grading Information

Please type and double space all work and include page numbers.

I will grade short pieces as submitted to me. Students may choose to submit work to me weekly; to submit selected pieces; to submit only at the end of the semester.

4: Excellent work on the assignment, a superior piece of writing: thoughtful, original, imaginative, substantive. The point is supported throughout the essay. Language is sharp, style elegant. Sentences are powerful, varied. The work is error free—no spelling or punctuation errors or grammatical errors. Posted by Wed. noon.

3: Good work, successful completion of assignment and solid writing. The reader's attention is held throughout. This essay may lack some of the elegance, heft, vision, clarity of a 4 essay. The central idea is clear but may not be supported or developed throughout. Transitions may need some work, structure might need tightening. Some minor punctuation or grammatical errors. Sentence structure contributes to overall vision of the work, but may need to be tightened or varied.

2. Completed assignment, but the work may lack depth, precision, keen observation. It meets the guidelines for the assignment but does not go beyond expectations in any way. The point may be too broad or insufficiently supported. There may be spelling and grammatical errors, but not so many that they are distracting. It lacks originality, significant purpose, or point of view.

1. Unsatisfactory work. Lacks insight, originality. It may be too short, too general. Sentences may be clumsy.

Grading: The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU *Catalog* ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A=excellent; B=above average; C=average; D=below average; F=failure. In this course, as in all English Department courses, I will comment on and grade the quality of writing (grammar, organization, clarity, specificity, etc.) as well as the quality of the ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

Determination of Grades

Final grades for the course are determined by participation in writing workshops and class discussions, reading of assigned material, submission of essays on time, and submission of a final class portfolio.

Classroom Protocol

Please come to class on time. All cell phones must be put away during class. Please read all assignments, listen respectfully to your classmates and contribute to class discussions. To prepare fully for workshops, read your peers assignments carefully and come to class with thoughtful commentary on the writing of each person in your group.

University Policies

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' [Syllabus Information web page](http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>

English 242, Creative Nonfiction, Fall 2018

Course Schedule (draft—I'm waiting to hear from two guest speakers and may have to adjust October dates some.)

WEEK 1: August 21, Introduction and visual “biography” exercise. Gerard, Chapter I; “The Line Between Fact and Fiction,” PDF. Discussion of Flash nonfiction: Concrete words/images; objectify emotions; start in the middle; reflect.

Dinty Moore, editor of a guide to flash nonfiction notes that the “brief essay needs to be hot from the first sentence.... The heat might come from language, from an image, from voice or point-of-view, from revelation or suspense, but there must always be a burning urgency of some sort translated through each sentence, starting with the first.”

WEEK 2: August 28, On Writing. Zinsser, Part I; Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook” and excerpts from Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women were Birds*, PDFs.

Workshop 1: Flash Nonfiction.

WEEK 3: September 4, On Writing. Anne Fadiman “Inset a Carrot” and “Eternal Ink,” PDFs. Amy Tan, “Mother Tongue”
<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/guorui/2008/02/06/mother-tongue-by-amy-tan/>

Workshop 2: Flash Nonfiction, mothers or fathers.

WEEK 4: September 11, Writing Places. What makes one place different from another? Why does it matter? Zinsser, Part II; Gerard, Chapter 2; Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction” and E.B. White, “Once More to the Lake” PDFs. **Reader:** Wallace Stegner, “At Home in the Fields of the Lord,” from *The Sound of Mountain Water*. John Steinbeck, “My War with the Ospreys.”

Workshop 3: Write about an important place in your life and what happened there.

WEEK 5: September 18, Writing Places, sensual details: Gerard Chapter 5; Gretel Ehrlich, from *The Silence of Open Places*, PDF. **Reader:** Annie Dillard, “Nightwatch” and “Seeing.”; Fadiman, *At Large and At Small*, “Collecting Nature”

Workshop 4: select one:

- a. Go into nature after dark, alone, and record what you experience with as many senses as possible, considering: kinesthetics, balance, directional sense, vibration in earth, air pressure, vertigo, peripheral vision, the olfactory landscape, air

temperature, wind speed and direction, height or depth, pain, air currents, water currents, gravity, light, harmonics. Taste things.

- b. Walk very slowly along the Guadalupe River. Walk in Kelly Park. Walk in Vasona Park, along the pond. Walk at the perk ponds off Almaden Expressway and Blossom Hill Road. Hike in the Almaden Quicksilver County park. Hike Almaden Park.

Select one of the above and write about the sensual details of place.

WEEK 6: September 25, What about “I”? “Zinsser, Ch. 20, 21; **Reader:** Phillip Lopate, “Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character,” Philip Gerard, “Taking Yourself Out of the Story: Narrative Stance and the Upright Pronoun”; “Steinbeck, “Harvest Gypsies.”

Workshop 5: Without using any first-person pronouns (I, Me, my, mine, we our, ours, etc) write an accurate scene about an incident you witnessed first-hand.

“To have humility,” observed Dag Hammarskjöld, “is to experience reality, not in relation to ourselves but in its sacred independence.”

WEEK 7: October 2, People: The art of interview/profile/research. See <http://journalism-education.cubreporters.org/2010/08/how-to-write-profile-story.html> Zinsser, Chapters 11, 12. Gerard, Chapter 4. **Reader,** Jane Kramer, “Cowboy”; Gay Talese, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a638/frank-sinatra-has-a-cold-gay-talese/>

WEEK 8: October 9, Memoir: Zinsser, Chapter 24. *This Boy’s Life*, Tobias Wolff, 1-84

Assignment 6: Character sketch, read to class. Class workshop.

WEEK 9: October 16, Memoir: Zinsser, Chapter 14. *This Boy’s Life*, complete.

Assignment 7: Write a scene about something that happened in your family.

WEEK 10: October 23, Memoir. Gerard, Chapters 7, 8. **Reader:** Mary Ruffle, “On Fear” from *Madness, Rack, and Honey*.

Assignment 8: Write about something bad that happened to you in grade school.

WEEK 11: October 30, Research and Revision: Considering the Long Essay, October 30: Guest Speaker: On structure. On revision. On interviews. Gerard Chapters 6, 10, 11.

WEEK 12: November 6, The Long essay. Gerard, Chapter 3; Zinsser 22, 23, 25. Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, 1-108.

Workshops on longer pieces, November 6-December 4. Each week 2-3 students will read and workshop their longer piece for the semester.

WEEK 13: November 13, The Long essay. Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, Grann, 11-244

Workshops

WEEK 14: November 20, The Long essay. Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, complete.

Workshops

WEEK 15: November 27, The Long Essay Reader, Ruffle, "Someone Reading a Book is a sign of Order in the World," from *Madness, Rack and Honey*.

Workshops

WEEK 16: December 4, Reflections

Workshops

Suggested Reading, a very incomplete list, just a few of my favorites...

Memoir/Autobiography

Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness, William Styron

The Liar's Club, Mary Karr

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, Dave Eggers

The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother, James McBride

Running in the Family, Michael Ondaatje

One Writer's Beginnings, Eudora Welty

The Glass Castle, Jeannette Walls

The Kid, Dan Savage

The Road to Coorain, Jill Ker Conway

This Boy's Life, Tobias Wolff

Educated: A Memoir, Tara Westover

A Celtic Childhood by Bill Watkins

The Wind Is Not a River by Brian Payton

Not My Father's Son by Alan Cummings

Dreams of My Father, Barack Obama

On Writing, Stephen King

Biography

Composing a Life, Mary Catherine Bateson

Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice, Janet Malcolm

Nature

Blue Meridian, Peter Matthiesen

Arctic Dreams, Barry Lopez

The Practice of the Wild, Gary Snyder

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, Terry Tempest Williams

Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, Kathleen Norris

Travel

Blue Latitudes, Tony Horowitz

A Russian Journal and *Sea of Cortez* John Steinbeck

Journalism

The Road to Wigan Pier, George Orwell

Confederates in the Attic, Tony Horowitz

May you Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India,
Elisabeth Bumiller

Hell's Angels, Hunter S. Thompson

"Act Five," Episode 218, *This American Life*. And others.

Humor

Me Talk Pretty One Day, David Sedaris

When You are Engulfed in Flames, David Sedaris (and every one of his collections)

Into the Woods, Bill Bryson (and travel)

Why Not Me? Mindy Kalig

