How do we grab our readers by the figurative lapel and pull them into our story? By paying close attention to our opening pages. In fact, I’d argue that the first chapter of a book is the most crucial. In the first pages, the author must set up the story, infuse it with drama, and captivate the reader. These are the pages publishers focus on when they decide whether or not to buy a manuscript or book proposal. They’re what readers browse online and in bookstores as they decide whether to dispense with their hard-earned cash. In other words, your opening pages should be irresistible.


In this class – which is geared toward writers of memoir and other narrative nonfiction -- we will study the opening pages of master works by Jeannette Winterson, Tobias Wolf, Jon Krakauer, Cheryl Strayed and others. We’ll examine how each author sets up his or her major themes and hooks the reader. Then students will try their hand at writing a dramatic opening to their own books, sharing drafts and feedback with their peers in a supportive environment. You should finish this course with a solid foundation on which to build the rest of your book. This class is a good fit for writers of any level.

Course Materials
I will provide all the reading material.

I will also provide supplemental material in the form of craft essays and videos of author interviews. These materials are entirely optional. My hope is that they will deepen your understanding of the points I’m making in class as well as your understanding of how creative nonfiction works in general.

Schedule
- Weeks 1-3: students will do short (250-750 word) craft exercises.
- Weeks 4-8: students workshop their opening pages (5,000 words).
- Weeks 9-10: students will submit revisions of their pages based on feedback.

Weekly Writing Assignments
The weekly writing exercises are designed to allow you to practice the techniques we’re discussing and to step back and think critically about your own book. After they are posted, you will choose at least three classmates and write a paragraph-long critique of their assignment.
The Opening Pages Workshop

Workshops begin Week 4. You will sign up for your workshop slot by the end of the first week, so you can prepare for this deadline. On the Monday of your workshop week (by 11:59 p.m.), you will post an attachment of your excerpt as a Word document to a forum thread that I’ve labeled with your name. The maximum length for these is 5,000 words. Everyone will have until the following Sunday to read your piece and write a letter of response of at least 250 words.

I will send out specific workshop guidelines when we enter that phase of our course.

Note: some students may be writing books of an extremely personal nature. For that reason, please treat your classmates’ work as private and confidential. That means no sharing other students’ material outside of class unless you have their explicit permission.

Weekly Schedule

MONDAY: Class week “officially” starts. I’ll post the weekly lecture along with the writing assignments and discussion questions.

The forum will be organized thusly:
- The required weekly reading will be posted under “This Week’s Reading.”
- Under “Optional Materials,” I will post links to essays on craft and author interviews.
- Under “Topics for Discussion,” I will pose a couple of questions based on the readings.
- Under “Writing Assignments,” you’ll find the written requirements for that week’s lesson plan, be they craft exercises or the workshop schedule.

Our group conversation begins when you post your musings and discoveries in the Discussion Forum. The Forum is a bulletin board where all the action happens. Here, we’ll have ongoing conversations about your work, the book excerpts we read together, and different story topics. This is where you’ll post your work, and where our workshop will take place.

DURING THE WEEK: You will engage in the Discussion Forum, work on your assignments/ workshop piece, and respond to your classmates’ work.

BY WEDNESDAY NIGHT MIDNIGHT (PST): Your writing assignment/ workshop submission is due (though the earlier you post, the more time you’ll have to receive feedback).

THURSDAY/ FRIDAY: You will comment on your classmates’ work. Also, I will host a live, drop-in “office hour” chat with interested students to discuss the class and related themes. These chats are not mandatory, but are a fun way to interact and learn. The chat time will be posted at the beginning of each week.
**WEEKEND:** I won’t be in the classroom over the weekend but you’re welcome to log on to start discussing the next week’s reading. The classroom is always open!
*Please note, as with a live class, after we begin a new week, the previous week’s discussions will close and I will only read new material.

If you have questions about the course or assignments, please post them in the forum rather than emailing me directly. Chances are, someone else has the same question and could benefit from the response. If you have a private concern, however, feel free to email me directly.

**A Note About Weekly Readings**
Reading is a fundamental part of a writer’s training. We become better writers by reading quality literature and figuring out how it works. I’d like you to read each weekly reading assignment twice: once for pleasure, and the second time as a writer.

When reading for pleasure, consider the following questions:
- What emotion does the opening elicit in you?
- Is the pacing fast or does the story reveal itself slowly?
- Who are the main characters?
- What’s at stake?
- At what point did the narrative “grab” you?

When reading as a writer – someone who’s trying to understand the scaffolding holding up the narrative – ponder these:
- How did the author elicit that emotional response in you? Was there a scene, a word, an image she used?
- What influenced the pace? Sentence length? Opening scene or image?
- Do you understand where the book is going? How did the author achieve this – through an explicit statement or through more nuanced means, such as foreshadowing?

This course asks you to read as a writer, which will help you improve your own writing skills. Feel free to borrow the architecture of any of the examples we read in class as you formulate your own opening pages.

Each week, I’ll post a couple of questions for you to reflect on. Please jump in with your own opinions and observations -- discussions are always more interesting when more people participate and comment.

**Workshop Guidelines**
Becoming a good reader is crucial to your development as a writer. Learning how to identify the strengths and weaknesses in others’ writing will help you recognize the strengths and weaknesses in your own. Please read each piece twice. Once for an overall sense of the work, and the second time as an editor, paying attention to specific issues such as clarity, tone, structure, etc. Besides commenting on these issues, state what you enjoyed about the excerpt – what caught your interest or made it memorable. Try to
articulate its underlying ideas or themes. Finally, offer specific suggestions for revisions.

Remember: your job isn’t to tell the writer to write a different book, but to take the piece on its own terms and offer feedback accordingly. Be kind. Be generous. Read the work as you would like your own work to be read. Don’t shy away from making suggestions. (Being too nice or unwilling to offer constructive feedback doesn’t help the author improve her craft). Comment with an eye towards helping another writer craft the best opening pages possible. More on this later.

My commentary
I will post my own critiques of your writing in the forum with everyone else. These will be brief for the short weekly exercises, and more extensive for your opening 10 pages. I will post these responses in the forum where anyone can read them, just as I’d discuss your piece of work aloud during a live class. My hope is that everyone will find my response constructive -- not just the person being critiqued.

Although we aren’t sharing the same physical space, you should think of Forum and the discussion threads as a place to interact with each other – our virtual classroom. After posting your critique, you may read someone else’s and find yourself wanting to elaborate on his or her comments or offer a different perspective. I will also read your comments to one another and pipe in when I have something to add. These discussions will be as lively as you make them.

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. Rather than adopting an "all-or-nothing" approach to your participation in this course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can. If there are a few weeks where you don't get to the reading, fine. If you have to skip a couple exercises, this is also okay. As long as you're continuing to work on your full-length piece and commenting on your classmates' submissions, you'll be fine.

Grading:
For those taking the course for a letter grade, the breakdown is as follows:
10%: weekly exercises (each week’s lesson will outline specific assignment).
50%: workshop submission
40% participation: responding to the writing of your peers, office hour (chat room) attendance, and activity in forum threads.

Schedule
Here's a weekly breakdown of our lecture topics:

Week 1: Beginning
Deep thoughts: Before sitting down to write your book, you should have a clear sense of
your theme. What larger topic does your book illuminate? The long road to redemption? The enduring bond of sibling love? The nature of violence? To attract readers, your book should have a dramatic story and universal appeal. It also must have people at its heart. In memoir, the central “character” is the author, of course. In literary journalism, the author needs to find sources through whom she can explore her theme.

**Reading:** “Drinking: A Love Story,” by Caroline Knapp  
**Writing:** Write the flap copy for your book. (150-400 words)

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**Week 2: The Building Blocks of Story**  
**Deep thoughts:** In creative nonfiction, storytelling is everything; writers must entertain the readers even as they enlighten the reader. What are the building blocks of story? Scene, summary and musing. We’ll consider each element in turn.  
**Read:** “The Liar’s Club,” by Mary Karr  
**Write:** A dramatic opening for your book (Max. 700 words)

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**Week 3: Weaving in Background**  
**Deep thoughts:** Learning how to break from the primary narrative to weave in background information is something many new writers struggle with. Yet, after we hook the reader with a dramatic opening, we must put the story into context. How can we provide background without interrupting the narrative flow or confusing readers? Herein we shall discuss the when, what, where, why and how of the background weave.”  
**Read:** “Jesus Land,” by Julia Scheeres  
**Write:** Background on a place, person or event in your book (700 words max.)

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**Week 4: Eliciting Emotion**  
**Deep thoughts:** How do we elicit an emotional response in the reader without falling into “purple prose”? How do we artfully convey our characters’ emotions through their words and actions? How do we write about injustice without sermonizing? Every word you choose signals an emotional response in your reader. Don’t tell the reader how to feel, show them.  
**Read:** “Wave,” Sonali Deraniyagala  
**Write:** A scene that elicits an emotional response in the reader (700 max)

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**Week 5: Developing Character**  
**Deep thoughts:** Skilled writers use different techniques to breathe life into the people they write about, be they a beloved yet eccentric Southern Aunt or a serial murderer. How do we convey a child’s sense of wonder and naïveté on the page? Or a refugee’s sense of dislocation? What interesting verbal tick, worldview, sartorial habit or way of walking makes your characters stand out? In short, what makes them unique humans?  
**Read:** “Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?” Jeannette Winterson  
**Write:** Convey one of your character’s unique traits through actions (700 words)

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**Week 6: Gradations of Truth**  
**Deep thoughts:** The various subgenres of creative nonfiction are held to different
standards of truth. Serious works of journalism are beholden to facts and must be meticulously footnoted. Memoir falls in a gray area where authors are allowed to recreate scenes and dialogue to convey the “emotional truth” of their experience. But when do memoirists cross the line into wholesale fabrication? How can we create vivid scenes for events we haven’t witnessed and have little documentation of?

**Read:** “Angelhead,” by Nick Bottoms
**Write:** Workshop begins – up to 5,000 words

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**Week 7: Difficult Subjects**

**Deep thoughts:** Writing about certain topics, such as sexual abuse or struggles with addiction, can be off-putting to some readers. How can we write about these subjects in a way that won’t repel them? People can also be difficult subjects. How do we write about living people without getting sued or written out of the family will?

**Read:** “The Source of All Things,” by Tracy Ross
**Write:** Workshop, continued

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**Week 8: Reporting**

**Deep thoughts:** Even memoirists need to fact check their lives. This week, we’ll talk about taking reporting trips, conducting interviews, and the many ways we can conjure up the past so it appears fresh and vivid on the page. We’ll also discuss the best tools for online research.

**Read:** “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” by Rebecca Skloot
**Write:** Workshop, continued

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**Week 9: Revision**

**Deep thoughts:** For some writers, the careful reconsideration of their manuscript is even more thrilling than the initial word dump. When we reread our prose, we can linger over sentences, pondering word choices and metaphors, infusing our work with the kind of fastidious attention that elevates ordinary prose into literary art. But how to begin the revision process?

**Read:** “Half A Life,” Darin Strauss
**Write:** Workshop, continued

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**Week 10: Moving Forward**

**Deep thoughts:** By now you’ve worked hard to set the stage for the rest of your book. You’ve introduced your main character(s), let the reader know what’s at stake and infused the narrative with drama. Here we’ll discuss the next steps in the process, including suggestions for plotting out the rest of the book. Also – suggestions on how to find an agent and get published.

**Read:** “Wild,” by Cheryl Strayed

**Congratulations! You’ve finished!**

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*** This syllabus is subject to change