Course Title: Observers of the Natural World: Writing the Personal Nature Essay  
Course Code: EGL 58  
Instructor: Peter Fish

COURSE SUMMARY

This course is intended for people who love nature and want to write about it well. Over our 10-weeks, we’ll be focusing on skills and techniques especially important in nature writing:

- Observation: Sharpen your sensory skills: looking, listening, smelling—in real time and from memory.
- Creating a physical world: Putting your observations into the right words on the page.
- Shaping your essay. Every successful personal nature essay needs a theme. It needs a start and an ending—you need to know more, and feel differently, at the end of the essay than you do at the beginning. We’ll work on discovering and honing themes, and how to shape your essay so it has the most intellectual and emotional impact on your reader.
- Voice: The best nature writers sound like themselves and no one else. We’ll work on attaining that goal.
- Research: even the most poetic nature essay is built on a framework of facts. How do you conduct research in a way that will most benefit your essay? How do you choose which facts to include, and which to leave out?
- Editing and self-editing. Learn how to revise your own work, and how to give constructive advice to other writers.
- Overview of how aspiring nature writers can get work published.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

- Completion of reading assignments and participation in discussions  
- Over the course of the class, first drafts and revisions of two personal nature essays of 500-1000 words.  
- In-class and take-home writing exercises  
- Weekly engagement with your fellow students’ writing

Required Text:  
  - Used copied readily available online
GRADE OPTIONS AND REQUIREMENTS:

Students have three grading options for Continuing Studies courses:

1. Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) – written work is required in this class, letter grades will be determined as follows:
   
   Participation in discussions: 20%
   Weekly writing assignments: 20%
   Completed essays: 40%
   Response to fellow writers’ workshop submissions: 20%

2. Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - participation is required. You must receive at least 70 percent according to the letter grade formula to receive credit.

3. No Grade Requested (NGR) - no work is required; No credit shall be received; No proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)

   Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies program.

TENTATIVE WEEKLY OUTLINE

WEEK ONE: OBSERVING NATURE

For our first class, we’ll be exploring a portion of the Stanford campus, opening ourselves to the sights, smells, sounds, and textures around us–the first essential step to putting the natural world on the page. We’ll also be working to summon up vivid memories of nature from our pasts. Reading and writing assignments TBA.

WEEK TWO: FINDING YOUR STORY

Like an oak tree, the personal nature essay is a multi-branched, sometimes tangled literary genre that can range from intimate personal memoir to the comic confession, from the coolly scientific to the pointed and political. How do you find your story? That’s what we’ll work on in this session.

Reading and writing assignments: TBA
WEEK THREE: FINDING YOUR VOICE

Who do you want to sound like when you’re telling your nature essay? Ideally, yourself—perfected. How do you find that person? This class will focus on the mystery of the writer’s voice—discovering it and polishing it while keeping it your own.

DUE: First draft Essay One

Reading and writing assignments TBA

WEEK FOUR: EDITING AND REVISING

Few great essays are great the first time around. Almost all good writing requires revision. This class will be focused on the art of editing—you and others. We’ll be breaking up into small groups to workshop the first drafts of each other’s essays.

Reading and writing assignments TBA

WEEK FIVE: FACTS, FIGURES AND PEOPLE

The personal nature essay is non-fiction: even the most lyrical essay rests on a solid bed of facts. How do you decide what facts you need to know for your essay, how do you uncover them, how do you decide what to leave out and what to put in? And how do you do this gracefully, compellingly? The personal nature essay also can benefit from including voices other than your own. Doing that successfully means training your ear to capture the way people actually talk. It means learning how much of what they say will work for your essay. It means learning how to interview people—to get them to share their most evocative thoughts, feelings and memories of the place you’re writing about. This second half of this class will focus on the craft of interviewing and the craft of incorporating accurate yet evocative quotes into your essay.

DUE: Final drafts Essay One
Reading and writing assignments TBA

WEEK SIX: STRUCTURE AND SCENE

“Structure,” says the distinguished non-fiction writer Susan Orlean, “is essential. Write as many pretty sentences as you want, but if they aren’t organized well, they’ll just fly away.” As you write longer essays, structure becomes all-important. This class session will focus on how to find the write structure for your essay—the one that helps you tell the story you want to tell. Also: In-class workshopping of ideas for Essay Two.

Reading and writing assignments TBA
WEEK SEVEN: THE PUBLISHING SCENE

We’ll be talking about what publications—both in print and online—regularly publish good nature writing, and how you can break into this world.

Reading and writing assignments TBA

WEEKS EIGHT AND NINE

We’ll be devoting most of these class sessions to workshopping first drafts of Essay Number Two.

Due: First drafts, Essay Two (possibly a couple of days before May 20)
Reading and writing assignments TBA

WEEK TEN

Wrapping Up
DUE: Final Drafts, Essay Two.