CRAFTING THE PERSONAL ESSAY: 
A MATTER OF FACTS 

CNF 14 W 

Online Writer’s Studio: Fall 2012 

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: 

“There’s nothing you cannot do with it,” says Annie Dillard of the essay, “no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed.” This course will explore lyric essays and memoir, helping us translate life stories and experiences into lively prose. Over several weeks, we will consider scene construction, point of view, associative observation, metaphor, and—most important—the effect of structure on meaning. We’ll look to research to enrich the past, fill in lapses in memory, and dramatize events without slipping into cliché. Work by Richard Rodriguez, Scott Russell Sanders, John D’Agata, and Brenda Peterson (among others) will serve as models as we examine how to enliven our writing with detail and description. Assignments will include directed journaling and structural experiments. Students will also write a longer essay for class discussion. Our goal in this course is not only to enlist facts, but also to electrify them.

REQUIRED READING 


SUGGESTED READING 


OVERVIEW:

Robert Lowell said, “Poetry is not the record of an event, it is an event.” The same is true of an engaging essay. In this course, we will learn what it is that makes writing spring to life. Weekly assignments and writing prompts will lead to the creation of original work that you’ll submit for group discussion. To increase our understanding of the tools and resources available to us as writers of creative nonfiction, part of the course is allotted to the scrupulous study of contemporary authors. Although I’ve placed selected readings in “subject categories” to provide a comparative platform, as our conversation evolves we may deviate from the schedule, skip around or consider alternative essays.
My goal is that you will leave this class feeling more confident in your understanding of the personal essay and memoir. Like any art form, creative writing requires discipline, practice, and persistence. To improve we must write, rewrite, and write some more. We must also allow ourselves to learn from others, becoming better readers of others’ work. I will continually encourage you to read with an eye to your own work, allowing your engagement with other authors to instruct you and enrich your own writing. This is, however, your class—thus, your opportunity to share ideas, flex your imagination and thoughtfully absorb the insights of your peers in a structured space. The success of this course depends on each person’s commitment to the material, and willingness to actively contribute to discussions. Never be afraid to ask a question—we are here to learn, not to prove what we already know.

COMPONENTS:

Readings: Throughout the quarter I will assign readings and craft essays from *In Short* and the *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*. Other selections are available via pdf file, or online. Because time restrictions limit our full exploration of these texts, I’ve highlighted additional essays I believe you’ll find helpful as you move into future projects (see syllabus: “Additional Selections”). The *Touchstone Anthology* includes the best of those longer essays recommended by more than 2000 professional writers and teachers, and includes examples of journalism, personal essays, memoir, humor writing, and criticism. *In Short* also offers an assortment of structures, points of view, subjects, and forms. However, the brevity of the volume’s individual entries (which range from several paragraphs to 2,000 words) will allow us to experience a variety of voices and stylistic strategies. Simply stated, *In Short* provides many fine examples of how to produce engaging creative nonfiction within the confines of a limited space. I have no doubt you’ll find much to admire in both of these fine collections.

Experiments & Writing Assignments: Over the quarter you will complete a series of short creative experiments. Generally, these assignments are intended to help you gain insight to the technical components of successful essay writing, while also encouraging you flex your creative muscles. Please adhere to guidelines regarding word count. Later in the quarter, you will have the opportunity to submit a longer essay, or collection of short vignettes (up to 2000 words) for in-depth feedback.

Craft Discussions: We will look at different elements of craft and how these elements relate both to the published material we’re reading and to student work. Each week I will provide questions about our assigned readings, in order to generate conversation. You are welcome to participate in these discussions to whatever degree you wish.

Workshop: At the end of Week Six, each student will turn a longer work of their choice for feedback (up to 2000 words). This selection can be a self-contained essay, a composite of several short assignments, or a section of a longer work. Over the course of the remaining term, the entire class will read and offer in-depth, detailed feedback for their classmates. In addition to posting my own comments, I’ll be moderating the discussion, and will expect that every student participate in these conversations. Depending on the number of enrolled students, we’ll workshop 3-5 essays per week. Participating in the workshop will be your only work for those weeks, with the exception of a short reading assignment.

Weekly Responsibilities:

- Log onto Blackboard. Read through the entire “Schedule” page, including your weekly “lecture,” assignments, optional/supplemental readings, as well as other updates and reminders.
- Read the assigned texts, and post your responses to the discussion section in the forum.
• Weeks 1-6: Respond to the Writing Exercise, post your response in the forum, and read/comment on one other student piece.

• Weeks 6-9: Provide in-depth (roughly a page) of comments for each full-length student piece submitted in the forum. Be sure to check back later in the week in order to continue your involvement in the conversation.

What I’ll Be Doing:

• Sending out a weekly e-mail containing general class info, as well as upcoming reading and writing assignments.

• Setting up the forums and moderating the discussion within. I generally check in at least once every weekday, although I don’t generally post on weekends.

• Reading and commenting on all student work in a positive and helpful manner. For short exercises, my responses will be brief, perhaps with a few lines of nitty-gritty technical stuff (showing you how you could rewrite a few sentences to better achieve the intended effect, for example). For the full-length pieces, I’ll provide a page or so of comments, plus make some line-by-line suggestions.

One VERY IMPORTANT Note: If you are not taking this course for a letter grade, all of the above is essentially optional, with the exception of providing comments for your classmates’ full-length assignments. Although many students take online courses with the intention of doing every assignment, “real life”—family, illness, professional obligations, etc,—often has a way of making that impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop completely out of the class. Rather than adopting an “all-or-nothing” approach to your participation in this course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can. If there are a couple of weeks in which you don’t get to the reading, that’s no problem. If you have to skip a couple exercises, this is also okay. As long as you hand in a full-length piece and participate fully in the workshop, you’ll be fine. And remember, if you DO have to take a couple of weeks completely away from the class, you can always come back! “The door is always open,” as they say.

GRADING:

For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Writing Exercises (weeks 2-6): 20%
Formal Assignment for Workshop (full essay, series of vignettes, or excerpt): 40%
Forum/Workshop Participation: 40%
CLASS SCHEDULE

All assignments are due on the day they are listed.
This schedule is subject to change; all changes will be announced.

WEEK ONE

The Nature of Personal Essay & Memoir
{topics: unearthing your subject, writing the physical world}

Read:
  In Short (IS): Burroughs, “Decoy” personal essay
  IS: Sanders, “Buckeye” memoir
  IS: Peterson, “Growing Up Game” memoir
  IS: Ehrlich, “A Match to the Heart” lyric essay
  Touchstone Anthology (TA): Levine, “The Essayist Is Sorry for Your Loss” personal essay

Additional Suggestions:
  TA: Berry, “Getting Along with Nature”
  TA: Dillard, “Living Like Weasels”

Write:
1. An Anthology of Opening Sentences
2. Meditation on a Natural Object

WEEK TWO

What’s in an “I” / Eye?
{topics: narrative persona, our multiple selves, earning the reader’s trust}

Read:
  TA: Strayed, “The Love of My Life” memoir
  TA: Lynch, “The Undertaking” personal essay
  pdf. Lynch, “Tract” lyric essay

Additional Suggestions:
  TA: Purpura, “Autopsy Report”
  IS: D’Agata, “Notes Toward Identifying a Body”

Write:
1. I Contain Multitudes
2. And How!
3. First Things First

WEEK THREE

Difficult Facts: On Research & Invention
{topics: ethics of nonfiction, imaginative truth & memory, cueing the reader}
Read:

**TA:** Doty, “Return to Sender” memoir / personal essay

**TA:** McPhee, “The Search for Marvin Gardens” lyric essay

**IS:** Capossere, “A Wind from the North” personal essay / profile

**IS:** Ackerman, “Mute Dancers” personal essay / nature writing

Additional Suggestions:

**IS:** Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”

**IS:** Shay, “We Are Distracted”

Write:

1. All in the Family
2. These Are the People in the Neighborhood
3. Play It Again

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**WEEK FOUR**

**Time Will Tell**

{topics: narrative summary & scene, flashbacks, metaphor}

Read:

**TA:** Beard, “The Fourth State of Matter” personal essay

**TA:** Kooser, “Small Rooms in Time” personal essay

**IS:** Rodriguez, “Proofs” personal essay

Additional Suggestions:

**IS:** Rodriguez, “My Mother in Two Photographs, Among Other Things”

**IS:** Kumin, “Enough Jam for a Lifetime”

Write:

1. Angry, Afraid, Funny-Funny Ha-Ha!
2. The Old Country

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**WEEK FIVE**

**Oh, the Places You'll Go! (Exploring “The Arc”)**

{topics: narrative tension, evolution & insight}

Read:

pdf. Deulen, “Aperture” personal essay

**TA:** Sedaris, “Repeat After Me” personal essay

**TA:** Grealy, “Mirrorings” memoir

Additional Suggestions:

**IS:** Dunn, “Locker Room Talk”

**IS:** Cherry, “A Note About Allen Tate”

Write: Two Steps Forward; One Step Back

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**WEEK SIX**

**The Plot Thickens: Structure & Organization**

{topics: juxtaposition, vignettes, linear movement, leaps}

Read:

**IS:** Baker, “My Children Explain the Big Issues” personal essay / collage
TA: Biss, “The Pain Scale” *lyric essay*

TA: Doyle, “Leap” *lyric essay*

TA: Levy, “Mastering the Art of French Cooking” *memoir*

Additional Suggestions:

TA: Moore, “Son of Mr. Green Jeans”

IS: Jones, “The Opposite of Saffron”

Write: This, That, The Other

You Are What You Eat

**DUE:**

**Workshop Submission (up to 2000 words)**

**WEEK SEVEN**

**Workshop**

Read: Student Essays

TA: Tan, “Mother Tongue” *personal essay*

Write: Feedback for Classmates

**WEEK EIGHT**

**Workshop**

Read: Student Essays

IS: Iyer, “In Praise of the Humble Comma” *personal essay / encomium*

Write: Feedback for Classmates

**WEEK NINE**

**Workshop**

Read: Student Essays

IS: Cooper, “The Fine Art of Sighing” *personal essay*

Write: Feedback for Classmates

**WEEK TEN**

**Looking Back / Looking Ahead**

{topics: *the art of revision, what's next?*}

Read: pdf. Williams, “Why I Write” *manifesto*