Course Description

When I’m working on a book, it often feels like I’m trying to draw an elephant while that elephant is sitting on my head—I want to see the whole thing, but mostly I just see the little square of gray skin in front of me. It is true, alas, that we can only write one page at a time, but it’s also true that we can use these smaller moments to help us understand and shape the entire book. In this course, we’ll focus, as we must, on detailed aspects of the writer’s craft, all the while lifting up our eyes to find the bigger maps we need to help us complete our books. We’ll dive deep into one aspect of craft, then see what that aspect can tell us about the rest of the book.

Nonfiction books come in many shapes and sizes and intents—from purely autobiographical memoirs to third-person studies of history or society or nature or other people’s lives—sometimes a combination of many approaches in one book. No matter the scope or style of your book, you’re welcome here. In fact, the broader the range of work we read, the better for all of us, as we’ll be able to expand the scope and texture of our own work—how can history inform memoir, or how can intimate scenes inform broad social canvases? Etc.

Each week we’ll read from the best essayists, to learn from their examples, and we’ll produce weekly writing assignments that offer new strategies and techniques gleaned from the reading. The last five weeks of the course will be devoted to workshop, where we’ll discuss the work of 2 to 4 writers per week (depending on the size of the class). By reading and discussing one another’s work, we’ll find new possibilities for our books, and a clearer sense of where those possibilities might lead us.

Required Reading

*Best American Essays of the Century*
ed. Oates and Atwan
paperback, Houghton Mifflin
978-0-618-15587-3

We’ll read 12 essays from this collection, ranging in approach from intimate memoir to reportage to research-driven exposé. Most of our focus will be on specific moments of craft, each detailed week by week, though we will be able to talk about issues of structure in book-length works through considering the shape of these shorter pieces. By exposing ourselves to 12 of the finest writers in the language, we’ll be able to “steal” more ideas, and we’ll also have time to re-read these essays. As Nabokov says, “there are no good readers, only good re-readers.”
Our Online Week

Friday:
- I’ll post the following each Friday by 5:00 p.m. PST:
  - Weekly craft lecture
  - Weekly reading discussion questions
  - Weekly writing assignment
- When workshops begin, workshop submissions due by 8:00 p.m. PST
- Critiques of workshops from the previous week will be due on Fridays.

Wednesday:
- Writing assignment due by 8:00 p.m. PST
- Reading discussion responses due by 8:00 p.m. PST

Weekends:
- I’ll be on-line each weekday and will respond to posts and questions in a timely manner. I will not, typically, be online on the weekends.

Craft Lectures, Weekly Reading, and Discussion Questions

Each craft lecture will be tied explicitly to that week’s reading and discussion questions. The lectures are intended to give you a frame of reference for your reading, and to help you focus on that aspect of craft as you read. I’ll pose several discussion questions, though you are only required to respond to one of those questions.

Weekly Writing Assignments

Each week you’ll write up to 750 words using a prompt tied to that week’s craft lecture and reading assignment. The purpose of these assignments is to offer you possibilities for your work that you might not find otherwise. Some of these assignments will be “outside” of the book, writing to help you think about the bigger picture. Other assignments will be very narrow, and may well produce new scenes and approaches that you can directly incorporate into your book.

We’ll divide the class into small groups, 3 or 4 in each group, and you’ll each post a brief—150 words—comment on the weekly assignments from that group, not as a critique, but as a response that can help broaden and deepen our sense of how these assignments might be used.

Workshop Submissions

Manuscript workshops will begin Week 6.

You may submit either one long piece of 15-30 pages, or two shorter submissions of up to 10 pages each. The submissions are up to you completely, whatever it is from the book you most want the workshop to look at it, and these submissions can be from anywhere in the book. Workshop submissions are due on Fridays, with critiques to be posted by the following Friday.
Depending on the size of the class, we may break up into two small workshops. At the very most, each student will read 2-3 submissions per week. We’ll set the workshop schedule during the first week of class, so everyone will know exactly when their submissions are due.

Workshop submissions must be in a Word doc, double-spaced in a 12-point font; don’t forget to include name, title, PAGE NUMBERS, and any brief explanatory note (less than a page).

Workshop Critiques

The ideal workshop should be both rigorous and generous. We do need to help one another see what’s not working or is confusing in a manuscript, but the purpose of a workshop isn’t to judge the writing or the writer. Our goal is, in the end, to offer the writer possibilities for the next draft, ideas and strategies he or she could not think of from the solitude of the desk. Our task is to open new vistas rather than shut them down.

I also believe that the most benefit a writer gets from workshop is when discussing the work of fellow writers. When you critique someone else’s manuscript, you’re honing your own critical skills and making yourself a smarter writer. Participation in workshop discussion, and in written critiques, is a vital tool for improving your own work.

And respect, of course, is mandatory. It’s not up to the group to say whether or not we “like” a work, but honoring the writer’s intentions for that work, help the writer move toward the best possible version of it.

Rigor; generosity; respect.

You’re expected to write a 250-400 word critique (no less and no more) for each workshop ms. you read. I will address, later in the course, in a brief lecture and discussion, how these critiques might best be approached.

Along with critiques from the group, each of you will also receive a detailed response from me.

Grading

If you’re 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 by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Weekly Writing Assignments: 20%
Workshop Submissions: 50%
Forum/Workshop Participation: 30%

I base grades solely on timeliness, and evidence of engagement. It’s all about doing the work.

Weekly Schedule

Week One:
Lecture: The Book’s Essential Shape: Structure and Story
Writing Assignment: The Essence of Your Book in 3 Pages
Set Workshop Schedule

Week Two:
Lecture: Scene: Animating the World
Writing Assignment: Write or revise a scene from your manuscript

Week Three:
Lecture: Compressed Narration: Stories in Motion
Writing Assignment: Translate one of your longer scenes into compressed narration

Week Four:
Lecture: Research: Constructing the World: Ways of Writing About the World
Writing Assignment: Describe the world of your book with no mention of the characters, i.e., history, geography, culture, etc.

Week Five:
Lecture: Research: Putting the Facts in Motion
Mini-Lecture: How to Write a Helpful Critique
Reading: There are no new readings from this week on. Instead, we’ll revisit the first 12 essays to investigate weekly topics and assignments
Writing Assignment: Research one aspect of your book you haven’t yet, and add those facts into an existing section
FIRST WORKSHOP SUBMISSIONS DUE!

Week Six:
Lecture: Memory: Diving Deep and Surfacing
Writing Assignment: Complete a timed exercise, “The Memory Thief.” Workshop

Week Seven:
Lecture: Point of View: Who’s in Charge Here?
Writing Assignment: Revise an existing three pages from an altered point of view
Workshop

Week Eight:
Lecture: Revision #1: Expansion
Writing Assignment: Choose one paragraph from your manuscript and expand it to two pages.
Workshop

Week Nine:
Lecture: Revision #2: Concision
Writing Assignment: Choose four pages from your manuscript and reduce to two pages
Workshop

Week Ten:
Lecture: Finishing Your Book: Where to Now?
Writing Assignment: Rewrite, from scratch, the first writing assignment, The Essence of Your Book in 3 Pages
Workshop