

Course Title: Mastering the Personal Essay with the Masters
Course Code: CNF 23 W
Instructor: Rachel Howard

Course Summary:

“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 Jozef Czajkowski

This course’s approach to experimenting with the personal essay 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

**Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

Grade Options and Requirements:

Students have three grading options for Continuing Studies course:

1. Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) – 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%

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2. Credit/No Credit (CR/NC) - 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.

**Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

Tentative Weekly 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 Ann Daum's "Those Who Stay and Those Who Go," and Peggy Shumaker's "Moving Waters, Tucson." Choose a paragraph from 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 between "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)

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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 “Goodbye to All That” and Eula Biss’s “Goodbye to All That,” 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.