OWC 203 Creative Nonfiction Book 1

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CNF Book I

This course is the first of three workshop-focused courses in the Creative Nonfiction Book series. Here we will look at beginnings and at strategies for continuance. Each student will submit 30 to 40 pages of writing exercises and one excerpt of their book. Students will be encouraged to form Creative Nonfiction Book groups in our learning environment.

The course will cover strong beginnings, general research for nonfiction, compelling protagonists and storylines, and the introduction and development of dramatic scenes. The goal of the course will be to introduce necessary craft concepts so students can create a strong, energetic launch pad for their projects.

Materials

Full Length Books

Roberts, A Sense of the World
Skloot, Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
McCourt, Angela’s Ashes
Wolff, This Boy’s Life
Gladwell, Tipping Point (not required)

Shorter Works available in PDF (provided by instructor)

Halberstram, Narrative Idea
Straight-Travels with My Ex
Church-Auscultations
Yaqub, The Washing
Kramer, Reporting for Narrative
Conover, Participatory Reporting
Hull, Being There
Brown, To Begin at the Beginning
Franklin, A Structure
Ephron, What Narrative Writers Can Learn from Screenwriters
Desliva, Endings
Lemann, Weaving Story and Idea
Udall, One Liar’s Beginning
Simon, Frank Sinatra’s Gum
Potter, Lucky Girl
Louis Pasteur said, “Chance Favors the Prepared Mind,” and we will be using those words to guide us on our journey toward completing a nonfiction book. When I was younger, I did a lot of painting. Watch really great painters sometime. They spend most of their time preparing. They clear the area, they mask, they tape, they gather their tools, which are clean and well tended. They don’t, like me, spill paint cans or break windows with the ladder. You don’t have to be a genius to tell the difference between good painters and poor painters.

In writing it can seem different. We write into something—a subject. We explore. We dabble. We’re interested and passionate. We know we have something to say, but what exactly? All that is good if we understand what we’re doing, that we are exploring, that we are experimenting and developing our talents and even our disposition and character—because that is part of writing too. We’re learning how to tell a story.

But if we feel driven to write a book, mixing up preparation and execution can become frustrating. We’re impatient. As Madonna said, the only trouble with instant gratification is that it just doesn’t happen fast enough. We think book, and we think, I want it now. We’re confusing the goal for the process.

We have to understand that preparing, thinking, and thinking again, far from a waste of time, saves us time. Preparing is working—and in our case, it is an indispensable part of writing and being a writer. We have to become that writer, which means developing a love of the process of writing, which includes establishing good habits and
appropriate goals, tending to and balancing our ego, and having a positive and benevolent disposition toward ourselves and the world.

In this course we are going to spend some time thinking, researching, and preparing. We will talk about the fundamental dynamics of storytelling. We will examine ourselves and the world to discover our subjects. We will read four full-length books that emphasize different but fundamental narrative approaches, and I will be providing insights into craft and techniques through lectures, in PDFs, and through my comments on your work. And mostly we will be working on our own writing technique through exercise in the application of the skills we will be acquiring.

Writing a book represents a remarkable personal effort, effort we must embrace. In this course, I hope to shape your approach—to give you some form and direction. I will also share with you all I know. We’ll work hard. We will test ourselves. We’ll be surprised, I’m sure, at what we discover. It should be a lot of fun.

**Grading**

**Non Grade, Pass/Fail, and Grade**

I encourage you to enroll in this course under the non-grading option or as Pass/Fail. If you do not need a grade, please choose the non-graded option. If you must have a grade for some academic purpose, I will assess your work as follows:

- 10% Reading Discussion
- 30% Peer Response
- 20% Short Assignments
- 20% Essay Draft (pass/fail)
- 20% Portfolio

**Contacting Me**

We’ll have an Office where you can talk to me individually about your work and we can have an ongoing conversation throughout the course. I’ll hold Office Hours via the Chat section or on Facebook, whichever serves our needs best. During that time we can have a “live” time chat with as many students who show up. I also welcome calls and Skype conferences.
To contact me in the Forum, go to your individual thread under the heading Otis’s Office. This is by far the best place to discuss your work with me and far more efficient than email. Though I ask that each person in the class respect the privacy of these individual “office” threads (and I know you will get notifications of a posting here), each student should understand that their individual thread can be read by other students. If privacy is an issue, email is the way: otishaschemeyer@me.com. I will respond within 48 hours. If you have a question of a technical nature, please go to “Questions and Answers.” I or another student may be able to help you. If you just want to email me, that's OK too.

**Office Hours**
Each week, we'll meet for scheduled chat time on Wednesday 10 am PST.

**Conferences**
While Blackboard has many functions, I also encourage you to open a user-friendly Skype account with me so we can conference. I am also available on the phone and by email.

**Weekly Schedule**

**MONDAY MORNING:** Each new week officially starts on Monday. Every Monday morning, I will send out an email to the class introducing the topic for the week, letting you know a little bit more about the craft point we will be focusing on, the reading we will be doing together, and directing you to the new Forum threads, including your Discussion Points about the week’s readings and your weekly writing exercises. (NOTE: Because many of you may have busy work schedules, the weekend might be your preferred time to work. Because of this, I will always post up the assignments and Forum threads the prior Friday so you can get a head start if you want.)

**TUESDAY:** First responses to reading discussion questions due. You may continue weighing in and participating in the discussion throughout the week, but this is when you should post your initial thoughts on the prompts.

**WEDNESDAY:** Continue posting to reading discussion. I will also hold weekly office hours in the chatroom for our classroom on Wednesday at 10am PST. Here we can talk more informally, discussing any
general questions as well as specific issues you might be having with your assignments. You're not required to come to office hours every week, and feel free to drop in for shorter periods of time within that hour.

THURSDAY: Begin posting your writing assignments. Note that during the final four weeks, we’ll post our workshop pieces on Saturday before the Workshop and we will concentrate our efforts on those assignments throughout the week.

SATURDAY: Finish all posting for the week by 10am PST.

WEEKEND: IF you want, use the weekend to get a jumpstart on readings and drafting your writing exercise. I won't be in the classroom over the weekend but you're welcome to start posting for the next week whenever you're ready. The classroom is always open!

Course Schedule Overview

Here’s what we’ll cover over the ten weeks: 1. strong beginnings; 2. general research for nonfiction; 3. compelling protagonists and storylines; and 4. the introduction and development of dramatic scenes.

 Preparation
Week One: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction and Research Assignment Due:
Week Two: Defining Dynamic Subjects Research Assignment Due:
Week Three: Research: Books Similar and Different; Interviewing Ourselves and Others Research Assignment Due:

Proposals: Defining Commitment
Week Four: Protagonists and Storylines Protagonists and Storylines Exercise Due:
Week Five: Dramatic Scenes Proposals Due (max 8): 5/12
The Hook: First Sentence, Paragraph, and Page . . .
Week Six: First Page
First Page: All Students (not to exceed 250 words): Note: First Page Should Be Posted During Week 6 (M-Th)

Weeks 7-10: Draft of the First Fifteen: The Shape of Chapter
Week Seven: Other Voices
Workshop: 4 Student Works (not to exceed 5000 words):
Assignments Posted Saturday
Week Eight: Revision in Narrative (Show Don’t Tell)
Workshop: 4 Student Works (not to exceed 5000 words):
Assignments Posted Saturday
Week Nine: Macro Revision
Workshop: 4 Student Works (not to exceed 5000 words):
Assignments Posted Saturday
Week Ten: Micro Revision
Workshop: 4 Student Works (not to exceed 5000 words):
Assignments Posted Saturday

Portfolio: Proposal and Revised Pages
Due Last Day of Class:

Navigating This Course
Once you login and click your course, scroll your mouse to the Course Info section (found in the upper left-hand corner in crimson—actually cardinal!). This is our major navigation point. You can always come back to review information I’ve included here. Each Friday click on Schedule (just below) to find course material available for the next two weeks (so you can plan ahead if necessary).

When you click on Schedule, a page will open with the week’s class. Each week, under headings, you will find a Summary of Writing Assignments, followed by a Craft Talk. This talk will highlight issues that we will address in our Foundational Work, our Writing Assignment to Post in the forum and in our Reading for the Week and Discussion Points. Generally there will be a section titled Final
Thoughts. Occasionally there will be supplementary videos and websites.

I summarize the writing assignments at the very start of the week because those are the most important component of this course, and I want you to be prepared early for the week’s writing. There are two kinds of assignments, Foundational, which build the foundations for your book, and Assignments to Post, which are short assignments we will post to the forum each week for feedback. Once we begin workshop we will no longer have short assignments.

At first we’ll be developing our research. Soon we’ll post our book proposal, and our first page. In the last four weeks of the course we’ll post and workshop our first chapter. We’ll post all these assignments by going to the Forum and clicking the Writing Assignment “thread” for the first six weeks of the course. In the last four weeks, 7-10, you’ll post your first 15 pages (5000 words max) of your memoir, biography, profile, personal essay, or any creative nonfiction you wish. We’ll then workshop your longer pieces in the Forum under the Workshop “thread.” You’ll post your work and your peers will comment, gaining their footing at first perhaps and increasing in perspicacity as we move along.

Outside reading: To enrich and expand our understanding of the material, in the subheading To Read This Week, I will assign short readings available in PDF. These might be Creative nonfiction essays or craft essays. Links to these works can be found in Materials. We will also read four full length nonfiction books over the term.

Under Discussion Points I will pose a couple of questions to get you thinking about the material for the week. Beginning with these prompts, but hopefully not ending there, you’ll take your ideas to the Forum, the place where we’ll have group conversations. The Forum is where the excitement happens, and you’ll be depending upon each other for spirited involvement here. In the Forum you will post your thoughts, feelings, and insights in the Discussion “thread,” and respond to your peers.

That’s the course! The only other thing we’ll be doing is communicating in different ways. You’ll get a chance to introduce yourselves to your classmates in the Introductions Forum. We’ll have a Forum set up called Coffee Shop where we can talk informally about any aspect of the course, our writing, our fears and
trepidations. And lastly, you’ll find a **Questions and Answers Forum** where I’ll address some common questions and where you can ask questions too. Hopefully we can take care of logistical and technical issues there.

In general, I’ve tried to keep the workings of this course as simple as possible. I know it might not seem that way at first, but you’ll see it will become “easy peasy” as we move along. The course is principally made up of the **Schedule**, where each class will appear, and the **Forum**. There is a good amount of redundancy built in too. After two weeks, you’ll be old hands at posting to the forums and giving feedback, and you will have dropped into a wonderful habit of reading and writing, and that’s why we’re here.

**The Schedule and Forums**

**Course Availability**

The weekly Course materials will be available on Friday, a week ahead of the actual schedule for those with a need to complete work early. If you have no pressing need to complete work ahead of time, I suggest moving along week by week, looking only at the materials for the current week on Friday, planning, and completing the reading and writing work that week. If your schedule calls for further accommodations, let me know.

**Forums and Threads (Discussions)**

Forums and threads for the **Reading Discussion** and the **Writing Assignments** will be available with the course materials. While you can submit either your reading response or weekly writing early, generally I’d like the reading discussion to begin on Tuesday. I’d like students to post their writing work for the week and begin their peer responses on Thursday.

Work from the previous week should be completed by Saturday 10 am PST. I’ll make my final comments that afternoon and evening. The forums will remain open indefinitely so that you can look back over them; however, I’d like us to try our best to finish posting for the previous week at latest on Saturday.

While I encourage you to look ahead and plan ahead, I’ve also tried to organize the course around a consistent weekly schedule that takes into account your busy lives. During the week, you will only need to...
respond to one thread at a time, first the **Discussion** thread then the **Writing Assignment** thread. We will also have an ongoing virtual coffee-shop where we can informally converse on any topic at any time.

**Coffee Shop, the Informal Thread**
This is the like the campus coffee shop, a place where we might show up, gather, and exchange ideas and talk informally. I'll be here from time to time, but I won't be wearing my hat as instructor, exactly. I'm hanging out. Other students, I hope, will be hanging out too. This informal thread is for anything and everything. Work completed after the weekly schedule can be posted in the "coffee shop" thread where you can ask for some feedback from peers. Any other conversations you'd like to continue can also be moved to the "coffee shop" thread. This is a good place for book recommendations, questions, requests for additional feedback, posting revisions, tangents, discussion of process, or anything at all. Treat it as a gathering place.

**Workshop Thread**
The first workshop submissions will be posted at the end of Week 6 (Saturday). We will have 3-5 pieces (maximum 5000 words). We will read and respond to these pieces over the course of the next week, completing our critique by the following Friday.

**Posting to Threads: Copy and Paste**
I suggest that you simply keep a "Reading Log," an ongoing document for all your reading responses and then simply "copy and paste" these into the thread. Write the new response at the top, and that way you won't be tempted to read over what's come before. Hopefully this log will become a lifelong habit. Do the same for your exercises.

**Nuts and Bolts**
**Some Questions Answered**

**Writing Assignments**
We will have several types of writing assignments in this course designed to help you formulate your research and develop your nonfiction book proposal, along with your first chapter.
1. **Research Assignments:** For the first three weeks of class you will have a variety of assignments, designed to get you thinking about your book. Those that you post should not exceed 750 words.

2. **Book Proposal** (three to four pages): We will write a book proposal. At this stage, while taking into account the typical requirements of the book proposal, we will use this proposal as a draft that “defines” our commitment.

3. **First 15 pages** (for workshops weeks 7-10): The major assignment for the term is a draft of a chapter of a book. This might also be an essay. This should be considered an ongoing assignment. I’d like to hear about your progress either in the Forum, chat, Facebook, or by email. This creative nonfiction piece may address any subject and will be between 4000 and 5000 words long. Expect a 5000-word essay to take at least 20 hours to write (or five hours of writing per week over the next four weeks).

4. **Portfolio:** The Portfolio gives you the opportunity to submit a revised version of your book proposal and first 15 pages.

**Weekly Reading Reflections**

Reading is a fundamental part of a writer’s training. Writers love to read, and they engage in the act of reading just as anyone with an appreciation for the written word does. They read to find out what happens next and why, to lose themselves in other worlds, to make discoveries about themselves and have imaginative experiences. They read, in short, to feel. The lay reader simply has the experience of reading, whereas the writer is in a constant dialogue with their reading, gauging their own emotional reactions and assessing the techniques of the author.

This course asks you to practice reading as a writer, since this will ultimately strengthen your own writing. You will be encouraged to bring together your emotional side (How does this make me feel?) with your analytical side (What formal choices has the writer made that could explain the way I’m feeling?). Each week, I’ll post a couple of questions for you to reflect on. I encourage you to jump in to these discussions. As you know, discussions are always more interesting when more people participate and there’s a wide range of opinions.
**Workshop**

Plan your time and consider your workshop project early in the course. In Week 3, I will send out a schedule for the workshops to be held in weeks 7-10. We will look at 3-5 pieces a week. Some of you will be farther along earlier, and will sign up for an early reading. Others of you will want more time for that first draft. Those of you opting for an earlier workshop have more time for revision. The reverse is true for those who hand in a draft later—less time for revision.

For readers, we will have 3-5 works per week to critique. These critiques should be about 250-500 words. They will come in the form of a letter addressed to the author. Unless you decide otherwise, your chapter/essay will be “workshopped”: that is, discussed critically and in depth, but also with a generous spirit, by the entire class.

**Student Feedback on Assignments**

Generosity of spirit should infuse every aspect of our feedback to our peers. Keep in mind that the purpose of responding is to be helpful to the writer. We need to write comments that will be “heard.” Also, responses are a good time to try out some of the ideas I’ll discuss in the **Craft Talk** or that you will find in your reading. Referring to outside sources and the tactics employed by other writers can be helpful as you solidify your own understanding of craft and develop your aesthetic. Be creative in your approach to feedback.

Because of the number of students in the course, you won't likely be able to respond to every assignment each week (and I want you to prioritize your writing). At a minimum, comment on the work of six classmates per week, and, over the duration of the course, share your attention among the work of as many classmates as possible. Writers whose postings have received less attention from the class will appreciate your time. Do keep in mind that writers and reviewers quickly develop a relationship of quid pro quo. If you want feedback from your peers, you must generate feedback. If we have trouble generating feedback, I will assign reviewers.

In our early short assignments, 4 or 5 sentences per assignment are enough. I’d like you to comment on as many as possible. In the Workshop period, we’ll have 3-5 pieces of less than 5000 words. These responses will be about 250 words each. This will be considered a
“critique.”

In your responses, do beware of electronic communication. It is quick, and sometimes this itself is the problem. Think before you let your fingers fly. Please, no “flaming,” as it is called. And generally keep irony, sarcasm, and any other double meanings out of your posts. Save the subtext for your real work, and take extra care to be respectful and warm. If someone else’s post appears to be curt or rude, consider it to be a problem with the writing, not the author.

Later in the course, in Week Six, I’ll post some advice on writing a critique of your peers’ work and receiving criticism graciously.

**Class Dynamics**
Attention to class dynamics is perhaps more important online than in face-to-face classes. I’ll suggest that the online environment can be exciting and dynamic. I ask each of you to take on a personal responsibility to add to the class dynamic, making it hard working, real, intellectually stimulating, and fun.

**My Online Presence**
I’ll be online and actively responding to new posts in the classroom most weekdays. I also check my email about once a day, and respond as promptly as I can. The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit; we don't have to be working simultaneously. So log on when it's convenient for you, morning or night, weekday or weekend. Just keep in mind that at the end of the week, on Sunday night, we move into a new week in the forum.

**My Feedback:** I will write a short (several-sentence) response to every writing assignment that is posted in the Forum. I will critique your workshop piece along with the rest of the class. I generally use my critique as both a response to your work and as an opportunity to underscore applicable issues that might be useful for the class as a whole. I will also send you a short letter once I’ve reviewed your portfolio.

**Reading Discussion:** In the discussion threads, I want to allow you breathing room to explore and develop ideas on your own and with your peers. I believe in this freedom--greatly--and know that an
instructor's constant meddling can stifle the conversation. You'll notice that I won't be commenting on every comment. I'll be reading with interest, however, and chiming in when necessary.

**Class Discussion:** In general, I try to hold two discussions each week to accommodate students in different time zones. I very much encourage students to attend this session.

If you have a general question about the course or about writing, please post those in the Questions and Answers Thread. Other students will likely see questions they themselves have and will appreciate seeing both the questions and answers addressed publicly.

**Conferences:** I enjoy talking with you about your work, so Skype me or give me a call. We can schedule a time to talk.