TELLING TRUE STORIES:
WRITING THE NONFICTION BOOK

ANNE ZIMMERMAN
CNF 78 W/ Stanford Continuing Studies: Fall 2021

The secret of good writing is telling the truth.

—Gordon Lish

This course aims to get you started (and keep you going) on the nonfiction project you’ve always wanted to write. Whether you’ve been dreaming of writing a memoir or a biography, a book about history, true crime, or travel, this course will help you to find your unique angle and produce pages. We’ll begin with basics: sharpening your premise, thinking about and conducting research, creating an outline and narrative arc. Next, we’ll jump into the actual work of writing, with weekly creative assignments designed to push you along. Readings and discussions will illuminate the choices that all long-form authors must make: what point of view to take; how to navigate shifts of time; balancing plot versus story; what details to include and what to omit; how to structure and pace the story; when to let it flow and when to revise. By the end of the course, you’ll have at least one completed (and critiqued) chapter and multiple short pieces of writing off of which to build new chapters. You’ll also have clear vision for the path to take to The End.

Required Texts:
Memorial Drive by Natasha Trethewey
You Can’t Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between, by Lee Gutkind

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS & WORKSHOP:

Short exercises in Weeks 1-4 will pave the way for a longer final project that you’ll share with the group on a date you pick during Weeks 5-10. Your longer submission may or may not be based on work done earlier in the quarter – that’s up to you.

If you produce five new pages a week, you’ll end the quarter with fifty new pages of work. You will submit ~12 pages/4,000 words (this can be new or past work, up to you) for workshopping/peer review. Workshop submissions can be shorter than ~12 pages/4,000 words, but not longer.

WEEKLY “HOMEWORK:”

*Provide thoughtful written critique to the work of your classmates. A commitment to making the time and space to read and comment on the work of others is especially important in this class.
*Use the information gleaned from this experience (our readings, lectures, conversations, critiques, etc.) to propel your personal work forward.

*Read and engage in group discussions.

My hope is that this structure will provide the ideal writing experience: You’ll have support from fellow writers who know your work, weekly doses of inspiration, compelling conversations about craft, and an intrinsic desire to focus on your personal work. Should that desire lag, don’t worry! There’s a committed group here to cheer you on.

**TYPICAL WEEKLY SCHEDULE:**

**MONDAY:** At the start of each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and read the assigned lecture. These lessons are important and help guide both our group discussions and focus your personal work. Please read them! Assignments will be posted alongside the lecture; you’ll post your replies in the labeled discussion threads for the week. (Sounds confusing, but you’ll get the hang of things quickly.)

**MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY:** Post your responses to the readings and discussion questions, respond to the work of your peers, ask any questions you have. Plan to work within the assigned week, posting your comments and critiques early rather than late — this will keep our conversations vibrant and on-topic.

**FRIDAY:** All the materials for the coming week (lectures, discussion questions, etc.) will be posted on Friday morning BEFORE the week begins. (For example, the content for Week 2 will be posted at the end of Week 1). This way you can start your work for the following week over the weekend if you choose. FRIDAY is also the day that you will post your long submissions. This allows for weekend reading and rumination.

Please post any questions about assignments, readings, or course content in Canvas for everyone to see, rather than sending it by email. There is a “Questions and Comments” thread so that you can ask questions or discuss ideas that don’t fit anywhere else. The “Questions and Comments” thread is also a great place to post essays, articles or book reviews to share with the group.

**WEEKENDS:** I typically won’t be in the virtual classroom much on Saturday and Sunday. I encourage you to work ahead, using the weekend to work on the upcoming week rather than playing catch up. This keeps the class momentum moving ahead and allows for the richest conversation. No matter what, threads will close on Sunday night — so if you’re hoping for feedback or conversation about something you’ve submitted, post sooner rather than later. (Of course, life sometimes gets in the way. If you need extra time or have a question or comment from the prior week that you’d like me to address, please let me know.)
TO REITERATE: If you have a question about course content or assignments, please post it on Canvas so that all may see both your question and my response. There are no silly queries and it’s likely that your classmates will be curious about the answer to your question too. If you have a private question or concern, please contact me directly. The best way to contact me is through the Canvas messaging system.

TRUST & CONFIDENTIALITY: Writing workshops are built on trust. I think this is even truer in online workshops where we’re not all sitting together in the same room. To build this trust, it’s important that we all agree that the work you present here stays within the workshop. If you love someone’s piece and want to share it with your husband/wife/best friend/etc., ask the writer first. And while I want this cohort to be friendly and the classroom fun, please refrain from sharing jokes or memes with the group; this is a creative writing course not a social media feed. Please be thoughtful with your comments. Be kind and respect the class and our shared commitment to creative growth.

POSTING AND SHARING YOUR WORK:
In Week 1, you will sign up for a day to submit workshop submission (long/4,000 word piece) for review. Please mark that date in your calendar; I can’t always accommodate schedule changes.

Workshop submissions are due on the Friday before we read your work. Post your writing in the discussion thread in Canvas that I’ve labeled with your name. You will submit ~12 pages/4,000 words (this can be new or past work, up to you) for workshopping/peer review. Workshop submissions can be shorter than ~12 pages/4,000 words, but not longer.

As a reader, please aim to submit a thoughtful critique to your classmates work as soon as possible (by Thursday) so that we may have rich discussion and Q+A before moving into a new week.

ONE FINAL NOTE:
Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last little assignment, I’ve never taught a course into which the real life—work, illness, children, the illness of children, etc. did not intrude. When this happens, I counsel a less is more approach: do what you can, when you can, rather than dropping out in frustration over not completing every assignment. Please let me know if you’re feeling overwhelmed, I’ll help you figure out a solution!

CRITIQUE GUIDELINES:
As a student in this intensive course, you are expected to read your fellow students work closely and write each author a detailed critique (of a paragraph or more), identifying the strengths of the writing and what could be strengthened further in revision. They will do the same for you. These responses will be posted for all to read.

By editing and responding to other students’ writing, you’ll learn how to bring the same critical eye to bear upon your own work. Because writing is challenging, it’s important to recognize what’s working well in a draft. This is why I encourage workshop members to start by commenting upon the strengths of a piece, what you loved, and what’s especially original and compelling before
offering constructive responses to elements that might need further consideration. The tone of these critiques should always be supportive and respectful, and should move well past a simple “I thought this was really good.” This feedback should help guide your classmates in their revision. As we all know, the goal of a writing course is to provide a safe and stimulating space in which people can take creative risks and grow as writers -- let’s work together to make our time together as productive as possible.

Please note: A commitment to the value of sharing and receiving feedback on work is essential to this course. If you’d like to receive thoughtful comments on your own work, you’re expected to make comments on others’ submissions. If you fail to do this, I will contact you privately and you may lose the opportunity to post submissions for others to read.

MY RESPONSES:
I will post my own critiques of your writing in the forum alongside the critiques you receive from your workshop group members. In a traditional classroom setting, I would offer much of my feedback aloud, as part of the whole class’s instruction. In our online class, I make my comments public with the same hope that they will be interesting and instructive not just to the author of the piece but to the rest of the class as well. If, however, you submit a piece of writing about which you feel particularly vulnerable, you may request to receive your comments privately (over email) and I’ll be happy to accommodate you.

ZOOM CLASSROOM MEETINGS
Each week (unless I notify you otherwise) I’ll host a ~45 minute class meeting. We’ll discuss the readings, any craft issues you are facing as you write, and – if there’s time – we’ll do some writing. These meetings will take place Mondays at 1PM PST. Attendance is optional—you’re all busy people, with very different schedules and responsibilities. Conversations will be recorded and posted. If you miss the conversation, you can always watch later.

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.

To Receive an ‘A’ in this class: All of the weekly assignments/discussion questions along with two long submissions were completed and submitted on time. You made insightful contributions to most discussions and provided constructive, thoughtful comments to the work posted by your peers.

To Receive a ‘B’ in this class: Most the weekly assignments/discussion questions along with your two long submissions were completed and submitted on time. You made active and insightful contributions to many discussions and provided constructive, thoughtful comments to the work posted by your peers.

To Receive a ‘C’ in this class: Some of the weekly assignments/discussion questions along with one long submission were completed and submitted on time. You occasionally made and insightful
contributions to discussions and provided some constructive, thoughtful comments to the work posted by your peers.

As you can see, I expect students to take part regularly in the online forum—to discuss published work and to provide feedback to your classmates on their works in progress. This course functions only when everyone takes part in the writing and responding process.

WHAT TO EXPECT, WEEK BY WEEK:

**WEEK 1: Welcome!**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
Introductions, summary of current work, goals.
Workshop sign-up

**WEEK 2: Finding Your Story**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
What’s it all about: Story, Point of View, Characters

**WEEK 3: Structure**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
Plotting and outlining your book.

**WEEK 4: Building Blocks**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
Scenes, Summary, Musing.
Workshop

**WEEK 5: Themes**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
Finding the themes at work in your work.
Workshop

**WEEK 6: The Turning Point**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
Identifying turning points and moments of tension.
Workshop

**WEEK 7: Getting It Right**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
Bolstering your story with research.

**WEEK 8: Revision**
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*
All writing is rewriting.
Workshop
WEEK 9: And Then We Came to the End  
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*  
Sustaining your voice to the end.  
Workshop

WEEK 10: Certificate of Mastery  
Reading: Selections from *Memorial Drive* and *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*  
Wrap up; further goals for writing and books  
Workshop