

English 91: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction (Memoir & Personal Essays)
Stanford University, Winter 2016
Tu/Th 3:00 – 4:50 PM
Wallenberg Hall (Building #160), Room #322
Instructor: Greg Wrenn (gjlwrenn@stanford.edu)

Office: Margaret Jacks (Building 460), Room #213
Office Hours: Tu/Th 5-6:30 PM



“What happened to the writer isn’t what matters; what matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that, the power of a writing imagination is required.”

—Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (2001)

“Facebook and MySpace are crude personal essay machines.”

—David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (2010)

Course Description

As we write essays this quarter, I’ll be encouraging you to see the writing process as an exploratory quest. An unmapped journey through beguiling, surprising thoughts and feelings. A labyrinth. To paraphrase memoirist Patricia Hampl, we don’t aspire to write *what* we know; we write *in order* to know. Indeed, the best essays feel like archaeological dig sites around which the dust is still settling, rather than like stuffy, curated museums.

Each week we will read celebrated essayists such as James Baldwin, David Sedaris, and Joan Didion in order to inspire us, in addition to lesser-known contemporary essayists like Amy Leach, Ander Monson, and Eula Biss. Along the way, we will aspire to exceptional craft, paying special attention to plot, scene, dialogue, imagery, setting, characterization, point of view/persona, research, syntax, and figurative language.

My wish is for each of you to walk away less timid as artists, more open to the mystery of language and life.

Required Texts

Coursepack

Course Requirements

Final Portfolio: 60%

 In-class exercises

 5-7 page memoir essay

 10-12 page final personal essay

Class Participation: 25%

Workshop Letters: 15%

** The final drafts of the essays included in the final portfolio must show significant evidence of revision—not just editing—in order to earn full credit.*

Attendance and Class Participation

My attendance policies reflect the absolute importance of your physical presence in our classroom. Each absence in excess of 1—and each tardy in excess of 2—lowers your final grade by 1/3 of a letter grade. (For example, an A- becomes a B+.) 5 or more absences results in a failing grade for the course. **If you do not show up to class the day of your workshop, barring extraordinary circumstances such as hospitalization, your final grade will be dropped 1/3 of a letter grade.**

Your intellectual and emotional presence in the form of class participation—asking thought-provoking questions, answering questions, basically adding to the richness of our class by being prepared and sharing your insights—is also extremely vital. To earn full participation points, please contribute at least one substantive thing to each class discussion. In addition, electronic devices—especially cell phones but also laptops and iPads—must be turned off for the duration of class, even during the break. Talk to each other. Laugh with each other. Make eye contact. **If you need to use your phone or computer, please step outside. We are building a writing community!** 😊

Assignments

We'll spend nearly all class meetings discussing assigned readings and your own work.

At least 48 hours before an essay of yours is being workshopped, you'll email it to us as a DOC or DOCX attachment, and we will each print a copy of it to read, comment on, and bring to workshop. As far as formatting is concerned, please use 12-point Times New Roman font and 1-inch margins (top, bottom, left, and right). Use the standard MLA formatting for heading, title, and page numbers (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>).

Right after an essay is workshopped, a hardcopy letter from each of us will be given to the writer—the workshop letters are not emailed to the writer. In these letters, you’ll offer constructive feedback that notes both strengths and weaknesses in the writing and offers ideas on further developing the ideas, voice, and structure. These should be approximately 500 words in length and include specific details from the text. A copy of each of your letters will be handed to me as well. If a letter is not thoughtful and rigorous, I will ask you to redo it.

You’re required to attend three readings, though I encourage you to attend as many University-sponsored writing events as possible. You’ll usually see me in the audience. Check the Creative Writing Program website (<http://creativewriting.stanford.edu/event-list>) and “like” Stanford Creative Writing on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/stanfordcw>) for up-to-date information. One of the three “readings” can be a Poet’s House or Art of Writing session.

Mid-quarter I’ll meet individually with you in a required conference to discuss your overall development—missing this conference or canceling it (or any other meeting with me) at the last minute is not acceptable and will affect your final grade. Again, I’m happy to conference with you during my office hours or at another mutually agreeable time—for me, meeting with you during office hours and over “literary meals” is the most rewarding aspect of teaching.

Please do not discard any completed assignments with my feedback on them. At quarter’s end you’ll submit a final portfolio with revisions (include the scanned drafts with my comments on them); and an extended letter to me of at least 1000 words assessing your revision choices, tracking your growth as a writer during the quarter, providing an overview of future writing possibilities, and summarizing your experiences (using specific details!) at the three readings. If you’d like to get specific feedback on your final portfolio, at the end of the quarter please make an appointment to meet with me in the Spring.

Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (650-723-1066 or <http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae>).

Honor Code

The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work.

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

All work must adhere to the University's policies on academic integrity. Failure to cite work that is not your own constitutes plagiarism, **as does the dual submission of work** (submitting a piece to this course that you submitted to another).

Some Essential Questions to Guide Our Reading and Writing

[taken from the *Tell It Slant* website: <http://www.mhprofessional.com/sites/tellitlant/>]

1. What is “creative” about “creative nonfiction?”
2. When does the “creative” part become fiction?
3. What are the ethical considerations writers must take into account?
4. What writerly techniques are most effective in this genre?
5. How do writers effectively structure pieces in this genre?
6. How do we characterize a strong “voice” in this genre?
7. How do we overcome inhibition while writing in this genre?
8. What about writing other people’s stories? Who “owns” the story?
9. How does a writer gain access to memory? How can this memory be represented both accurately and aesthetically?
10. How do writers incorporate research in creative nonfiction?
11. Why are personal stories interesting to others? What makes them “universal?”

What are your particular questions about creative nonfiction?

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Week 1

January 5: Introductions / What is creative nonfiction? What is the difference between memoir and the personal essay?

[Read James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," Nora Ephron's "A Few Words About Breasts," David Sedaris' "Let It Snow," and Cheryl Strayed's "The Love of My Life."]

January 7: Studio Day: Begin working on a draft of your memoir piece.

[Read Joan Didion's "Goodbye to All That," Eula Biss's "Goodbye to All That," Chang-Rae Lee's "Coming Home Again."]

Week 2

January 12: Bring in first rough draft. Discussion of memoir readings, with in-class exercises.

[Read E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake," Alberto Rios's "Green Cards," "Goodbye to All That," Bruce Snider's "Ammunition."]

January 14: Bring in second rough draft.

[Read Vivian Gornick's "The Situation and the Story."]

Week 3

January 19: Workshop #1

January 21: Workshop #1

Week 4

January 26: Workshop #1

January 28: Workshop #1

Week 5

February 2: Workshop #1

February 4: Workshop #1

[Read Amy Leach's "Please Do Not Yell at the Cucumber," Montaigne's "On Cannibals," Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail."]

Week 6

February 9: Personal Essays

[Read Virginia Woolf's "Death of the Moth," Henry David Thoreau's "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (excerpt from *Walden*), Leslie Jamison's "Empathy

Exams.”]

February 11: Discuss personal essays.

[Read Sei Shonagon’s “Hateful Things” and David Foster Wallace’s “Consider the Lobster.”]

Week 7

February 16: Studio Day: Begin working on a draft of your memoir piece.

[Read Ander Monson’s “The Exhibit Will Be So Marked.”]

February 18: Discuss rough drafts in small groups.

[Read “The Glass Essay” by Anne Carson.]

Week 8

February 23: Workshop #2

February 25: Workshop #2

Week 9

March 1: Workshop #2

March 3: Workshop #2

Week 10

March 8: Workshop #2

March 10: Workshop #2 / Alohas / The Paths Forward

**FINAL PORTFOLIOS—EMAILED TO ME AT AS A SINGLE PDF FILE—ARE DUE
BY 11:59 PM ON SUNDAY, MARCH 20**