English 91: Creative Nonfiction
Summer 2017, M/W, 11:30am-1:20pm
Building 20, Room 216
John W. Evans, wevbo@stanford.edu
Office: Margaret Jacks (Bldg 460), Room 211 * 650-723-2638
Office Hours: M 10:00am-11:00am.

Course Description: English 91 introduces the groundbreaking genre of creative nonfiction. Focusing on the many different forms of the essay, we’ll examine works from across time and nationality for craft and technique. Then, we’ll experiment with our own writing exercises. We will pay special attention to the diversity of subjects—travel, science, sports, personal memories, memorable encounters, etc.—that have been examined through this democratic and inclusive form. The latter half of the course will be devoted to workshop, in which students will read and respond to each other’s longer nonfiction projects. A variety of creative and critical exercises, as well as required readings from the course texts and handouts, will foster your understanding and appreciation of the form. Writers at all levels of experience/comfort with creative nonfiction are welcome. Energetic, committed participation is a must.

Required Texts (will be supplemented with handouts):

Course Requirements:
Class Participation (40%): A workshop succeeds when its participants are punctual, engaged, thoughtful, and intellectually invested in each other’s growth and success. Please arrive to each class on-time, in possession of the course materials, having completed the assigned work, and ready to make regular contributions to the class conversation. I expect you to read each other’s work carefully in preparation for workshop. Starting in Week 2, I will partially quantify your class participation in the course by counting the number of times you speak in class. I will also make some brief continuing notes after each class, so as to have a qualitative basis for the evaluation of your participation. Please be thoughtful about sharing the discussion space in the workshop.

Writing Assignments (30%): You should expect to write at the beginning of every class; a notebook or journal might be helpful for organizing this writing. You will develop and present for workshop two (2) short personal essays, one (1) sketch, one (1) mid-term contract/statement of self-reflection, and one (1) longer personal essay. You will write a short critique for each of your colleague’s shorter exercises. You will write a longer critique of each of your colleagues’ longer essays, turning in a copy to the student and to me. All critiques will include specific recommendations for revision with an emphasis on editing and formal structure, theme and subject matter, as well as personal reaction. These critiques will be a resource for revision. You will be required to prepare materials for conferences related to the development of your longer essay.

Leading A Class Discussion (20%): During the quarter, you will either individually or in pairs lead a class discussion on the assigned texts for the day (See Calendar, p.9). You will select passages to emphasize during our discussion, organize your thoughts related to form and theme in the selected essay(s) generally, begin the class discussion on those passages, and distribute a supplemental handout related to your presentation. You do not need to turn in any written work to me for your discussion leading. Comprehensive guidelines are given in the Course Assignments portion of this syllabus (see p.5).
End of Term Analysis (10%): You will speak to the class for about a minute regarding an essay from the assigned readings that had a direct impact on your development as a writer during the quarter. No written work is required and you will not turn in anything (see guidelines, p.7).

Course Grading: The highest grade that you can earn in this class is an “A.” You are always welcome to check-in with me regarding your grade. As detailed above, your grade breaks down by the following:

- Class Participation (40%)
- Writing Assignments (30%)
- Leading a Class Discussion (20%)
- End of Term Analysis (10%)

Coursework Formatting: Please type all assignments in plain 12-point Times New Roman font. Double-space your prose. In the header of each document, include your name, assignment title (e.g., “Reading Response #2”), and page number. All work must be titled. When submitting work to the class, bring copies for each member of the class, and a couple of extra copies. Printers are notoriously unreliable machines; anticipate their failure and plan accordingly. Assignments may NOT be submitted via e-mail.

Absences and Missed Work: You are allowed two absences for the duration of the quarter. Thereafter, your grade will drop a full letter with each absence. If you are more than ten minutes late to class, or if you leave early, it will count as an absence. There are no such things as excused absences in this course—you are given two absences in case of unforeseen circumstances, and additional absences will be penalized regardless of the reason given. In coordination with the Office of Accessible Education, or a university official, I will work with you to best accommodate long-term illnesses, medical situations, or university conflicts. If you miss class, for any reason, it is your responsibility to follow-up with a colleague regarding what you missed, to arrange any missed work, and to come prepared to participate fully in the next class. You will receive an automatic grade of ‘C’ for any assignment submitted after the due date, unless we have made other arrangements prior to the assignment’s deadline.

Paperwork: You will receive a lot of paper in this course, including handouts, student work, and critiques from your fellow students. Be prepared to get organized and consider purchasing a file folder or binder. Do not discard any of your work during the quarter.

The Digital Age: As a courtesy to your colleagues, do not use your laptop, phone, PDA, etc., during class. You will not need to use the internet, create electronic documents during this class, or send electronic messages during this class. Please keep your cell phones turned off and stowed away. An exception is made to this policy for the Week 5 Conferences and In-Class Writing Lab.

Email Updates. I will send out via email class summaries following each class, usually within 24 hours of our meeting. I cannot by Stanford policy distribute student emails for any reason. If you are uncomfortable sharing your email address with me, then you may opt out of the email summaries.

Office Hours and Etiquette: I will hold office hours on Monday from 10:00am to 11:00am. I will also have limited availability to meet by appointment. Feel free to grab me after class or drop by to talk about your work, creative work in general, your grade, etc. These office hours are for your benefit and use. If you have a question or concern about the course, please see me in office hours before you email me. I only check email once a day (at the most).
Conferences: As noted above, I will meet individually with every student at the mid-point of the quarter. I may request an additional conference with you if I think that it would benefit your work or progress.

Criticism: My primary goal as the instructor of this course is to cultivate an environment in which you feel comfortable managing the many vulnerabilities inherent in writing creative nonfiction and sharing it with strangers, while expanding your knowledge base of craft and form. A secondary goal is to demonstrate a particular creative and critical faculty, as I have developed it. To this end, my feedback during workshops is generally positive and encouraging, while my written feedback can be more critical.

Readings: Readings are selected to emphasize those formal and thematic elements that I think will help you to develop as readers and writers of creative nonfiction. I assign more readings than we can discuss in a given class, with the hope of offering many models for your writing. The student(s) leading the day’s discussion chooses the readings we’ll spend time with in class.

Academic Advising: Please stop by the department to consult with an academic advisor, to learn more about the Creative Writing Program, and/or to ask questions and make suggestions.

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 (phone: 723-1066, URL:http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae).

The 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.


Finally—I will do everything in my power to make this an enjoyable and valuable learning experience for you!

NOTES:
COURSE ASSIGNMENTS
(please note the due dates for these assignments are listed on the Course Calendar, p. 8.
I may choose to modify or omit the following, as our progress permits)

Essay-You-Like w/ Introduction (Week 1). Find and bring to class a short essay or essay excerpt (500 words max.) that you admire, written in the creative nonfiction (CNF) genre. Bring also a one-page typed (150-200 words) explanation of why you like the essay. Write naturally and honestly about your appreciation of the essay; there is no need to adopt a formal critical posture. Staple the introduction on top of the piece, to create a single handout (front/back is fine). Bring copies of this handout for all of your colleagues, and for me (~15, to be safe).

Leading A Class Discussion (Weeks 2-6). During the quarter, you will either lead or co-lead a class discussion on one assigned essay (see Calendar, p.7). Your work as discussion leader will be counted toward your Class Participation grade. You do not need to turn in any written work to me for your presentation. Below are guidelines, which you may modify to play to your strengths as a presenter, teacher, and learner.

1. Make a brief (~1 minute) summary of those thematic and formal concerns that interested you in the essay. Your goal should be to refresh these concerns in the minds of those who have already read the essay closely.
2. Introduce the writer to the class (~1 minute), so that we are able to locate him/her among the writers whose work we know. Include here your research about the author as it helps you appreciate the writer and his/her approach to writing the essay. Keep it brief and simple.
3. Identify and read aloud to the class two short passages from the essay:
   a. a passage illustrates a particular thematic or formal concern that interests you.
   b. a passage you enjoyed in the essay.
   Read each passage out-loud to the class, giving page and paragraph # as you do so. Then, come up with an easygoing “first question” to start our discussion. Your goal is simply to kick-off a friendly chat.

In all, this should take you no more than five (5) minutes of in-class time to complete. Please be mindful of the time. Do not make a lecture, rant, etc. Do not take on more than these guidelines set out. I will jump in at some point to emphasize a particular point or idea, and then guide us in the next direction.

Short Essay #1 (Week 2; 400-600 words). Write a brief portrait of yourself or someone you know. Use observation and physical detail to make the person come alive to the reader. For every piece of “basic information” that you give, write a footnote to explain how that information helps to make this subject more real to the reader. For the purposes of the assignment, define “basic information” as information that you might exchange during a brief conversation with someone you’ve just met (e.g., “She’s 33,” “She’s a writer,” “She lives in Palo Alto”). Do not footnote non-basic information (e.g., “Her right eye is slightly smaller than her left eye,” “She likes to eat sardines out of the can,” “She rubs her eyes when she’s nervous.”) The point of these footnotes is not to make you exclude basic information about your subject, but rather to help you to think about the effect of using different kinds of details as you write creative nonfiction. Bring copies for me and your colleagues, and for me (~15, to be safe).

Sketch of Long Essay (Week 4). Write a 1-2 page narrative sketch or visual outline of your Long Essay. This outline should take the critical or creative form that you find most useful for organizing your thinking about and planning for the Long Essay. Include any ideas for specific research that you are conducting as you write the Long Essay. Consider also including a short bibliography of essays or writers from the class or outside of it, which inspire or inform your work. Bring copies for all of your colleagues, and for me (~15, to be safe).
Quarter Contract (Week 5; due in conference). Write a ten-point (10) bulleted list in response to the prompt, “I would earn an A in English 91 this quarter if I walk out of class able to do the following five (5) things AND having at least tried to take at least three (3) of the following five (5) creative, critical or personal risks.”

In-Class Writing Lab and Conferences (Week 5). During Week 5, we will meet privately for 15-20 minutes to discuss your planning and work for the Long Essay. You will bring to this conference the revised Sketch, based on feedback from the class; a draft of the beginning of the Long Essay; and, your Quarter Contract. When you are not meeting in conference, you will use the class time as an in-class writing lab, to work collaboratively or individually on your Long Essay. Electronic devices are allowed in-class during Week 5.

Short Essay #2 (Week 5; 400-600 words). Write about a secret, lie, or mystery related to a person or place you know well. What about this secret interests or troubles you? Include at least one scene in the essay. Some ideas: an inconsistency in family history, a person or object gone missing, a time you lied to someone; a time when someone lied to you, an unusual custom or belief in the place where you grew up. Bring copies for me and your colleagues, and for me (~15, to be safe).

Long Essay (Week 6-8). Write a 7-12 page, 3000 word max., personal essay in the creative nonfiction genre (“Long Essay”). Your Long Essay may be on any subject in any style. It may expand upon our daily writing activities, imitate the writers we are reading, come from your personal papers/journal, and/or respond to whatever attracts your fancy. The only stipulation is that you actively investigate experiential and documentary sources specific to this essay, and include that research in your essay. Experiential sources include interviews, travel, personal experiments, etc. Documentary sources include photos, letters, newspaper, books, musical recordings, official documents, etc. Here are some successful examples taken from previous Creative Nonfiction classes:

- A student who wrote about her mother’s suicide looks at police reports and letter.
- A student who wrote about his relationship with food documented the contents of his family’s refrigerator, and interviewed them about his eating habits.
- A student who wrote about a trip to South Africa looked at photos and re-listened to music from that summer.

Bring copies for all of your colleagues, and for me (~15, to be safe).

The Process Letter (Week 6-8; stapled at end of your Quarter Project). When you have finished writing the Long Essay that you will workshop in class, write a one-page process letter answering the following questions. The purpose of the Process Letter is to orient your colleagues to those areas which you feel require the most attention in discussion and revision. What were your intentions when you wrote this piece? What parts do you think were the most successful? What parts were frustrating to write or need more work?

Feedback Letters (Weeks 6-8; 1/2 to 1 page, single-spaced, 1 per colleague). After reading each classmate’s essay, you will respond with a letter of written feedback. You will bring two copies to the next class, one for the writer and one for me. These will not be graded individually, but the work should conform to the standards of the class. The perspective and content should follow the guidelines set out in The Creative Nonfiction Workshop (p. 9). You will be asked to rewrite letters that seem especially global or unconsidered in their attention, at my discretion. If you write all of these, provide serious and considerate feedback, and turn them in on time, you will receive full credit for this writing assignment.

End of Term Analysis (Week 8). You will speak for about a minute about a cited passage from an essay in the course anthology that had a direct impact on your development as a writer during the quarter. No written work
is required and you will not turn in anything. Speak naturally about the passage, and consider it a chance to both review the readings from the quarter and also to preview some of your thinking for the final Process Letter.

**Process Letter & OPTIONAL Revision (Week 9).** In lieu of a final exam, you will write a process letter. The purpose of the process letter is to give you the space and time to reflect on your work from the quarter within the more traditional framework of a self-evaluation statement. Additionally, you have the OPTION to assemble a full revision of the long essay you’ve worked on this quarter, to seek specific feedback. The deadline for both is **no later than 5pm on MON 8/21** by email to me at wevbo@stanford.edu.

**A Process Letter (REQUIRED)**

Write a 1-2 page letter (bulleted or traditional letter format) to me that:

- Explains how you approached revising the long essay. I am interested to hear how the writing process worked for you across drafts, with some discussion of when and why you think you did your best work.
- Evaluates the extent to which you pursued the risks and goals you articulated during Week 5. Give specific examples. The goal of this part of the assignment is not to show your success, but rather to demonstrate your thoughtful engagement with the risks and goals you chose to pursue in the writing you did after Week 5 (Short Essay #2, Long Essay, in-class writing).
- Revisits one assigned reading, which you found particularly helpful to look at again as you conducted your revision. Perhaps it was a model for your writing, or you found the tone or voice relevant, or the subject matter was inspirational, etc. You might very well have your own idiosyncratic reasons for revisiting the essay. Regardless, articulate them. Write thoughtfully and organically about how that essay was purposeful for you as a writer and reader, in revision.

**A Full Revision of the Long Essay (OPTIONAL)**

Email a complete and clean copy of BOTH the revised draft and the workshop draft of your long essay. Please name the files to indicate the distinction. The revision should reflect your best work at the end of the quarter. The emphasis should be quality, rather than quantity (e.g., one excellent and thoughtful revision beats five or six minor ones), but the revision itself should seem significantly different from the workshop draft. Include 1-3 questions to which I can respond specifically in my feedback. Give a page # and paragraph # as reference to focus each question.

I will have limited availability to meet to discuss your final portfolio during finals week. Send me an email and we can figure out a time to meet. Otherwise, I will send a follow-up email with comments during the break. I will not be able to review incomplete submissions that do not follow all of the guidelines above.

**Snack Schedule (Optional).** As you are able to do so, please consider signing up to bring snacks—healthy, homemade, or otherwise—to share during the term. Even a few bags of chips or cookies go a long way toward satiating the hearts, minds, and stomachs of your colleagues.

*Your Snack Schedule Date (Optional—Circle Below):*

6/26  6/28  7/3  7/5  7/10  7/12  7/17

7/19  7/24  7/26  7/31  8/2  8/7  8/9  8/14
COURSE CALENDAR:
WORKSHOP SCHEDULE & DUE DATES
(subject to change and supplement, as our progress requires)

Week 1 (6/26):
6/26—Introduction, logistics, formal and thematic readings, course concepts.
6/28—Essay-You-Like w/ Introduction due with copies for all. Chapters 9, 10, 12 in Tell It Slant.

Week 2 (7/3):
7/3—Short Essay #1 due with copies for all. Ginzburg, He And I; Fisher, Once A Tramp, Always. Chapters 2, 4, 6 in Tell It Slant.
7/5—Workshop Short Essay #1: Group #1 (feedback marginalia only)

Week 3 (7/10):
7/10—Soyinka, Why Do I Fast?, Sanders, Under the Influence; Rich, Split at the Root. Chapters 1, 13 in Tell It Slant.
7/12—Workshop Short Essay #1: Group #2 (feedback marginalia only)

Week 4 (7/17):
7/17—Sketch due with copies for all. Dillard, Seeing; Fitzgerald, The Crack-Up; Didion, In Bed and Goodbye To All That. Chapter 7, 14 in Tell It Slant.
7/19—Workshop Sketch (no prepared feedback). Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son; Woolf, Death of the Moth.

Draft of Long Essay start (max 1 pg.) and Quarter Contract due in conference.

Week 5 (7/24): In-Class Writing Lab & Conferences.
7/24—In-Class Individual Conferences; Writing Lab for other students.
7/26—In-Class Individual Conferences; Writing Lab. Short Essay #2 due with copies for all. Sign up for Long Essay Due Dates.

Week 6 (7/31):
7/31—Workshop Short Essay 2 (small groups—feedback endnote only). Winterson, Art Objects (via email).
8/2—Field Trip & Prompt: Making A Pact (Meet at Cantor Center steps). Long Essay due Students 1, 2, 3.

Week 7 (8/7):
8/7—Long Essay due Students 4, 5, 6. Workshop Long Essay Students 1, 2, 3.

Week 8 (8/14):

Process Letter & Optional Revision due by email to me no later than 5pm on MON 8/21.
THE CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP: A REFRESHER

While we cannot anticipate every success and frustration, we can do our best to anticipate and avoid many of the most common workshop pitfalls. With that in mind, I propose some workshop guidelines for the quarter.

1. **Copies (Essays).** Your essays are due prior to the period during which they will be work-shopped. On the due date, please bring enough copies of your essay for everyone (I would recommend 15, until enrollment settles).
2. **Copies (Comments).** I will periodically spot-check student feedback, at my discretion, for quality and consistency.
3. **Reading.** Read each essay at least 2 times before you come to class on the day that it is due to be work-shopped. Do not write Comments (see below) during the first read—you ideas about and understanding of the essay will most likely change with successive readings.
4. **Curiosity > Authority.** Read and write Comments from a place of curiosity rather than authority. Assume that every line, sentence, paragraph, section, and word is chosen with intention and skill. Work to understand the choices that are made in the essay, rather than what you hoped or imagined the essay might be.
5. **Avoid Benign Neglect.** Do not decide to love everything in an essay. Choose your praise carefully and express it intelligently and concisely.
6. **Comments [Logistics].** Write both marginalia and endnotes on each of your colleagues’ essays. Marginalia is criticism written in the margins of the essay that express line-specific praise, questions, and wondering. Endnotes appear at the end of the essay to express whole-essay praise, questions, and wondering and appear at the end of the essay. A good rule of thumb is to write 2-3 marginalia notes per page and a single endnote of 3-5 sentences.
7. **Comments [Quality].** Where appropriate, incorporate ideas from our class discussions and make reference to specific craft-based or thematic elements. Consider your feedback an opportunity to practice and demonstrate your critical mastery. Write thoughtfully about how you perceive the author’s approach to writing, how the essay thinks, the object of the author’s attention, and the positive and negative space in which the essay sets outs its ideas and images. When you ask questions, avoid yes/no phrasings. Remember that your comments will be a departure point for revision.
8. **Suggestions.** Offer suggestions for revision. When you do so, give a clear and concise context for the suggestion. Do not simply make a change to a word, phrase, line, sentence, paragraph, etc. without explanation. The author should understand clearly why you have recommended a revision.
9. **Choose Your Reader.** Before it is work-shopped, a passage from each essay will be read out-loud. This will give all of us a chance to refresh our understanding and reception of the essay from our previously reading it. When your essay is work-shopped, you may either read the passage out-loud or ask someone else to read it out-loud. If asked, read the passage with care and attention.
10. **Prefaces and Questions.** Feel free to offer a brief preface to your essay before it is read to the class. There is no need to send prefatory comments via email or during the previous class period. After the end of your essay’s discussion, you will have the opportunity to clarify and/or respond.
11. **Keep It On The Page.** During discussion, locate your comments with references to specific moments in the essay that occur on the page. Do not infer intention or interpretation.
12. **Avoid Clustering.** There are many different kinds of essays and writers. No doubt, aesthetic preferences will converge and diverge as the quarter progresses. Consider these fluctuations an opportunity to understand better unfamiliar or unattractive ideas about writing, reading, and literature. Do not read an essay exclusively through the lens of a single kind of interpretation or criticism (e.g., Marxism, New Criticism). Use criticism/ideology to clarify your understanding of an essay—not vice-versa.
13. **Easter Island and Authority.** While your essay is being work-shopped, listen carefully and with an open mind. Avoid making faces.
14. **Safe Space.** Respect the safe space we create as we work together. Seek me out if you feel it has been violated.
15. **Other.** What did I leave out?
FURTHER READING LIST

Anthologies, Craft Books, & Books on Nonfiction Writing by Prose Writers

Writing the Memoir, Judith Barrington
The Situation and the Story, Vivian Gornick
Inventing the Truth, Edited by William Zinsser
On Writing: A Memoir of Craft, Stephen King
Tell It Slant, (recommended for exercises), Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paolo
Naming the World: And Other Exercises for the Creative Writer, Bret Anthony Johnston
Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, Anne Lamott
Burning Down The House, Charles Baxter
Narrative Design, Madison Smartt Bell
Lit From Within: Contemporary Masters on the Art and Craft of Writing, Kevin Haworth and Dinty Moore
One Writer’s Story, Welty, Eudora
How to Write: Advice and Reflections, Richard Rhodes
The Art of the Personal Essay, Philip Lopate
The Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Nonfiction, Michael Marton
The Making of a Story: A Norton Anthology of Prose, Alice LaPlante

Some Memoirs I Love

The Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion
Testament of Youth, Vera Brittain
Goodbye to All That, Robert Graves
Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, Mary McCarthy
The Glass Castle: A Memoir, Jeanette Walls
H Is For Hawk, Helen Macdonald
Days of Grace, Arthur Ashe with Arnold Rampersad
Self-Consciousness, John Updike
Twentieth Century Pleasures, Robert Hass
Personal History, Katherine Graham
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, Alison Bechdel (a memoir in comics)
A Soldier’s Heart, Elizabeth Samet
Here If You Need Me, Kate Braestrup
Object Lessons, Eavan Boland
Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonders, Lawrence Weschler
Notes from No Man’s Land, Eula Biss
Confessions, Augustine
Confessions, Rousseau
The Blessing: A Memoir, Gregory Orr
In Pharaoh’s Army, Tobias Wolff
I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou
Angela’s Ashes, Frank McCourt
Catfish and Mandala, Andrew Pham
Art Objects, Jeanette Winterson
The Astronomical Me, MFK Fisher
Always Running, Luis Rodriguez