

English 391
Creative Nonfiction Writing Workshop

“It’s the will to be accurate that will take you outside yourself
and enlarge your work. It’s the will to be accurate that
will bring you face to face with surprises, wonder, beauty.”

—D.W. Fenza

“Whatever is unnamed will become unspeakable.”

—Adrienne Rich

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Catalogue Description

An advanced workshop course in writing creative nonfiction, emphasizing innovations of structure, language, and style. This course combines reading and analysis of creative nonfiction with a workshop of students’ writing.

Prerequisites and Satisfactions

Requires Introduction to Creative Writing (ENG 290), or the permission of the instructor. Creative Nonfiction is a course in the Writing Minor and does not count toward the English major course requirement.

Course Rationale

Creative nonfiction is often defined against other genres, particularly, as its name suggests, fiction. Its central form is the essay, which can shift and expand to become critical, lyrical, meditative, exploratory, and/or whimsical. The aim of this course is to introduce you to the possibilities and paradoxes of creative nonfiction in order to sharpen your skills as a creative and critical writer. We will investigate the debated definition of “creative nonfiction,” discuss possible forms that this genre may take, and explore its boundaries through our own work. The

center of our course will be a workshop of students' writing. In workshops, and in supplementary discussions and activities, we'll study elements of prose craft such as character, setting, dialogue, sound, voice, and image. In addition, we'll focus on issues of particular importance to creative nonfiction, including personal presence, veracity, and innovation of form.

Course Objectives

On the basis of readings, workshops, and the completion of all writing assignments, at the end of the semester you should be able to do the following:

- Identify and explain key terms and concepts involved in analyzing creative nonfiction.
- Identify and analyze the work of contemporary writers in this genre.
- Analyze the effects of particular elements of craft in your own and others' creative-nonfiction prose.
- Participate in substantive and respectful workshops whose main goals are analysis of creative nonfiction and the creation of a community of writers.
- Apply feedback from workshops toward revision of your own work.
- Develop greater insight into your own identity as a writer: what purposes you have in writing, what audiences you want to address, and how.

Course Policies

Attendance. In order to maintain a creative and productive workshop, all members must demonstrate a serious commitment, sense of professionalism, and ethic of mutual respect. Therefore, your attendance, preparedness, and full participation in all workshops are required. You may be excused from up to two workshops with my permission. Excused absences will be granted only for unavoidable emergencies, such as a documented illness. A non-emergency event such as a job interview or family visit will not be accepted as grounds for an excused absence. All work, including workshop critiques and exercises, must be completed by the deadline set when we discuss your excused absence. If you accrue more than two excused absences, I will review your performance in the class and will decide, on a case-by-case basis, whether you will be able to continue in the course with a passing grade.

Punctuality. Repeated lateness to class can cause you to accrue additional absences. I will contact you if you have been late repeatedly and this policy is going into effect.

Preparedness. Because a workshop is an interdependent project, late work is not acceptable. Failing to provide your essays for distribution to the class, or to provide timely responses to peers' work, demonstrates a lack of respect for your fellow writers and undermines our ethic of creative productivity. Being prepared for class means arriving with the work due that day in hand. No take-home work can be printed out or otherwise prepared during class. Late work will receive a grade of zero except in cases individually approved by me.

Academic Honesty. Material from other sources, whether quoted, paraphrased, or simply referred to, must always be accompanied by citation of the source. Failure to acknowledge the contributions of others' words or ideas to your work is plagiarism, a violation of Spelman College's Academic Integrity Policy. The standards of academic integrity apply to work produced within as well as outside our workshop. Penalties for academic dishonesty may include a failing grade on a particular assignment, a failing grade in the class, or suspension from the college. For more information on plagiarism and academic honesty, consult the Spelman College Bulletin.

Work From Other Classes. Using writing you've produced prior to this class, and/or in another course, for credit in English 391 is a violation of academic honesty and is subject to the same penalties as an instance of plagiarism. However, I realize that—like many authors—you may want to return to an especially compelling *topic* that you've written about before. If this is the case, you must talk to me about it ahead of time. I'll ask to see your previous work on that topic, and we'll discuss how you can move forward with the topic in ways that still satisfy the requirements of our course.

Accommodations and Academic Support. I assume that all of us have different learning styles, and that the organization of any course will accommodate each student differently. For example, you may prefer to process information by speaking and listening, so that some of the handouts I provide may be difficult to absorb. Please talk with me as soon as you can about your individual learning needs and how this course can best accommodate them. If you have a documented disability, I recommend that you register with the Office of Disability Services in MacVicar Hall (270-5289), since they can help you coordinate accommodations in all your courses. Other support services, including the Writing Center and the Learning Resources Center, are available to all students.

Course Requirements

Required Texts and Materials

- Bill Roorbach (ed.), *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*. New York: Anchor, 1995.
- A notebook in which to keep all materials from the course. Establish a system that allows you to pick out any piece of writing, or any handout, within a few seconds.
- A folder or notebook in which to present your final portfolio.

Required Writing (see below for detailed assignments)

- One paper-and-ink essay (8 pages or more), workshopped and revised.
- One digital essay, suitable for submission to L-I-N-K-E-D magazine or another publication.
- One final portfolio.
- Short exercises, both in-class and take-home. This includes inksheds and reflections.
- Peer responses written for workshops.

Inksheds

To begin each class, we'll engage in a practice which a former teacher of mine called "inkshedding." It works like this: You come to class with a single-spaced typed page of analysis and reflection. This is your inkshed. The topic of your inkshed is that week's theme and how you see that theme reflected in what we've read for that week. When you arrive in class, we'll write directly on each others' inksheds (thus shedding more ink ☺) and then we'll use the inksheds as the basis of our discussion of the readings. A discussion leader will be appointed each week to facilitate this discussion. A discussion leader should pay careful attention to that week's inksheds for ideas or questions that we should follow up on during the discussion.

Peer Responses

You will receive a handout detailing guidelines for workshops and the written responses you will prepare for each author who presents her work.

Reflections / Fourth Hour Justification

For our course's fourth-hour justification, you will take part in four visits or events (on four different days) that are part of Atlanta's writing / creative community. I will hand out and email announcements of events as they come up; please bring in all announcements that you can share, as well. Events must include:

- One visit to an independent bookstore. (For the purposes of this assignment, "independent" means it exists at one location only).
- Two performances. At least one of these must be a reading or spoken-word event.
- One visual exhibit at a museum or gallery.

After attending each event, write a reflection (between 1-2 pages) detailing the event, what you experienced, what it made you think about, and how the event impacted you as a writer. Turn in reflections as you complete them. Arrange your schedule mindfully so that you aren't trying to cram in four events at the end of the semester! You must include the four reflections, with my comments, in your portfolio.

Paper-and-Ink Essay

The mission of your paper-and-ink essay is to tell a story that has previously gone untold, and that only you can tell.

As you seek your topic for this essay, you may find it helpful to consider questions like these: *What are the times that I have known more, or differently, than the people around me? How did I know that this difference existed? How did it affect me? Why has the story gone untold until now? What does it mean to bring the story forward at this time?*

Knowing an untold story doesn't necessarily mean that you were the only one around. In fact, some of the most profound untold stories are the ones that happen inside our own heads when we are surrounded by people. For example, think about the "untold stories" that are brought to light by Dubus, Gawande, Ruiz, and Ehrenreich. In each of these cases, there are many other people involved in the story. What do the narrators know that no one else in the essay knows? What is unique and memorable about the truths they share?

Important note: Avoid writing a long, general piece about what you've "always" known. Focus on an important *moment* (the events of a single day, hour, minute) during which this truth came forward. Begin from that moment, and then add background as needed. Clare's essay "The Mountain" is a good model for this technique.

When responding to each others' essays for workshops, please use the following criteria. I will do the same when assigning grades to essays.

- Establishes a distinct narrative presence (usually, but not always, an "I") that conveys a unique voice and point of view.
- Provides reflection on all information presented in the essay. Depending on the essay's purpose and style, "reflection" may be achieved explicitly (for example, through direct analysis) or implicitly (for example, through imagery or tone).
- Communicates a clear purpose, whether implicitly or explicitly.
- Develops characters, settings, and all other sensory elements through concrete and relevant detail.
- Uses precise language to deepen descriptions and sharpen analyses. Avoids clichés and word packages.
- Establishes and adheres to a structure and style appropriate to content and purpose. Experimental structures and styles are encouraged, but must conform to an identifiable system of internal logic.
- Maintains appropriate grammar and usage, and adheres to required format.
- (Final draft only) Progresses substantively between drafts.

Digital Essay

The mission of your digital essay is to expose a truth that your audience needs to know. Your audience is the readers of L-I-N-K-E-D magazine (<http://www.spelman.edu/academics/programs/english/L-I-N-K-E-D/index.html>) or another online publication of your choice. (If you are aiming toward a publication other than L-I-N-K-E-D, you must notify me of the publication's URL so I can grade your work appropriately.)

For this assignment, we are using digital space to re-interpret what *essay* can mean. Your essay will include text, image(s), and possibly audio and video elements. The key factor is the *arrangement* of these elements in a way that helps to tell your story.

Digital essays will be built as HTML files. Basic instruction in FrontPage and image editing will be provided in class. For additional instruction, you will visit the Multi-Media Assistants in the Writing Center (a schedule is posted). If you know Dreamweaver, HTML, or another web-authoring tool/markup language, you are free to use it.

I am hoping that you won't stress out about the details of learning FrontPage or image editing. You will learn these most easily if you first envision what you want to do—imagine *doing something amazing* with a digital essay—and then work on the skills you need to make that a reality. I will be here to support you. ☺

When responding to each others' digital essays in workshops, please use the following criteria. I will do the same when assigning grades to essays.

- Establishes a distinct narrative presence (usually, but not always, an “I”) that conveys a unique voice and point of view. This presence must appear on the essay's index page, and must persist throughout all pages of the essay.
- Uses images and language to establish the narrative presence and develop the essay's purpose. (Use of audio and video elements are encouraged, but not required.)
- Communicates a clear purpose, whether implicitly or explicitly.
- Arranges elements in a way that enhances the clarity, tone, and purpose of the essay. Since this is a hypertext, the structure may be fragmented or dynamic. Experimental structures and styles are encouraged, but must conform to an identifiable system of internal logic.
- Develops characters, settings, and all other sensory elements through concrete and relevant detail. Detail may be visual and audible as well as textual.
- Uses precise language to deepen descriptions and sharpen analyses. Avoids clichés and word packages.
- Maintains appropriate grammar and usage, and is free of technical errors such as broken links or uncontrolled page width.

Final Portfolio

Your final portfolio must be spine-bound in a folder or three-ring binder, with clearly labeled tabs to separate each section. It should include the following:

- Title page, with a title for the portfolio overall (as well as your name).
- Table of contents.
- All inksheds, with class's comments, in chronological order.
- All cover notes written for others' paper essays.
- Four reflective pieces (fourth-hour assignment)
- The draft of the paper essay that you workshopped, with my comments and cover note.
- Final, revised draft of the paper essay.
- Final digital portfolio (in a sleeve or jewel case. Some folders have CD sleeves built in).

Grading

All course requirements must be met in order to receive credit for this course. In addition, remember that overarching criteria such as attendance, punctuality, and preparedness will affect your final grade.

Paper-and-ink essay	
Workshopped draft.....	10%
Final draft.....	15%
Digital essay.....	20%
Fourth-hour reflections	15%
Inksheds & workshop responses.....	20%
Participation	10%
Presentation of final portfolio	10%