

Creative Nonfiction

ENGL 204/304/404

Spring 2016

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

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Required text: *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry*, by Jon Ronson (Riverhead Books)

Required Writer's Notebook: Classic, black and white marbled composition notebooks are available for this class in the SNC store.

"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 fully cross over into fiction?

Student Outcomes:

To answer these questions, and more, we will read and dissect examples of the best current and classic creative nonfiction to discover each piece's 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.

An Up-Front Note on Attendance:

Yes, I notice when you're not there. For a high letter grade in this course, attendance is *essential*. You must

inform the **professor** beforehand when you expect to be absent. Random, unexcused absences will hurt your overall grade for the course. Also, if you miss class, you are still responsible for completing the assigned work and turning it in on time. Please exchange phone numbers and/or emails with a classmate now.

Grading & Evaluation:

1. Attendance, Participation, and Writer's Notebook (50%):

Come to every class and engage thoughtfully and respectfully in lessons, discussions, and writing exercises to earn full credit for Attendance and Participation.

Use your Writer's Notebook for in-class exercises, annotating reading assignments, reflecting on and planning the writing of each craft essay, and to prepare for future class discussions. Writer's Notebooks can contain anything and everything that inspires and instructs your creative mind. I will review the content of your Writer's Notebook(s) for the mid-term and final of the course.

2. Personal Mission Statement (5%):

On the first day of class, write a statement of your purpose and practical objectives for learning the craft of creative nonfiction (1-2 pages, 250-500 words).

3. Craft Essays (20% X 2 = 40%):

Essay #1 will serve as your mid-term and Essay #2 will be your final. Each will be 1,500 words (5-6 typed, double-spaced pages) and will be on topics of your choosing. Hand in each essay on time, at the require word count, with writing focused on the assigned craft discipline (first draft and revision) to earn full credit.

4. Reflective Essay (5%):

On the last day of regular classes, write a summary essay detailing your craft journey upon reflection of the goals you set in your Personal Mission Statement (1-2 pages, 250-500 words). Be introspective and honest, 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. Writer's Notebook. Write Personal Mission Statement.

What is Creative Nonfiction? Defining the genre.

For Thursday, read and annotate: "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" by Gay Talese (will be provided digitally and/or in hard copy). Annotate in your Writer's Notebook and reflect in preparation for Thursday.

Thursday:

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

Week Two

Tuesday:

"Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" (cont.)

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.

Thursday:

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

Week Three

Tuesday:

Writing exercise. Discuss class text. Structure and Outlining: the wizard behind the curtain. The *Lede*.

Structure lesson on the magazine piece "What is that, Velvet?" by Chris Millis

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday:

Craft lessons, writing exercises.

Week Four

Tuesday:

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

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday:

Craft lessons. Writing exercises.

Week Five

Tuesday:

Competence, Style, and Attitude. Making, and fulfilling, a promise to the reader.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday:

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

*Turn in Essay #1.

Weeks Six

Tuesday:

Dramatizing a True Story. Evoking mystery and Suspense. Taking creative license. Boundaries. Law and ethics.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday:

Craft lessons.

*Receive back Essay #1 with notes for revision.

Week Seven (Mid-term)

Tuesday:

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

Assigned reading for "Writing About Place" discussion.

Thursday:

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

*Turn in revised Essay #1.

*Marking progress on your Writer's Notebook.

Week Eight

Tuesday:

Imagery and The Fascinating Detail.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday:

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

Week Nine

Tuesday:

Revision (with and without an editor).

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Craft lessons. Writing workshop exercises.

Week Ten

Tuesday:

Magazine Writing: action, angle, and anecdotes.

Read & annotate assigned reading.

Thursday Workshop:

Discussion of assigned reading. Magazine-style writing exercises.

Assigned reading for discussion on humor in nonfiction.

Week Eleven

Tuesday:

Humor in nonfiction.

Thursday:

Craft lessons and exercises in writing humor.

Assigned reading for discussion on memoir.

Week Twelve

Tuesday:

Memoir.

Thursday Workshop:

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

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

*Turn in Essay #2.

Week Thirteen

Tuesday:

Blogging: authenticity and honesty, cultivating an online persona

Thursday:

Craft lessons. Writing workshop exercises.

*Receive back Essay #2 with notes for revision.

Week Fourteen

Tuesday:

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

Endings: bringing it all home. Callbacks. Selecting a title. Theme and having a personal philosophy (without preaching). Review endings, titles, and themes from various pieces read throughout the semester.

Write Reflective Essay.

Thursday:

LAST CLASS. Student-led readings. Class party.

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

Week Fifteen

FINALS WEEK.

Student Conduct

Our Tuesday and Thursday meetings are in the "workshop-style" format so, to get the most benefit from the learning experience, regular, thoughtful, and courteous engagement in our lively discussions is not just encouraged – it's *required*. Your grade is based 40 percent on Attendance, Participation and the use of your Writer's Notebook, 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. Show respect and ye shall receive it.

This class is *old school*. When necessary, I will provide handouts to accompany important lessons. Any in-class notes will be taken by hand in your Writer's Notebook, not typed into a device. Video and/or audio recording of class is not allowed – unless approved for special in-class purposes.

*****DO NOT THINK YOU WILL SPEND OUR TIME TOGETHER STARING INTO YOU OPEN LAPTOP AND/OR CHECKING YOUR MOBILE DEVICE.*****

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.