



The Personal Presence: Memoirs, Articles, and Essays – CNF 07

Winter 2021

Wednesdays, 6:30 – 9:20 p.m.

10 weeks, January 13th – March 17th

INSTRUCTOR: Lynn Stegner

OFFICE HOURS:

While I do not hold regular office hours for this course, I am happy to schedule a video or phone appointment.

TEXTBOOK OR READER:

“CANVAS” or online Course Reader entitled THE PERSONAL PRESENCE: MEMOIRS, ARTICLES, AND ESSAYS. This Reader is password protected, and each student enrolled in the course will have access to weekly readings and course memoranda.

MATERIALS AND/OR EXPENSES:

None

REQUIREMENTS FOR CREDIT:

Several grading options are available to students registered in the course. If students wish to receive transcript credit and/or a letter grade, then they must attend *most* of the class meetings; produce one to two chapters of a memoir (length dependent), or one chapter and one revision; or one or two essays or articles, and/or a revision; and participate regularly and respectfully in workshop discussions. Those choosing the NGR option are not subject to attendance constraints; that being said, the workshop dynamic relies upon a consortium of voices working together toward a single goal—making our narratives the best that they can be. So, though not required of everyone, attendance with active participation is desired as part and parcel of being a solid citizen of the workshop community.

Before our first meeting—

* FIRST ASSIGNMENT: Read the excerpt from Moritz Thomsen’s memoir, “THE SADDEST PLEASURE,” pages 91 – 100. This will be available online to those enrolled in the course one week before we begin.

* Students should also contact the instructor, Lynn Stegner, via email one week before the first class meeting to indicate whether or not they have work in progress that will be ready for

discussion on January 13th. Those students who do have work ready will then get those narratives to me in time for workshop participants to read before the 13th.

* NOTE: Neither the subject of creative nonfiction nor the dynamic of a writing workshop lends itself to a rigid schedule of topical presentations, since issues arise organically from the material under discussion week to week. Nevertheless, we will follow roughly the natural sequence involved in developing, writing, and revising narratives, focusing each week on a different aspect of nonfiction composition—something along the following lines:

WEEKLY SCHEDULE AND OUTLINE:

Week 1 – January 13

- * Housekeeping
 - Student sign up: manuscript presentation calendar
 - Handouts & explanations
 - Discussion of workshop protocol and dynamic
 - Guidelines for thinking and talking about works in progress

- * Overture: *Opening remarks about the personal voice within a nonfiction context – the dynamic between storyteller, audience, and content, including the narrator’s motivations*

- * Student manuscript presentations & discussions

- * For next week: Read the essays “Rumors of a Snake” by David Quammen, and “A Hanging,” by George Orwell

Week 2 – January 20

- * Brief talk: *Before you begin*
 - Fomenting ideas with imaginative license; truth vs. fact
 - Research, homework, and respectful preparedness
 - Organizing your material & notes
 - Good habits, good writing

- * More talk – *Lying to tell the truth: Imaginatively inhabiting the facts without recklessly violating them*
 - narrative proximity to audience

- * Student manuscripts

- * For next week: Read the essay “A Loser” by John Graves

Week 3 – January 27

- * Brief talk: *Point of View*
 - Proxemics: Managing the first-person perspective, near & far
 - The subjectivity of objectivity, and degrees thereof
- * Student manuscripts
- * For next week: Read the essay “The Urge for an End” by Edward Hoagland

Week 4 – February 3

- * Brief talk: *You can't tell the players without a program*
 - Introducing your players
 - Brushing in background
 - Initiating the narrative situation, issue, or topic; where there's trouble, there's interest
- * Student manuscripts
- * For next week: Read “That Great Falls Year” by Wallace Stegner and “Damp in the Afternoon” by Calvin Trillin

Week 5 – February 10

- * Brief talk: *Fiction & Nonfiction: two peas in a pod?*
 - The ways in which the devices of fiction serve the purposes of nonfiction, and for a lot of the same reasons
 - Composing dramatic scenes
 - Narratively relevant description & details
 - Experiential language & details vs. telling through summary & abstractions
 - More about causative elements – loading the spring, and building your argument
- * Student manuscripts
- * For next week: Read the essay “Perito Moreno: Chronicles of Ice” by Gretel Ehrlich and “Draft No. 4” by John McPhee

Week 6 – February 17

- * Brief talk: *Artificial Respiration*
 - Characterization & development – breathing life into your players
- * Student manuscripts
- * For next week: Read the excerpt from Frank McCourt's memoir, *ANGELA'S ASHES*, pages 151 – 169

Week 7 – February 24

- * Brief talk: *Furnishing the House: The narrative toolbox*
 - Dialogue
 - Metaphor, simile, & symbolism – all forms of analogy
 - Necessary exposition & interpretation
 - Flashbacks, backstories, and the informing past
 - The language of the senses
- * Student manuscripts
- * For next week: Read the excerpt from Julian Barnes' piece, "The Loss of Depth"

Week 8 – March 3

- * Brief talk: *Narrative architecture*
 - Orchestrating content, scenes, backstories and anything else meant to enrich, expand, or explain the central narrative line
 - Pacing and dramatic syncopation – no one-note sambas!
- * Student manuscripts
- * For next week: Read the two pieces, "The Trouble with a Caddie" and "Moral Exercise" by John Updike

Week 9 – March 10

- * Brief talk: *No Snoring*
 - Thematic considerations – *it has to amount to something*
 - The art of rhetoric – persuading your audience
 - How to make what you're writing important to your reader; making meaning
- * Student manuscripts
- * For next week: Read the excerpt from Ann Fadiman's memoir "EX LIBRIS," pages 3 – 10, and the essay by Joan Didion entitled "Goodbye to All That."

Week 10 – March 17

- * Brief talk, with Q & A: *The road to publication – or perdition?*
 - Final line editing, submissions, contests & awards, agents, presses and publishers
 - When and when not to capitulate to editors
- * Student manuscripts