Required Reading:

Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction
Sondra Perl & Mimi Schwartz
ISBN: 0618370757

Supplemental readings to be posted online

Grading:

30%  Writing Exercises (Weeks 2-6)
40%  Full-Length Piece (Revised, formatted properly, and submitted on time)
30%  Forum/Workshop Participation

I understand that you may sometimes be unable to complete one week’s writing exercises or reading, or comment on every classmate’s weekly assignment—that’s really okay. Rather than adopting an “all-or-nothing” approach, simply do what you can, when you can, with the understanding that the more you put into the class, the more you’ll gain. Your participation in our FORUM discussions is a benefit to everyone.
Weekly Schedule:

MONDAY MORNING: Each new week officially starts on Monday morning (PST). Look for an email from me introducing the week’s topic and directing you to the FORUM threads for the weekly assignments. I will post these threads on Friday of the previous week (in case you’re one of those organized types).

THROUGHOUT THE WEEK:

   Weeks 1-6: Complete the Writing Exercises; Participate in Readings Discussions; Read/Comment on Peer Postings/Exercises.

   Weeks 6-9: Provide a Workshop Letter for each Peer Manuscript; Participate in Readings and Manuscript Discussions.

THURSDAY, 7PM (PST): Exercises/Assignments DUE (so that your peers have the opportunity to read and offer comments on them).

WEEKEND: Feel free to use the weekend to get a jumpstart on the next week’s readings and writings. I won’t be in the classroom over the weekend but you’re welcome to start posting as soon as the threads are up. The classroom is always open!

Preliminary Schedule

Week 1: Introductions/Why Creative Nonfiction?

What is creative nonfiction and why? Who are we as writers? What are the forces that shape our identities and influence our writing projects?

   Perl & Schwartz, Chapter 1: Why Creative Nonfiction? (pp. 2-19)
   Perl & Schwartz, 20 Ways to Talk About Creative Nonfiction (pp. 80-84)
   Personal Essay: Brian Doyle, “Being Brians”
   Exercises: Writing Your Name; Writing About Place

Week 2: The Power of the Notebook

Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 2: The Power of the Notebook* (pp. 20-32)
Short Shorts: Alexandra Fuller, “Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight”
Exercises: Muscle Memory; Mapping the Body/Neighborhood

**Week 3: 10 Ways to a Draft**

Head data. Exercises. Different ways of knowing and ordering information.

Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 3: 10 Ways to a Draft* (pp. 33-45)
Stories of Craft: Patricia Hampl, “Memory & Imagination”
Memoir: Tony Early, “Somehow Form a Family”
Exercises: Personal History Timelines

**Week 4: Taking Shape**

Openings. Scene, Summary and Reflection. Narrative arc. Form, traditional and non-traditional.

Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 4: Taking Shape* (pp. 46-63)
Portrait: Susan Allen Toth, “Going to the Movies”
Personal Essay: Connie Wieneke, “Snakebite”
Essays of Place: Gretchen Legler, “Moments of Being: An Antarctic Quintet”
Exercises: Beginnings/Hooks; Scenes; Writing Emotion

**Week 5: Finding Voice**

The vertical I vs. the narrative eye. Authenticity and narrative authority. Author positionality. Incorporating other voices.

Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 5: Finding Voice* (pp. 64-79)
Linda Williamson Nelson, “On Writing My Way Home” (online)
Lee Martin, “Telling Our Private Truths” (online)
Exercises: Characters; Setting

**Week 6: The Role of Research**

Integrating head data. Gathering information. Creative research and investigation. Interviewing.

Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 9: The Role of Research* (pp. 143-162)
Personal Essay: Scott Russell Sanders, “Under the Influence”
Brian Doyle, “Joyas Voladores” (online)

Exercises: Creating Metaphor/Context

**Week 7: Workshopping a Draft**

*Reading. Listening.*

Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 6: Workshopping a Draft* (pp. 85-105)
Workshop I (Personal essay or Memoir chapter)

**Week 8: The Craft of Revision**

*The situation and the story. Focus.*

Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 7: The Craft of Revision* (pp. 106-128)
Personal Essay: Gerald Callahan, “Chimera”
Faith’s Handouts
Workshop II (Personal essay or Memoir chapter)

**Week 9: A Lighter Touch—Or Other Ways to Tell a Story**


Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 8: A Lighter Touch—Or Other Ways* (pp. 129-142)
Workshop III (Personal essay or Memoir chapter)

**Week 10: The Ethics of Creative Nonfiction**


Perl & Schwartz, *Chapter 10: The Ethics of Creative Nonfiction* (pp. 163-178)
Literary Journalism: Anne Fadiman, “Do Doctor’s Eat Brains?”
Rigoberta Menchu (online)

**How All This Works:**

ANNOUNCEMENTS  Check here for important updates and course bulletins.
| COURSE INFO | General course information/overview. |
| MATERIALS | List of textbooks, plus any supplementary readings and reference materials (PDFs or links). |
| SCHEDULE | Where to find weekly assignments. Links to the reading assignments, writing assignments, and discussion points for each unit (Week 1, Week 2, etc.). |
| FORUM | Our discussion board where you post weekly writing assignments, submit manuscripts for workshop, provide feedback on other work, and discuss/ask Qs. |
| CHAT | Where live, text-based interaction occurs. Instructor’s office hours also held here (check ANNOUNCEMENTS for exact times). |

**My Online Presence:**

I’ll be online at least every other weekday. The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when schedules permit. So log on when it’s convenient for you, morning or night, weekday or weekend.

If you have a question about course content or class assignments, please post it in FORUM rather than e-mailing me, so that everyone can benefit from the information. If you have a private question or concern, feel free to email me (fadiele@cca.edu). I will check my email at least once a day and respond as promptly as I can.

Once a week, time TBD, I’ll hold a one-hour CHAT session, a kind of “live” office hour. Participation is encouraged but not mandatory, and CHATs will be recorded for those who can’t make it. I will post the times in advance in ANNOUNCEMENTS. If you’d like, we can try an audio option (like Skype) or a video option (like Google chat).

**Reading Assignments:**

I chose an easy-to-read (and portable!) textbook crammed with writing prompts, craft lessons, and suggestions for structuring creative nonfiction. Most weeks, I’ll post supplemental readings as well—worksheets/handouts I’ve developed and essays, memoirs or websites.

The purpose of the assigned published texts is to demonstrate different nonfiction strategies and possibilities we can discuss and try out. Pay attention to what you respond to and why, to the balance of Head versus Heart data. Once you figure out what works (or doesn’t) for you in a piece and how, you are closer to stealing (or avoiding) that technique yourself!

**Discussion Points:**
Each week in the FORUM, I’ll post discussion questions about the readings or your writing process. Please respond to at least one of my questions during the week, or address other issues you think deserve attention. Also feel free to ask your own questions about the texts we are reading or anything else. Explaining what craft lesson you learned is always helpful.

After posting, you may read someone else and find yourself wanting to elaborate on her or his comments or offer a different perspective. I will also read your comments to one another and pipe in when I have something to add. The more lively the discussion/argument, the more fun we’ll have and the more we’ll all learn.

**Writing Exercises/Responses:**

Each week in the FORUM, I’ll post at least one writing exercise related to the week’s topic. Your responses are not meant to be full stories (shoot for 500 to 1,250 words), but explorations that (hopefully) you might use in or develop into longer pieces. Eventually you may come up with something that simply demands further attention and choose to work/develop/expand on it, rather than responding to the weekly prompt. Basically, I want you to use these exercises in the way that best supports your creative endeavors, not to feel trapped by them.

Posting by Thursday evening (PST) ensures that your classmates and I have the opportunity to read and offer comments. Although comments on these exercises won’t necessarily be as in-depth as responses to the manuscripts we’ll workshop in the second half of the quarter, it’s critical that we all become comfortable with reading and discussing one another’s work.

**Small (Cohort) Groups:**

Depending on the size and productivity of the class, we may need to form smaller groups. The purpose of cohorts is to foster intensive community and maximize peer feedback on weekly exercises/responses. If we do end up using them, you will be responsible for reading and commenting on the writing of your cohort group (rather than the entire class).

The groups, which we will periodically rearrange the groups for variety, are public. While you are obligated to comment on the work of your cohort, you may also respond to others outside your group. So if you develop a strong rapport with a particular writer, you may continue to read/comment each other’s work once the small groups are rearranged.

**Manuscript Submissions:**
At the end of Week Six, each writer will submit one full-length (2,500-3,750 words) essay or memoir, and over the course of the next few weeks, the entire class will read and offer in-depth, detailed comments on each of them (see below). Ideally, this story will be an extension and expansion of one of your early exercise responses, but it doesn’t have to be.

Please (1) post your manuscript as a Word attachment, and (2) paste it into the text box for those who don’t have the necessary version of Word. Unless non-traditional formatting is central to the experience of your piece, please use standard, professional format (page numbers, one-inch margins, double-spacing, 12-point Times New Roman or similar font). As you would for an editor or agent, proofread thoroughly for grammar and mechanics, and include a word count. (Please note that I am unable to read beyond the maximum word limit.)
**Manuscript Workshopping:**

Becoming a good reader is an important part in your development as a writer. Learning how to identify the strengths and areas for improvement in others’ work will help you recognize the strengths and areas for improvement in your own.

In keeping with the MFA workshop model of writing instruction, your job will be to write a detailed, constructive response letter (250 to 500 words, *not* including words quoted from the manuscript in question) to each writer “up” that week. We’ll workshop several pieces per week, and the workshop letters/discussion will be your only written assignment for those weeks.

Here are some things I’ve found helpful for dealing with true stories:

- Read the work twice—first for pleasure and meaning, and a second time with a pen/cursor, to ensure you understand the writer’s intention and strategies. Your goal is to reflect back what’s coming across on the page, and help the writer identify and enhance the techniques that will help achieve her/his goals.

- Begin your letter by identifying the piece’s strengths, what makes it memorable, what are the compelling (or potential) themes. Then ask questions about what you didn’t understand/believe/feel. When making suggestions/criticisms, be specific and base them on our craft discussions/readings rather than your personal dis/likes or beliefs. Finally, end with hope for the future or reading suggestions or writing models—in short, you’re making a meaty love sandwich!

- Discuss the writing, not the writer. We may refer to the writer as YOU, but we refer to the character on the page as THE NARRATOR. When readers avoid being judgmental or directive or nosy, it’s easier for writers to take risks; however, being completely uncritical is its own kind of irresponsible workshop behavior. Though a writer’s impetus may be deeply-held beliefs or powerful experiences, our goal is to craft literary art that invites others in; workshops should resemble communal barn-raisings more than political meetings, religious revivals or group therapy. Amen!

- We all play an active role in creating a learning environment where we are comfortable taking risks, giving honest feedback, and learning from different ideas/points of view. Trust is even more critical in cyberspace, where we can’t see hear the excitement in someone’s voice or read supportive facial expressions and body language. And where we’re sharing
personal stories. It’s therefore important that we maintain our senses of humor, give each other the benefit of the doubt, and keep all work confidential.

My Commentary:

My remarks on your short exercises will be brief but designed to help you develop the piece or think about how it might be extended into something longer (if applicable). You may expect my feedback within 3 days, provided you post on time (which allows us to keep moving steadily forward on time).

I will write you a longer response letter to your manuscript submission and post it in the FORUM. (In a live classroom I would make these comments to the class, so that everyone could benefit and respond.) I’m hopeful that we can achieve a similar back and forth in our “threaded” discussion in the FORUM.

After your workshop, I will be available for an optional 15-minute conference (either CHAT or Skype/Google-Chat), if you’d like to discuss the feedback and possible revision strategies privately. Time TBD.

A Final Important Note:

Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last assignment, “real life”—family, illness, professional deadlines—often has a way of making that impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop completely out of the class. Hold on! If you have to skip a couple exercises, this is also okay. As long as you’re getting most of the work done and commenting on your classmates’ submissions, you’ll be fine. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch if you have any concerns about your standing. If you foresee some bumps in the road, let me know. We’ll work together to find the best possible solution for you.

Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to make this a better experience for you. I welcome suggestions for discussion, assignments, scheduling (and, of course, vacation spots).