TEXTBOOKS: We’ll read one craft book (Telling True Stories: A Non-Fiction Writers’ Guide from The Nieman Foundation at Harvard University) and ten online profiles this quarter. The combination of the two will give you practical tools for writing non-fiction AND the pleasurable experience of reading and studying profile writing while actively writing.

Telling True Stories: A Non-Fiction Writers’ Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call ISBN: 978-0452287556
http://www.amazon.com/Telling-True-Stories-Nonfiction-Foundation/dp/0452287553/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297193147&sr=1-1

WEEKLY WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: Each week for the first four weeks, I’ll post a prompt that will help you practice different techniques, improve your writing, and influence how you think about writing about real-life characters. The prompts are intended to focus your attention on particular elements of character writing, but also to help spark ideas that you may want to develop into a bigger writing project. (This project is due in weeks 5-10; you’ll sign up for a date to submit in Week 1—more about the final project below).

If there’s interest, I’ll supply writing prompts for Weeks 5-10. Writing and critiquing will be optional.

In addition to structured writing exercises, your weekly “homework” will be the following:
*Read and engage in forum discussions focused on reading assignments.
*Provide thoughtful written critique to the work of your classmates.
*Use the information gleaned from this experience (our readings, lectures, conversations, critiques, etc.) to propel your personal work forward.

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

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.

FINAL PROJECT: You will pick a subject and write one (4,000 word maximum) profile to be workshopped by the group during the second half of the term. Please begin thinking about potential subjects early in the course. Your first few weeks of writing assignments will give you an excellent opportunity to ‘test’ writing about various subjects and determine who is the most compelling.

CRITIQUE GUIDELINES:
During the workshop portion of the class, 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, you may lose the opportunity to post submissions for others to read.

GRADING OPTIONS:
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 writing assignments along with your final project 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: 75% of the writing assignments along with your final project 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: 50% of the writing assignments along with your final project were completed and submitted on time. You made and insightful contributions to some discussions and provide constructive, thoughtful comments to the work posted by your peers.

You can also register for No Grade Requested (NGR) – no work will be required; no credit received - or Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) – students must participate in 80% of the course.

Regardless, 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.

HOW THE CLASS WORKS:
Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and read the “Lecture and Lesson” page. This will include my art/craft/process thoughts to start the week, as well as both writing and reading assignments, any necessary links, and other announcements.

FRIDAY: All the materials for the coming week will be available by Friday afternoon. This way you can start your work for the following week over the weekend if you choose.

WEDNESDAY: Writing exercises (for the first four weeks) and workshop responses (for weeks five through ten) are due by Wednesday at 8AM, PST. Both writing exercises and workshop pieces should be posted in the FORUM. You’ll have my response by Friday afternoon to any work posted before the deadline.

MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY: Post your responses to the readings and discussion questions, respond to the work of your peers, ask questions. Please post any questions about assignments, readings, or course content on the Forum 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.

WEEKENDS: Here is a chance for you to get ahead on the week’s work if you wish to post exercises or responses to discussion questions for the following week. Or read, write, and relax – that’s what I’ll be doing!
Please note: I will not be able to answer questions or contribute to discussion on weekends. Nonetheless, I encourage you to post your own comments and participate in class discussions even when I am not present.

TO REITERATE: If you have a question about course content or assignments, please post it in the forum so that all may see both your question and my response. There are no silly queries and it's likely that you classmates will be curious about the answer too. If you have a private question or concern, please contact me directly.

TO SUMMARIZE:
In Weeks 1-4 you'll respond to the posted writing prompt, sharing your short work (600-750 words) with everyone in the course. You'll also offer brief, constructive criticism to four of your classmates.

In Week 5, we'll segue into the workshop portion of the quarter, in which we'll read fewer (but longer!) submissions each week and devote more time to constructing thoughtful responses. As a writer, workshopping involves the presentation of polished work to the group. As a reader, workshopping involves a careful reading of the piece and the posting of a letter of response to the writer (See Critique Guidelines below).

Workshop submissions are due on the Friday before we read your work. Post your writing in the Forum thread I've labeled with your name. Workshop pieces may be up to 4,000 words in length. Please aim to submit a thoughtful critique to your classmates work as soon as possible so that we may have rich discussion and Q+A before moving into a new week

If a student participates fully in the course, they will have written and received instructor and student feedback on 4 short exercises and one longer piece/final submission, the equivalent of about 20 double-spaced, typed pages.

WORD LIMITS:
I ask that you keep your weekly writing exercises to no more than 750 words and your workshop submissions to no more than 4000 words. If you turn in more than this, you will not receive feedback on the writing that goes beyond the maximum. If the class shows an interest, I will happily create a special forum thread for students who want to write and share more creative work, but I can't offer feedback on this additional writing.

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 rest of life—work, illness, children, the illness of children—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 two days
early, sans typos. Nothing terrible will happen if you miss a week of reading or don’t hand in an assignment. As long as you hand in a full-length piece and participate fully in the workshops of your classmates, you’ll be fine. Even if you have to take a couple of weeks completely away from the class, you can always come back. We’ll welcome you.

WEB CHATS:
Each week, I’ll host a forty-minute long video “chat” session. (Day and time, TBD.) This session is an online “office hour” of sorts, but in a group context. Attendance is optional—you’re all busy people, with very different schedules and responsibilities. This is an opportunity to gather in a group and mimic the give-and-take you’d find in a traditional classroom. We’ll discuss the readings, answer one another’s questions in regard to writing techniques, and kvetch.

TENTATIVE WEEKLY OUTLINE.

Week 1: WRITING THE LIVES OF OTHERS.
“I asked whether she was sure she wanted her story told. She was.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “The Most Successful Female Everest Climber of All Time Is A Housekeeper in Hartford, CT.”
Writing Prompt: A written portrait

Week 2: THE INTERVIEW.
“The danger is getting friendly with people you should feel free to destroy.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “Pete Wells Has His Knives Out”
Writing Prompt: Conduct interview, write short profile incorporating quotes and other information.

DONE Week 3: PEOPLE AS DOCUMENTARY.
“He ran toward the burning buildings only to just miss being killed at 9:59…”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “Why The Best War Reporter in a Generation Had to Suddenly Stop”
Writing Prompt: ‘Just the Facts’

DONE Week 4: THE STORYTELLER’S VOICE.
“She slides into the car, and even before she buckles her seat belt, her phone is alight in her hands.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “13, Right Now”
Writing Prompt: Writing scenes and crafting narrative voice

Week 5: START AT THE BEGINNING – OR DON’T.
“Jennifer Frey drank herself to death.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “The Writer Who Was Too Strong to Live”
Writing Prompt: Your Story
Week 6: THE BACKSTORY.
“Sometime in early ’50s, after being roughed up and harassed by the FBI, James Baldwin realized that while he “loved” his country, he “could not respect it.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “The Weight of James Arthur Baldwin”
Workshopping of longer pieces

Week 7: BUILDING PEOPLE ON THE PAGE.
“Somehow, wagging this derrière and begging for sex — and sounding deeply soulful while he did it — didn’t make him a novelty act.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “George Michael Mattered Beyond Music – An Appraisal”
Workshopping of longer pieces

Week 8: WRITING ABOUT HARD PEOPLE & THINGS.
“She played dead as the sound of gunshots reverberated around her, echoing off the red tile roofs and limestone walls.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “The Reckoning: The Story of Claire Wilson”
Workshopping of longer pieces

Week 9: THE ROLE OF THE AUTHOR.
“I puzzled for days and weeks after I drove away from East Hampton over what exactly had been different about Ina Garten than whatever my expectations had been.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “How Simple Is That? At Home with Ina Garten”
Workshopping of longer pieces

Week 10: THE END.
“I’m trying to tell you the story of my strange life.”
Reading: Selections from Telling True Stories AND “The Earth Mover”
Workshopping of longer pieces
Guest Lecture on pitching the profile piece (Maggie Hoffman, former Managing Editor, Serious Eats)