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CRWR 212A.01: Intro Nonfiction Workshop

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Introduction to Nonfiction

“...that high-wire act of thinking in public, balanced improbably between passion and detachment, formal and informal tones.” - Phillip Lopate, *To Show and To Tell*

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Office Hours: W, 12-3pm

Syllabus is subject to change

Required text:

To Show and To Tell by Phillip Lopate (please purchase on your own. New or used is fine. You can find this online at Amazon.com or Barnesandnoble.com, or locally at Fact and Fiction, or Shakespeare and Co. bookstores.)

Course Description

Writing creative nonfiction is a chance to make meaning from the raw materials of life: love, grief, inheritance, coincidence, and resilience. We will use our own lives as fodder, turning both inward and outward to produce narratives that speak to the complicated human condition. The best nonfiction writing searches for the truth of different situations, showing us how messy, touching, and wondrous life can be. A successful essay usually offers insight gained by the writer, and simultaneously, seeks to alter the reader's perspective, even if it's just momentarily. If you're able to leave the reader wondering after the words end, you've done your job as a writer. Drawing on the old art of storytelling, we will write about what matters to us —and seek to show why it matters to our readers.

Over the course of the semester, we will study many different authors' crafts, looking at the writing decisions they've made, gathering a repertoire of tools to practice on our own and putting those tools to use in both short and longer pieces of writing. We'll write and revise and write some more. We'll share writing extensively, both in workshop and in class read-arounds. Over the course of the semester, we'll aim to develop a practice fit for a writing life ahead.

Course Outcomes

- Acquire foundational skills in reading, discussing and writing nonfiction.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the terminology and concepts that apply to nonfiction.
- Practice the art of writing and revising nonfiction.
- Learn to critique the quality of one's work and that of peers.

Course Requirements

Your grade, which will be given at the end of the semester, will comprise of two main components:

Workshop Final - 50%:

You will rewrite one major paper (see workshop writings below) that will be graded on your ability to revise with precision, development, structure, attention to detail, application of nonfiction techniques and craft, spelling, and grammar.

Participation - 50%:

The other half of your grade will be based on turning all assignments in on time, attendance, printing off the readings for class, speaking up and participating with substance, and printing peer feedback.

Workshop Writings

Over the course of the semester, you'll submit two larger pieces of writing for workshop. The first will be a personal essay and the second, an outward-focused essay, broadly defined. The aim of this is to get you experimenting with multiple parts of the creative nonfiction spectrum--one that can rely on your own experience and one that requires research to pull off. On the Friday before your workshop date, you will email your essay to your assigned workshop group. Please keep to the schedule and be sure you aren't late with your submissions. Respect your peers' time.

The Personal Essay

5-8 pages

Weeks of 10/9-10/16

[examples: lyric, segmented, braided, prose-poetry, narrative, etc.]

The personal essay is about establishing intimacy with the reader. Keep in mind, although you are pulling on your own individual experiences, your essay should seek to connect with your audience through universal sentiments. In-class exercises, readings, and short writing assignments will lay the necessary groundwork for a successful personal essay.

An Outward Looking Essay

8-10 pages

Weeks of 11/13-11/27

[examples: literary journalism, profile piece, environmental/science/nature writing, place-based writing, travel writing, etc.]

The Outward Looking essay builds on the skills and techniques practiced in the personal essay, as you will pull on personal experience and personal interest for the basis of your piece. Yet, you will need to incorporate research to broaden and deepen your scope. The definition of "research" is open; if you're writing a place-based essay, you may need to visit the area explored in your piece. If you're writing about your heritage, you may need to conduct interviews with family members. And of course, it's always encouraged to turn to databases and scholarly sources if you're researching historical events or cultural shifts.

Final

At the end of the semester, you will turn in a revised workshop piece (either the 'inward' or 'outward' looking piece) alongside your original and my notes to you. This single paper counts as 50% of your final grade so I expect you to spend a significant amount of time on revision and making it your best work.

Participation grade

Responses to Workshops:

In creative writing classes, you'll find that you often learn the most from your peers' writing. Your peers will write in ways that you may not have considered before, pulling on experiences that are specific to them, and this class is your chance to be inspired by their knowledge, creativity and interests. It is also your chance to hone in on writing strategies that work and pinpoint spots in writing that prove difficult.

In addition to offering verbal feedback during in-class workshops, you are required to write a half page, single-spaced response to your peers' writing. In your letter, you'll address what's working in a piece and what needs working on. In pointing out these spots for revision, make sure to suggest constructive solutions. This is your chance to brainstorm writing solutions--both for the sake of your peer's piece and the cause of your own writing. You'll bring in two printed and signed copies of your letter to workshop--one for your peer and one for me.

Smaller Writings

Expect a small weekly writing assignment. These writings will both get you writing no matter the writing block and help prepare you to write the two longer workshop pieces. These pieces will often draw inspiration from our readings and can stand alone or serve as starting points for your longer essays. We'll work on these both in class and out and share them through

Read-Arounds.

Readings

Our primary text is *To Show and To Tell* by Phillip Lopate. This book will act as a guide for our craft-related inquiries. Additional weekly readings will be uploaded to Moodle. All readings must be printed off and brought to class. This affects your participation grade. I expect the readings to be marked up, highlighted, and annotated.

Participation

Participation looks different for everyone based on personality type and class dynamics, but it is important to stretch beyond your comfort zone in this class to take the risks you need to better your writing and to create the community of writers we're looking for. Being able to navigate both large and small group speaking and listening is an essential skill in college, and it's important to me and to the class as a whole that each of us contributes.

Attendance

Workshop can't operate without people. Writing can't happen without an audience. Community can't be created without consistency. Come to class. And when you're here, really be here. After three

unexcused absences, your grade will begin to drop by a letter grade with each subsequent missed class. Under this timeline, six unexcused absences result in a failing grade.

Other notes

Classroom Community

Workshop can be tricky. Writing, and especially writing nonfiction, is deeply personal, and it is important to remember this as you make revision suggestions both in your letters and in class. Whatever you do, it is not your place to offer life critiques. It is your place to analyze how the writing in front of you could benefit from different revisions—addition, subtraction, clarity, etc.—and to be specific and thoughtful in your suggestions.

Workshop Etiquette:

When workshopping each other's writing, I expect you to respond thoughtfully and respectfully. Anything less than that will not be tolerated. During in-class workshops, you'll offer your peers praise, constructive criticism, advice, and feedback for revision. As you'll learn, writing about yourself and your world is a vulnerable act. Therefore, as the writer, it's important you only bring material you're ready to share and have discussed. As the workshopper, it's imperative you treat your peers' writing with love and attention. Offer the kind of feedback you'd like to receive on your own work. When discussing your peer's writing during workshop, please refer to the student being workshopped as "the writer" or "the narrator" rather than calling him or her by name. It is important to separate the writing from the writer and treat the essay as a creative work.

Students With Disabilities

Come talk to me after class or in my office with a letter from DSS. We will work together to establish appropriate accommodations for this class with the support of your DSS coordinator.

Plagiarism Policy

We will be imitating many authors in this class. This is not only encouraged—it is vital to your development as a writer. Plagiarism, on the other hand, is representing another writer's work as your own. This is both against university policy—and can result in failure and expulsion—and antithetical to who you are.

Late Work

If you need an extension, please talk with me before the due date. All the smaller assignments should be completed on time. Given the workshop schedule for your longer essays, it is imperative to have your pieces in on time so your peers and I can read them and respond to them through letters for class discussion. Sometimes you can switch workshop dates with a peer if need be. This has to be arranged well enough in advance for workshop to proceed smoothly, and I need to know about the change in plans to update the schedule. Whatever you do, do not miss your workshop. This will have a significant negative impact on both your final grade for the class and the quality of your writing. If you hand in a workshop piece late I will not give you notes unless you come speak to me during office hours. Remember, not having notes from me will negatively impact your final grade.