

English 210: Writing Nonfiction
Section 00: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30pm to 2:45pm
Oddfellows #206

Professor: Matthew Ferrence
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Office Hours: M 1:30-2:30; Tu 11-12; W 10-11, 1:30-3:30; Tr 3-4
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Required Texts

Williford and Martone. *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*.
Dillard. *The Writing Life*.
Houston. *A Little More About Me*.

Philosophy

An odd genre, this nonfiction, defined in its very name by what it is not. Maybe this is an accident of history, a utility of the publishing industry, or some deep metaphorical nomenclature. Indulge the latter for a moment, and I think we can form a workable notion of the excitement of creative nonfiction. It's true — or true enough, depending on the writer — but beyond that we're bound by little. Form is open. Content is open. Intent is open. So we're done. Write something true, and you have some creative nonfiction.

Well, not quite.

In fact, despite the openness of the form, authors of creative nonfiction are pretty serious about the genre. Yes, the label covers a litany of shapes: personal essay, memoir, lyric essay, immersion journalism. But it also enthusiastically excludes others: straight-ahead journalism, academic argument, technical writing, and on and on and on. It will be our effort in this class to become more familiar with this genre of writing, both as writers and readers.

Compared to the other genres of literary writing, you likely bring to this class a relatively scant background of study. We've all read countless poems and stories and novels and plays by the time we reach college. Creative nonfiction? Probably not so much. Thus we begin with a certain challenge, a lack of common experience or knowledge that would allow quick and breezy understanding of just what we're dealing with. But that's the good thing, too. We enter with little baggage, free to read and write as contemporary practitioners of nonfiction.

Yet because of this freedom, it's important that we engage our study in a careful and controlled manner. The broadest sense of this class will be familiar to you: a workshop of original student writing, bolstered by professional readings. In following that model, we will seek to engage these aspects of CNF:

- a. Content — what do we write about?
- b. Form — how do we shape that material?
- c. Craft — what techniques allow us to engage a and b?

In seeking to fashion writerly answers to these questions, we will limit our authoring to the shorter physical constraints of the essay, though we will seek to engage different aspects of nonfiction within that restriction. We will, therefore, fashion personal essays which might take shape as mini-memoir, lyrical essays, and immersive reportage. In so doing, we'll learn to be better writers and learn more about the genre of creative nonfiction itself.

Assignments and Grading

Original Creative Writing — 50%

1. One short lyrical essay, 3-4 pages.

2. Three 5-7 page essays: one each of a self-focused, other-focused, and place-focused piece.
3. One revision of each of the four above essays.
4. A second polished revision of one of the above.
5. A radical form revision of one of the above.

This is a writing workshop, intended to offer you the opportunity to write and revise original work. You will be required, therefore, to revise each of the pieces you write this semester, making use of the comments you receive in class workshop discussion. I will offer comments on each of these revised pieces, and you will select one of them to work on further in order to create as fine a sample of creative nonfiction as you can. For another piece, you will seek to stretch the boundaries of creative nonfiction and your own abilities. You will refashion the piece in a “radical” form, based on a found non-narrative structure: eg. a quiz, a help-wanted ad, a technical manual. Each sort of revision has its own merits – one to demonstrate the commitment necessary to bring a piece to fullness, the other to demonstrate how, as contemporary writers, we can seek to shake up the boundaries of our textual limits. Your grade for this portion of the class will not be determined until the end of the semester, based on the contents of the portfolio you will hand in at the final exam.

Workshop and Participation — 25%

A significant and important portion of this class will be spent in peer workshop. Your response to your peers’ papers will earn a quarter of your own course grade, reflecting the value I place on these sessions. Each of you will workshop twice over the course of the semester, once in each half of the term.

All writing to be discussed must be distributed on paper to the entire class one meeting before the workshop date. This is crucial, as we must all be afforded ample time to read and respond thoughtfully to your writing. Workshop respondents should come to class prepared to offer incisive and generous criticism for their peers. To prepare for response, each student should make margin comments directly on the distributed texts and must write a separate full-page analysis of the work. Two copies of this response will be brought to class: one will be submitted to me, the other to the author of the work under review.

As a part of your participation grade, you are also required to attend the Single Voice Reading events for this term. You will write a one page informal response to each reading, due at the class meeting directly following the evening reading. Address both the delivery and content of the reading – watch these writers to see how they *perform* their work in front of an audience.

Reading Responses and Critical Introduction — 15%

We will spend considerable time reading professional work this semester, part of our effort to develop nonfiction ears. Prior to the class discussion of each assigned reading, you must post an informal reading response to Sakai. These responses are intended to help you prepare for the class, to form and shape thoughts that will help deepen our conversation. As such, write these responses as a *writer* and not just a reader: focus on how the essay works, on what craft decisions lead to the successful execution of the piece. Preparing these individual responses will also prepare you for your final portfolio, which must include a five-page self-reflective introduction. Part of that introduction should include discussion of your nonfiction influences and how they helped encourage your individual aesthetic. Well-crafted reading responses over the course of the term will provide you with useful foundation material for the final portfolio.

Literary Journal Analysis — 5%

None of us is likely to become fabulously wealthy as a result of our writing. But that’s not to say that our work won’t be read, or that the current state of literary America offers no venue for the sharing of serious creative writing. Quite the contrary, we have a splendid proliferation of literary journals in this country, offering literally hundreds of locales to (with a little luck!) share our work.

Each of you will select a literary journal currently active, order a copy (which usually costs around \$5), and prepare a thorough description: writer's guidelines, genres included, kinds of material between the covers, and a discussion of your favorite work within. The idea is to participate in the wider world of writers, to see what's being published and where, and also to begin to form our own catalogs of potential publication venues. Because this class is devoted to nonfiction writing, your chosen journal must include literary nonfiction. Though the situation has changed over the years, there are still a few journals that do not regularly include creative nonfiction. Conversely, there are a few (*River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Creative Nonfiction* to name three) that are devoted entirely to creative nonfiction. You will turn in a hard copy of this essay **and** post a copy to Sakai, so that everyone in the course will have access to the aggregation of analyses. You will also offer an informal presentation of your summary to class.

Author Analysis — 5%

Each of you will select a contemporary author of creative nonfiction and a book-length work written by that author; class sign-ups will prevent overlap and allow for a wide distribution of authors. In a carefully-constructed five page critical essay, you will provide an overview of the book, author, and craft. Your essay should be attentive to the choices made by the author in style, form, content. You should read and write from the point of view of craft mechanic, taking apart the book to better understand how it was put together. You will turn in a hard copy of this essay **and** post a copy to Sakai, so that everyone in the course will have access to the aggregation of analyses.

Administrative Details

Attendance: Ideally, you should be here. The nature of this class's design makes your presence important and valuable, and your absence will hinder your learning and the learning of your classmates. However, legitimate reasons for absences do arise, and in the case of sickness missing class may be necessary for your health and for the health of the rest of the class. You are the primary evaluator of your ability to attend class, and I trust you to keep your classmates' best interests in mind, both by missing class when ill and by not taking advantage of our compassion. Please email me as soon as you can if you think you will be absent, then visit me during office hours upon your return, so that we can make arrangements to have you make up the work you miss. You may miss two courses in the term without penalty to your grade (though, of course, the spirit of the missed day can never be recovered). Subsequent absences will result in the loss of 10% of your participation (i.e. each further absence reduces your *course* grade by one letter). Any student missing more than four classes will fail the course.

Late Work: We're creative, but we're not lazy. All work turned in after due dates have passed will be assessed a one letter-grade per day penalty. On-time work will be defined as turned in during class. Work turned in, for example, later in the day will be considered late.

Class Conduct: We will treat each other with respect in our written and verbal communication, regardless of ethnicity, gender, orientation, or religious belief. Even when offering critique of writing, we will be civil, gentle, courteous, and fair. Electronic devices will be neither turned on nor used while class is in session.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be tolerated in this class. All work handed in should be your own, and any source materials should be properly cited. Plagiarized work may result in a zero score for the assignment with no chance of revision and, if serious, could result in immediate failure of the course. If you are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism, please refer to Allegheny College's Honor Code.

Daily Schedule

- 1.19 Course Introduction; "Define" Creative Nonfiction; Writing Exercise
- 1.24 "The Pain Scale" (28); "Son of Mr. Green Jeans" (389); Discuss Proposals
- 1.26 "Living Like Weasels" (148); "Leap" (165); **Lyrical Proposal Due**
- 1.31 "Bad Eyes" (360); "Consider the Lobster" (525); Dillard Ch. 1
- 2.2 **Lyrical Essay Draft Due**; "Return to Sender" (152); "Shitdiggers, Mudflats, and the Worm Men of Maine" (420)
- 2.7 **Self Essay Proposal Due**; Ferrence at Clarion
- 2.9 "Somehow Form a Family" (167); Workshops _____ and _____
- 2.14 "Kissing" (176); Dillard Ch. 2; Workshops _____ and _____
- 2.16 **Self Essay Draft Due**; "Mirrorings" (209); "Black Swan" (484);
- 2.21 "High Tide in Tucson" (265); Workshops _____ and _____
- 2.23 "The Essayist if Sorry For Your Loss" (280); Workshops _____ and _____
- 2.28 "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" (290); Dillard Ch. 3; Workshops _____ and _____
- 3.1 **Other Essay Proposal Due**; Ferrence at AWP
- 3.6 "Flight" (308); Workshops _____ and _____
- 3.8 "World on a Hilltop" (242); Workshops _____ and _____
Single Voice Reading 8pm: Nick Lantz and Andrew Mulwani
- 3.13 "Reading History to My Mother" (231); Dillard Ch. 4; Workshop _____
- 3.15 "Embalming Mom" (89); **Literary Journal Analysis Due**
- SPRING BREAK
- 3.27 **Other Essay Draft Due**; "The Fourth State of Matter" (1); "The Undertaking" (334)
- 3.29 "Sun Dance" (201); Dillard Ch. 5 and Ch. 6; Workshop _____
- 4.3 **Place Essay Proposal Due**; "The Beautiful City of Tirzah" (190)
- 4.5 Discuss *A Little More About Me*; Workshop _____
- 4.10 Discuss *A Little More About Me*; Workshop _____
Single Voice Reading 8pm: Pam Houston
- 4.12 **Place Draft Due**; "The Search for Marvin Gardens" (370); Workshops _____ and _____
- 4.17 "Present Tense Africa" (220); Workshops _____ and _____
- 4.19 "A Small Place" (257); Dillard Ch. 7; Workshops _____ and _____
- 4.24 "Interstellar" (354); Workshops _____ and _____
- 4.26 "The Date" (381); Workshops _____ and _____
- 5.1 "This Is Not Who We Are" (401); Dillard Ch. 8; Workshops _____ and _____; **Author Analysis Due**

FINAL EXAM: 00 – 5.8 2:00 p.m.