Course objectives:

In creative nonfiction, we writers are hemmed in by two equally powerful forces – the facts (those unalterable details, such as time, place, people, and history) and the self (the consciousness, the "I" who experiences, argues, presents, and feels). In this introductory course, we will read and write with careful attention to these two forces. We will begin by reading a selection of essays spanning more than a hundred years, and using those essays as models for our own writing. We will read for content, but more importantly we will study figurative language, character and setting development, and dramatic structure. Our goal will be to write with skill and verve about things that are real, about the material world of which we are part.
Course Requirements

Class Participation (30%) This includes attendance, punctuality and involvement in class discussions, as well as a presentation on one of the assigned essays.

Absences: Attendance is required and essential to your experience of the course. Individual workshops are especially affected by absences and are impossible to recreate. If you have a legitimate reason to be absent, please arrange this in advance; otherwise any unexcused absence will reduce your overall grade by 1/3 of a letter grade. Chronic absences will affect your grade significantly.

Essay Presentation: In the first half of the quarter, you will lead a 20-minute discussion on one of the essays I've assigned. I will model this the first few class meetings, and am available to help you plan your discussion. Handouts, in-class writing exercises and other ways of involving the class are very much welcomed.

Writing assignments (40%) This includes all writing exercises you've completed in class and for homework, one 6,000 word essay, and a revision of that essay.

In addition to your long essay we will produce and respond to some short writing assignments. Some of these you will turn in to me for brief comments or to discuss in voluntary conferences. All others are to be kept in your notebook and turned in the penultimate week of class.

Required Materials

Course reader (available at the Stanford Bookstore)

Notebook & folder (to be brought to each class period)

Copies of your essay for workshop (8-10 copies, once per quarter)

Written critiques (15%) One of the most valuable elements of a writing class is the opportunity to have your work seriously critiqued both by your instructor and your peers. It will be as beneficial to your nonfiction to think critically and generously about your classmates' work as it will be to have your own writing discussed. It isn’t necessary to write pages and pages of comments to your classmates, but make sure your letter is carefully thought-out and both critical and kind. It’s important to remember that we won’t be discussing polished essays but early drafts, we’ll be talking about the process of writing and all of the narrative possibilities inherent in each piece.

Attendance at Readings (15%) Attendance at three readings or writing-related events is required. I am very flexible about this requirement — you might go to a museum, attend a film screening, or participate in a workshop. If you are unsure about any event, just ask! Brief responses of 1-2 paragraphs are required, and due by Wed March 18th.

[I write nonfiction] to change my own mind. I try to create a new vocabulary or terrain for myself, so that I open out—I always think of the Dutch claiming land from the sea—or open up something that would have been closed to me before. That’s the point and the pleasure of it.

– Marilynne Robinson
Due Dates

Failure to turn in work on assigned dates will result in a half letter grade for each day submitted late. For more information on how to make up missed courses or readings, please see “Make-up Work” below.

There is no extra credit offered in this course.

If you anticipate not being able to meet a deadline, in some cases extensions may be granted in advance. These must be agreed upon by the professor at least 48 hours before the assignment is due. It is your responsibility to plan accordingly.

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 truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.

–Galileo

Make-Up Work If you miss a class, or cannot make three readings, please read an author interview on either The Paris Review’s website, as part of their Art of Nonfiction series theparisreview.org/interviews or on the Identity Theory website identitytheory.com/interviews/ and write a two-paragraph analysis of it, due at the time of your final essays (Wed March 18 by 5 p.m.)

Accommodation 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.

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Provisional schedule (subject to change & expansion)

Mon April 2: Who put the ‘non’ in nonfiction?
Wed April 4: A Most Popular Genre
Selections from NPR, 99% Invisible, Radiolab
Selections from The Devil’s Dictionary
Mon April 9: The Facts & The Self (sign up for presentations)
David James Duncan “Cherish this Ecstasy”
Zadie Smith “On Joy”
Wed April 11: Attention (DUE: Exercise #1) (sign up for workshops)
Jeanette Winterson “Art Objects”*
Mon April 16: No class
Wed April 18: Tension & Suspense (DUE: Exercise #2)
Vanessa Veselka “Highway of Lost Girls”
James Baldwin "Notes of a Native Son”*
Mon April 23: Subtext
Joan Didion “On Morality”
Louise Glück “Education of the Poet”
Wed April 25: Style (DUE: Exercise #3)
Zora Neale Hurston “How it Feels to be Colored Me”
Elizabeth Tallent “Little X”
Mon April 30: Time & Temporality
Zitkala-Ša "Impressions of an Indian Childhood”*
James Agee "Knoxville: Summer of 1915”
Wed May 2: Imagery (DUE: Exercise #4)
Annie Dillard “Total Eclipse”
David Foster Wallace “Consider the Lobster”
Mon May 7: In-class writing; reading TBD
Wed May 9: Mock workshop
Mon May 14: NO CLASS
Wed May 16 - Wed May 30: Draft workshops
**no class Monday May 28 (Memorial Day)
Mon June 4 - Wed June 6: On revision; small group workshops

Final essays due Wednesday June 13 by 5 p.m.