

Creative Nonfiction

ENGL 204/304/404

Fall 2015

10-11:15 a.m., T,R (PL 214)

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"I think it's a beginning for authors to acknowledge that they are myth-makers and that, if they are widely read, will have an influence that will last for many years. I don't think there's a strong awareness of that now. And we have such a young culture that there is an opportunity to contribute wonderful new myths to it -- which will be accepted."

—Kurt Vonnegut, *interview with Walter James Miller, WNYC's Reader's Almanac (1974)*

Course Description:

This course begins with the questions: What is creative nonfiction? What are its various components and applications? What makes it such a popular genre? And, how does a writer dramatize fact in a way that doesn't cross over into fiction?

Required text: *The Best American Essays of the Century*, edited by Joyce Carol Oats and Robert Atwan.

Student Outcomes:

To answer these questions, and more, we will read and dissect the best American creative nonfiction writing of the past century, including today's best writers, to discover their practical structural guidelines, learn key insights into theme and metaphor, and develop applicable tools that will improve every student's understanding of, and writing in, this unique, and highly marketable, genre.

Attendance and Participation:

Attendance and participation are *essential*. You get one free absence (if it's absolutely unavoidable), but still must do the assigned work. Please exchange phone numbers and/or emails with a classmate now.

Grading & Evaluation:

Attendance and Participation (15%). Come to every class and engage thoughtfully and respectfully in lessons and discussions to earn full credit in this category.

Required Writing:

1. Personal Mission Statement (10%):

A statement of your purpose, and practical objectives, for learning the craft of creative nonfiction (1-2 pages double-spaced, 250-500 words).

2. Craft Essays (10% X 4 = 40%):

To be assigned (3-4 pages each, 750- 1,000 words). Hand in each essay on time, within the require word count, with focused writing on the assigned craft discipline to earn full credit.

3. Writer's Notebook (20%):

The Writer's notebook will be used to annotate all readings, reflect on and plan the writing of each craft essay, and to prepare for discussions in each Thursday Workshop. Writer's Notebooks can contain anything and everything that inspires and instructs your creative mind.

4. Reflective Essay (15%):

A summary essay detailing the craft journey of the writer upon reflection of the goals set in his or her Personal Mission Statement (3-4 pages, 750 – 1,000 words). Be introspective and honest, take great care to craft your writing well, and you will earn full credit.

It's a writing class so, yes, handing in work that is competent and error free matters a great deal.

Schedule (subject to change):

Week One

Tuesday:

Introductions. Course goals and format. Reviewing the syllabus. Syllabus class feedback exercise and Q&A. My Writer's Notebook.

What is Creative Nonfiction? Defining the genre.

For Thursday, read and annotate: "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" by Gay Talese (will be provided digitally or in hard copy).

Annotate in your Writer's Notebook and reflect in preparation for Thursday Workshop.

Thursday Workshop:

"Frank Sinatra Has a Cold". Craft lesson and discussion. Writing exercise.

Writing Assignment #1: Personal Mission Statement due.

Week Two

Tuesday:

How Well Do You Write? Grammar, spelling, punctuation and other rudiments of being taken seriously as a communicator of ideas.

A Writer's Tools. Creative space. Routine.

Annotate assigned reading in Writer's Notebook.

Thursday Workshop:

Discuss Mission Statements and assigned reading. Writing exercise.

Week Three

Tuesday:

Finding an Original Subject. How to get ideas: novelty and originality. The Audience: Who is Your Reader?

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons, writing exercises.

Writing Assignment #2: First Essay due (topic TBD).

Week Four

Tuesday:

Research: reading, taking notes, reflecting. The Art of the Interview.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons and revisions on First Essay.

Week Five

Tuesday:

Structure and Outlining: the wizard behind the curtain. The Lead. Competence, Style, and Attitude. Making, and fulfilling, a promise to the reader.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons and writing exercises in Structure and Outlining. Discussion of assigned reading.

Writing Assignment #3: Second Essay due.

Weeks Six

Tuesday:

Dramatizing a True Story. Evoking mystery and Suspense. Taking creative license. Boundaries. Law and ethics (Why did Oprah get to yell at James Frey on TV over *A Million Little Pieces*?)

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons and revision on Second Essay.

Week Seven

Tuesday:

Character and Dialogue. Getting (or inventing) the quote.

For "Writing About Place" discussion on Tuesday, read and annotate *Stickeen* by John Muir and *Pamplona in July* by Ernest Hemingway.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons and discussion on assigned reading. Character and dialogue writing exercises.

Week Eight

Tuesday:

Imagery and The Fascinating Detail. Writing About Place.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons and discussion on assigned reading. Writing exercises on imagery, detail, and "painting with words."

*Turn in your Writer's Notebook.

Writing Assignment #4: Third Essay due.

Week Nine**Tuesday:**

Revision (with and without an editor).

*Receive back your Writer's Notebook.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons and revisions on Third Essay.

Week Ten**Tuesday:**

Magazine Writing: action, angle, and anecdotes.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Discussion of assigned reading. Magazine-style writing exercises.

For "Humor in Nonfiction" discussion Tuesday, read *Corn-pone Opinions* by Mark Twain and *Life with Daughters: Watching the Miss America Pageant* by Gerald Early.

Week Eleven**Tuesday:**

Humor in Nonfiction.

Thursday:

Craft lessons and exercises in writing humor.

For "Memoir" on Tuesday, read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou.

Week Twelve

Tuesday:
Memoir.

Thursday Workshop:
Craft lessons, discussion, and writing exercises in the art of memoir.

Writing Exercise #4: Fourth Essay due.

For Tuesday's discussion on "Blogging", bring examples of your favorite blogs to class for analysis (devices allowed).

Week Thirteen

Tuesday:
Blogging: authenticity and honesty, or cultivating a persona?

Thursday:
Craft lessons and revision of Fourth Essay.

Week Fourteen

Tuesday:
Endings: bringing it all home. Callbacks. Selecting a title. Theme and personal philosophy (without preaching). Review endings, titles and themes from various essays read throughout the semester, and in the best creative nonfiction ever written.

Thursday Workshop:
Review and discussion of our favorite endings, titles, and themes from the four craft essays this semester.

Week Fifteen

Tuesday:
Frank discussion and Q&A about publication (book, magazine, online) and the basics of having your creative nonfiction optioned and/or adapted for film.

Turn in FINAL PORTFOLIO. Includes: Personal Mission Statement, Four (revised) Craft Essays, Writer's Notebook, and Reflective Essay.

Thursday Workshop:
LAST CLASS. Student-led readings. Class party.

Student Conduct

Our Tuesday and Thursday meetings are both in the "workshop-style" format so regular, thoughtful, and courteous engagement in our lively discussions is not just encouraged, but *required*, to get the most benefit from the learning experience. Your grade is based 15 percent on attendance and participation, so I pledge to always do my best to present challenging material, spark interesting discussion, moderate difficult topics, and steer our discourse to stay focused on the aspects most relevant to our purposes.

Please don't chew gum, or mess around with your cell phone, laptop, tablet, Google Glass, iWatch, Rubick's Cube -- or engage in any other rude, distracting behaviors.

This class is *old school*. I will prepare handouts to accompany important lessons. Any class notes will be taken by hand in your Writer's Notebook, not typed into a device. Video or audio recording of class is not allowed.

It is a student's responsibility to be aware of assignment deadlines.

Computer problems, power failures, and Internet difficulties are not excuses for missed assignments. Have back-up plans for possible technical glitches.

Academic Accommodations:

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with a documented disability are eligible for support services and accommodations. If a student wishes to request an accommodation, please contact the Director of Academic Support Services, Henry Conover, at (775) 831-1314 x7534, hconover@sierranevada.edu or go to the OASIS offices on the third floor of Prim Library within the first week of the semester.

The SNC E-mail System:

The SNC e-mail system is the official communication vehicle among students, faculty members and administrative staff and is designed to protect the confidentiality of student information as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 Act (FERPA). Students should check their college e-mail accounts daily during the school year. Students have a right to forward their SNC e-mail to another e-mail account (for example, @hotmail or @gmail). However, confidentiality of student information protected by FERPA cannot be guaranteed for SNC e-

mail forwarded to an outside vendor. Having e-mail redirected does not absolve a student from the responsibilities associated with official communication sent to his or her SNC e-mail account.

Faculty/Student Honor Code:

The faculty of SNC believes students must be held to high standards of integrity in all aspects of college life in order to promote the educational mission of the College and to encourage respect for the rights of others. Each student brings to the SNC community unique skills, talents, values and experiences which, when expressed within the community, contribute to the quality of the educational environment and the growth and development of the individual. Students share with members of the faculty, administration and staff the responsibility for creating and maintaining an environment conducive to learning and personal development, where actions are guided by mutual respect, integrity, responsibility and trust. The faculty and students alike must make diligent efforts to ensure high standards are upheld by their colleagues and peers as well as themselves. Therefore faculty and students accept responsibility for maintaining these standards at Sierra Nevada College and are obligated to comply with its regulations and procedures, which they are expected to read and understand.

Consequences for Violating the Honor Code:

SNC students and faculty share the responsibility for maintaining an environment of academic honesty. Thus, all are responsible for knowing and abiding by the SNC Faculty/Student Honor Code published in the current SNC Catalog. Faculty are responsible for presenting the honor code and consequences for violating it to students at the start of their classes AND for reporting all incidences of academic dishonesty to the Provost. Students are responsible for knowing what constitutes cheating, plagiarism and fabrication, and refraining from these and other forms of academic dishonesty. Violations of the honor code become part of a student's academic record.

SNC's Disciplinary Sanctions for Honor Code Violations:

- 1st Offense: Student receives a zero for assignment/exam and counseling with faculty on the honor code, consequences for violating the honor code, and the value of academic honesty in learning.
- 2nd Offense: Student fails course and receives counseling with faculty on the honor code, consequences for violating the honor code, and the value of academic honesty in learning.
- 3rd Offense: Student is expelled.

The SNC Mission Statement:

Sierra Nevada College graduates will be educated to be scholars of and contributors to a sustainable world. Sierra Nevada College combines the liberal arts and professional preparedness through an interdisciplinary curriculum that emphasizes entrepreneurial thinking and environmental, social, economic and educational sustainability. Core themes are Liberal Arts, Entrepreneurial Thinking, Professional Preparedness and Sustainability.