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 stuffy, curated museums.

Each week we will read celebrated essayists such James Baldwin, David Sedaris, and Joan Didion in order to inspire us, in addition to lesser-known contemporary essayists like Amy Leach, Ander Monson, Claudia Rankine, and Anne Carson. Along the way, we will aspire to exceptional craft, paying special attention to plot, scenes, dialogue, imagery, setting, characters, 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.

“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.”


“Facebook and MySpace are crude personal essay machines.”

Required Texts

Coursepack

Course Requirements

Class Participation: 30%
Workshop Letters: 20%
Final Portfolio: 50%
  Three in-class exercises
  Two 3-5 page essays
  10-12 page final essay

* 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, I ask that electronic devices—especially cell phones but also laptops and iPads—be turned off for the duration of class.

Assignments

We’ll spend nearly all class meetings discussing assigned readings, your own work, or other texts.

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/](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. 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 almost always 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 meet with you during my office hours or at another mutually agreeable time—indeed for me it’s one of the most rewarding aspects 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 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 after the quarter ends.

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/oaef).

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/tellitslant/]

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?
SCHEDULE

Week 1  **March 31**: Introductions / What is Creative Nonfiction? Memoir? The Personal Essay?

[Read pp. xiii-38 of *TIS*. Read James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” and David Sedaris’ “Let It Snow.” Print out a vivid, multisensory Facebook posting from your pre-university days and bring enough hardcopies for all of us.]

**April 2**: Discuss memory, family, place, as well as the two assigned memoir pieces. Share essays. Begin working on a draft of your memoir piece.

[Read Joan Didion’s “Goodbye to All That,” Nora Ephron’s “A Few Words about Breasts,” and excerpts from Justin Torres’s *We the Animals*.]

Week 2  **April 7**: Bring in first rough draft. Discuss Didion and Torres’ pieces.

[Read Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Village” and excerpts from John Evans’ “Young Widower” and from Sarah Manguso’s *Two Kinds of Decay*.]

**April 9**: NO CLASS (AWP Conference)

Week 3  **April 14**: Bring in second rough draft.

[Read Eula Biss’s “Goodbye to All That.” Work on final draft for workshop.]

**April 16**: Discuss Biss’s essay / Workshop #1

Week 4  **April 21**: Discuss Lee’s essay / Workshop #1

**April 23**: Discuss Didion’s essay / Workshop #1

Week 5  **April 28**: Socratic Texting Brainstorming for Essay #2

**April 30**: Workshop #1

Week 6  **May 5**: Workshop #1

[Read Amy Leach’s “Please Do Not Yell at the Cucumber” and Montaigne’s “On
Cannibals”

**May 7**: Workshop #1 / Discuss personal essays.

[Read Wendell Berry’s “An Entrance to the Woods” and Sei Shonagon’s “Hateful Things.” Write a 3-page rough, rough draft of your personal essay.]

**Week 7**

**May 12**: Discuss drafts and Berry and Shonagon’s essays.

[Read Alice Walker’s “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is Self” and Virginia Woolf’s “Death of the Moth”]

**May 14**: Discuss rough drafts in small groups.

**Week 8**

**May 19**: Workshop #2

**May 21**: Workshop #2

**Week 9**

**May 26**: Workshop #2

**May 28**: Workshop #2

**Week 10**

**June 2**: Workshop #2

**FINAL PORTFOLIOS—EMAILED TO ME AT AS A SINGLE PDF FILE—are due by 11:59 PM on Sunday, March 20**