

CNF 23 W: Mastering the Personal Essay with the Masters

Summer 2015

Instructor: Rachel Howard

Our Course

“One shouldn’t be afraid even to lose oneself in an apprenticeship to past masters, as if one were an ignoramus or lacked individuality; one should take all of it merely as a point of departure, as a springboard to that further and bolder step into the unknown.”

--*Polish painter Józef Czajkowski*

In this course you will learn to write surprising, moving personal essays by apprenticing yourself to the masters, much as painters learn their art by closely studying masterworks at the Louvre. For the first six weeks, we will cycle between deeply observing such craft elements as tone, image, and structure in a handful of masterful essays (Reading Week), and then producing short essays of our own for small group feedback (Writing Week). For the final month, you will work on a longer essay (maximum 5,000 words) and we will workshop four writers each week, reading one another with the same close eye for craft that we applied to our master-writers. You may expand/revise any of the shorter essays you wrote during weeks one through six for your workshop essay, or draft a new essay.

This approach is inspired by two “Imitation Workshops” produced by the literary magazine *ZYZZYVA* that I attended early in my writing life. The benefits to this approach, and the outcomes to our course, are that you will:

- learn to read as a writer (rather than as a reviewer or a book club member)
- think about craft aspects such as image, tone, structure, point-of-view, and connotative language, so that you can make active decisions in your work
- discover material from your life you might never have put on the page otherwise, and see which subjects are rich for you and your readers
- experience the way working with constraints, such as a pre-determined form, can give you freedom to investigate your material more deeply
- begin to recognize your unique sensibility

Our Readings

Required textbook: *Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction*, edited by Judith Kitchen. (Norton, 2005)

Most of our master essays will be drawn from this diverse anthology. Please note: this course does not require a heavy quantity of reading, but it does require a high *quality* of reading. In addition to the model essays we’ll read carefully together, I hope you will browse the whole collection and discover your own favorites.

Our Weekly Rhythm

I am present online everyday Monday through Friday, responding to your posts.

The material for the coming week is released every Friday, so you can get started on reading over the weekend.

During Reading Weeks, you will read each short selection twice by Tuesday, and post your Discussion responses by Thursday at very latest. You are encouraged to post your Discussion responses early.

During Writing Weeks, you will be assigned to a small group for feedback. You will post your draft of a short “imitation” (maximum 1,500 words) by Tuesday, and respond to your fellow writers’ work by Friday. I will provide workshop response prompts asking you particular questions about your fellow writers’ work. Your answers may be short and concise.

During Workshop Weeks, you will read the personal essays by the students up for workshop (three or four per week) and post your response to each by Friday. These are more in-depth responses than during Writing Weeks. I will provide complete guidelines. We will also have one optional reading of a master’s essay and optional discussion thread during Workshop Weeks.

We will hold live class video chats every Monday afternoon. These are optional. During Workshop Weeks, each of the writers just workshopped will have 20 minutes in live chat to follow up with questions about our responses to their workshopped essays.

Important note: Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every single assignment, real life--family, illness, work—have their ways of intervening. **Rather than adopting an "all-or-nothing" approach to your participation in this course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can.** Remember, if you have to take a couple of weeks away from the class, **you can always come back!** "The door is always open," as they say.

Your Grade

Students have three grading options for Continuing Studies courses:

1. Letter Grade (A, B, C, D) – written work is required

In this class, letter grades will be determined as follows:

Participation in Reading Week Discussions: 20%

Shorter Writing Week Essays: 20%

Response to fellow writers’ essays during Writing Weeks: 20%

Longer workshop essay: 20%

Response to fellow writers’ workshop essays: 20%

2. Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - attendance and participation is required. You must receive

at least 70 percent according to the letter grade formula to receive credit.

3. No Grade Requested (NGR) - no work is required; No credit shall be received; No proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)

Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Whichever option you choose, the most important things are for you to enjoy yourself, try new things, give back to your fellow writers, and be part of the writing community.

Our Quarter at a Glance: Week-by-Week Outline

Week One: Reading Week

Introductions; What Is the Personal Essay?; Your favorite writers.

Read Grace Paley's "Mother" and Christopher Castellani's craft notes on "Mother;" add your observations to Castellani's.

Read Ian Frazier's "Crazy Horse" and annotate in the same way that Castellani annotated "Mother."

Week Two: Writing Week (Person)

Choose between "Mother" and "Crazy Horse;" choose a significant person to write about. Follow the structure of your master-essay exactly. Post for response and respond to your small group members.

Week Three: Reading Week

Read Rebecca McClanahan's "Signs and Wonders," Meagan Daum's "Those Who Stay and Those Who Go," and Peggy Shumaker's "Moving Waters, Tucson." Choose one to thoroughly annotate in the style of Castellani. (You may also comment more briefly on the ones you did not choose, if you wish.)

Week Four: Writing Week (Place)

Choose among "Signs and Wonders," "Those Who Stay," and "Moving Waters Tucson;" choose a significant place to write about. Choose two craft elements in your selected master essay to imitate: point of view, tone, image, sentence rhythm, etc. Post your "imitation" for response and respond to your small group members.

Week Five: Reading Week

Read Dinty W. Moore's "Son of Mr. Green Jeans," Sandra Steingarber's "The Fall of a Sparrow," and Lawrence Sutin's "Six Postcards." Choose one to annotate. (Again, you may also comment on the essays you didn't choose, if you wish.)

Week Six: Writing Week (Adventures in Structure)

Choose between “Son of Mr. Green Jeans,” “The Fall of a Sparrow,” and “Six Postcards.” Choose your own subject (we will brainstorm during the Reading Week to see what kind of subjects would work well with each master essay approach). Adapt the master essay structure for your subject. Post your draft for response and respond to your small group members.

Week Seven: Workshop Week

Three or four writers will post essays for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter essays you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft a new essay.

You may optionally also read Joan Didion’s “In Bed,” and contribute annotations on the discussion thread.

Week Eight: Workshop Week

Three or four writers will post essays for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter essays you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft a new essay.

You may optionally also read John McPhee’s “They’re in the River” and “Draft #4” and contribute annotations and comments on the discussion thread.

Week Nine: Workshop Week

Three or four writers will post essays for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter essays you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft a new essay.

You may optionally also read Annie Dillard’s “Living Like Weasels” and contribute annotations on the discussion thread.

Week Ten: Workshop Week

Three or four writers will post essays for in-depth workshop response. You may expand/revise any of the shorter essays you wrote during weeks one through six, or draft a new essay.

We’ll also discuss how you’ve grown as a writer and what your next steps will be, and I’ll provide lists of literary publications that publish personal essays, and we’ll talk about how to submit your best work.

Optional reading: Michael Martone’s “Contributor’s Note.”