Creative Nonfiction: Crafting a Narrative Voice

Instructor: Erica Ehrenberg

Required Text:
The Art of the Personal Essay, ed. Philip Lopate

Weekly Reading and Writing Assignments

We will spend the first six weeks of the course immersing ourselves in the work of some of the greats of creative non-fiction while using these works as an important jumping off point for short weekly exercises. The readings will come largely from Philip Lopate’s collection, and will occasionally include supplemental readings that I will send to you which may include magazine articles, stories, and poems. These exercises will be about 1-2 pages and will be submitted for comments in the forum. Every week each student will post an exercise to the forum by Thursday for discussion. You should always feel free to post sooner—the sooner you post the more time your piece has for review. I will be posting my comments for each exercise, and each student should respond with a paragraph of feedback. Try to always be as specific as possible.

Workshop

After week six we will be work-shopping the longer pieces that will be shaped from one or more of our experiments and exercises from the first six weeks. At the end of week 6 each student will submit his or her longer piece. We will then spend the next four weeks discussing and commenting on these pieces, usually about 3-5 pieces per week. I will respond to each work-shopped piece with in-depth feedback as will each student. I will also be moderating the discussion as it develops from and beyond these comments.

Zoom

Every week I will be hosting a live zoom discussion session. This live discussion will be optional, and will be recorded in case you can’t participate. This will be a chance for me to address any questions you might have as well as to continue our forum discussions for that week, to try some writing exercises together, and explore writers who are not on the syllabus who may come up in our discussions. This will be our chance to connect and respond to each other’s thoughts and questions with something close to the immediacy of a live classroom.

Your Weekly Responsibilities

1. Sign in at the start of each week to access all lectures, discussion questions, and reading and writing assignments.

2. Respond to reading assignments.

3. Submit your exercises during the first 6 weeks for discussion and feedback.
4. Respond to each submitted exercise with a brief paragraph of specific comments and suggestions. Respond to longer pieces during workshop. If you don’t have time to respond to everyone, every week, don’t worry! Just do as much as you can—you can focus on the work of writers you missed the following week.

5. Remember that our discussions will be as lively as you make them! I will encourage you all to be as engaged as possible, and to feel free to bring your thoughts and your excitement about what you are reading and writing to the table!

What to Expect From Me

1. I will begin the week with an email to the class introducing that week’s topic and assignments.

2. Each Monday I will post a new lecture along with that week’s writing and reading assignments. I will also post a set of discussion questions for the week.

3. I will be providing feedback to each submitted exercise and written piece as well as moderating our workshop and discussion topics. I will be checking in online most weekdays, and though I generally will not be online on the weekends, remember the course is always open to you!

4. I will host our weekly chat session.

5. If you have a question for me, it’s a good idea to post it in the forum where everyone can see it, as it most likely will be of interest to the whole class. That being said, you can also, of course, feel free to email me directly if you prefer.

An 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 steadily on your writing and commenting on your classmates' submissions, you'll be fine. And remember—if you DO have to take a couple of weeks completely away from the class, you can always come back!

Grade Breakdown

If you are taking this course for a letter grade, the breakdown will be as follows:
Writing Assignments: 50%
Workshop feedback: 25%
Discussion participation: 25%

Week One

The Subjective Eye: Observation, Description, and the Transformative Detail

Virginia Woolf, “Death of the Moth”
MFK Fisher “Once a Tramp, Always…”
Sei Shonagon, “Hateful Things”

Week Two

Voice and Vulnerability: The Tone of Not Knowing

Joan Didion, “In Bed”
F Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”
Excerpts from Fernando Pessoa

Week Three

Memory and Transformation: The Scene and its Reverberation

Proust’s Madeleine
George Orwell, “Such, Such Were the Joys”
Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”
James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”

Week Four

Journeys in Time and Space

David Foster Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”
Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

Week Five

Journeys of the Mind

Walter Benjamin, “Hashish in Marseilles”, “Unpacking my library”
Montaigne, “On Books”
Week Six

Place and No-Place

EB White, “Once More to the Lake”
Lorine Niedecker, “Paen to Place”
Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That”

Week Seven

Workshop I

Geoff Dyer, “My Life as a Gatecrasher”/Creative Non-Fiction as a Process of Discovery

Week Eight

Workshop II

Excerpts from the Notebooks of F. Scott Fitzgerald/Perceptions and Pre-Ocupations

Week Nine

Workshop III

Malcolm Gladwell, “Group Think: What Does Saturday Night Live Have in Common with German Philosophy?”/The Art of Juxtaposition

Week Ten

Workshop IV

Why You Should Read WG Sebald,” Mark O’Connell/Writing Into and Through the Unknown

Revision and Publication