

ENG 235: Creative Nonfiction
Fall 2009
Cedar Crest College
MW 1-2:15 p.m.
BHA 8

Professor Mary H. Snyder

Hartzel Hall 220

Office hours: MWTTh 2:30-4 p.m.

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This course is a workshop in writing creative nonfiction. Our goals in this course include learning and developing skills as writers; reading a range of nonfiction, and learning techniques from the various readings; improving our ability to analyze and critique written prose; and gaining experience in editing and revising our own work. The readings will show you many possibilities for your own work, and I'll urge you to try writing in different styles and forms during the semester. You will spend a great deal of time discussing and revising your work—in group workshops and in conference with me.

Texts

Gutkind, Lee, ed. *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.

Miller, Brenda and Suzanne Paola. *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2005.

Thiel, Diane. *Winding Roads: Exercises in Writing Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008.

Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle*. New York: Scribner, 2006.

Course Description: English 235 focuses on the process of writing complete works of nonfiction through intensive writing practice and through focused critical assessment. Assessment will be done in the writing workshop format, requiring each student to evaluate assigned/submitted works in writing prior to whole-class discussion. Students will read the work of frequently published writers as well as that of their peers. The role of the instructor is to assign readings and writing exercises that strengthen the student writer's knowledge of and facility with techniques for creating effective nonfiction; to guide workshop discussion of written work in a manner that will benefit both the writer of the work at hand and the other writers present; to define and explain important elements of nonfiction writing and the writing process; and to evaluate the performance of students as

developing writers, as critical readers, as focused and responsible workshop participants, and as members of a mutually supportive community of writers.

Course Outcomes, Objectives, and Assessment:

English 235, Nonfiction Writing is designed to facilitate the following educational outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate nonfiction writing ability
- Students will demonstrate close reading and analytical/critical thinking skills
- Students will demonstrate the ability to revise/edit written work
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of basic writing and literary terms

To attain these outcomes, English 235 pursues the following course objectives:

- At the completion of this course, students will be able to write complete works of nonfiction in various modes
- Students will be able to analyze and critically evaluate completed works of nonfiction writing and to provide suggestions for improving them
- Students will be able to devise their own approaches to the teaching of nonfiction writing

English 235 achieves its intended educational outcomes through the following forms of assessment:

- Students will demonstrate their nonfiction writing abilities through the completion of writing exercises and the writing of complete works of nonfiction in various modes
- Students will demonstrate close reading and analytical/critical thinking skills through written and oral assessment of works written by established writers and by their workshop peers
- Students will demonstrate the ability to revise/edit written work through written and oral assessment of works written by established writers and by their workshop peers
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of basic writing and literary terms through written and oral assessment of works written by established writers and by their workshop peers

Classroom Protocol: As this class depends on collaborative effort, I'll expect you to be actively involved in discussions, to come to class prepared, and to formulate questions and ideas about the readings. You will be required to participate in discussions, in workshops, and in sharing your work; your participation **WILL** affect your grade (see below). Also, I'll expect you to respect your peers, whether discussing their creative work or their ideas about writing. ***And, let me be very clear: no cell phone, laptop, or Internet use – or any technological item use for that matter – during class, or I will ask you to leave.***

Attendance: Simply put, you are expected to attend and participate in each class meeting. There is no distinction between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. If you miss a class, you remain responsible for the material covered. Missing more than 1/4 of the class meetings (4 classes in a semester) will result in a final grade of F. **Very important: DO NOT miss a workshop class. If you do, you will need a very good reason.**

Class Cancellation: If Cedar Crest's campus is open, you should expect our class meetings to be held. If troublesome weather threatens to close the campus and thus cancel class, however, you should refer to Cedar

Crest's Inclement Weather Hotline at 610-606-4629 for notification. If I cancel class independently of the campus closing, due to weather or for other reasons, I will send a class-wide email to your Cedar Crest account.

College Policy Regarding Learning Disabilities: Students with documented disabilities who may need academic accommodations should discuss these needs with their professors during the first two weeks of class. Students with disabilities who wish to request accommodations should contact the Learning Center.

My Policy Regarding Late Assignments: I DO NOT accept late assignments. If you experience extenuating circumstances that prevent you from completing an assignment on time, you will need to have documentation of that circumstance and I reserve the right to make my decision. If it is an extenuating circumstance, you have 24 hours past the due date to hand in the assignment, both through email and a hard copy. Thus, no late assignments will be accepted unless proper documentation of an extenuating circumstance is provided and approved by me, and then only by getting the late assignment to me, both through email and hard copy, within 24 hours of the due date. A penalty for lateness will apply. **Again, very important: You must pass out your work when you're scheduled to pass it out, and you must show up for workshops. If you can't make it to class to hand out your work, have a friend do it for you, or drop it off ahead of time for me to pass out. There will be a penalty. Workshop classes must be attended.**

My Policy Regarding Email: I will not accept writing assignments over email, especially due to the new version of Microsoft. Also, I will only respond to emails that I deem necessary to do so. I recommend that you bring any concerns or questions to me before/after class or during my office hours.

Grading

Journal entries and in-class writing (10%) – At least one journal entry due per class. I will record that these entries have been done at the beginning of each class. In-class writing will be done in class, sometimes handed in and given a check plus, check or check minus.

Writing exercises (10%) – Exercises assigned to be completed and handed in. Graded on satisfaction of assignment and effort put into doing so.

Midterm exam (10%) – On reading, including memoir, up to the time of the exam.

Final portfolio (50%) – You will write, workshop, and revise three creative nonfiction writing assignments. You'll receive a "temporary" grade from me, and then a portfolio grade at the end of the semester, after revising all three assignments and handing them in as a portfolio. You will need to include your original draft and your final draft of each writing assignment. The portfolio grade is worth 50% of your final grade.

Participation (20%) – will be evaluated as follows:

Grade Criteria for Participation

A Regularly demonstrates excellent preparation: has clearly read the assigned material and thoughtfully considered any suggested questions, etc. Brings original thought and perspective to discussion, making significant contributions that expand and extend our collective understanding and appreciation

- of the written work. Listens attentively to other class members and instructor and responds constructively. Maintains active involvement throughout the semester.
- B** Regularly contributes to class discussions and has clearly read the assigned material, considering any suggested questions, etc. Brings original thought and perspective to discussion. Listens attentively to other class members and instructor. Maintains consistent ongoing involvement throughout the semester.
- C** Contributions to discussion show that the assigned materials have been read. Listens attentively to other class members and instructor. Level of involvement variable, but can contribute when called upon.
- D** Doesn't often contribute without being called upon. Completion of assigned reading sometimes in doubt. Level of involvement consistently unsatisfactory.
- F** Does not contribute to discussion unless called upon. Contributions when called upon indicate that assigned materials have not been read.

****Workshop Protocol:** A good portion of our class time will be devoted to group discussion of your works-in-progress. This discussion will cover all aspects of the work—content, form, strategy, technique, language, etc. Each of you will submit drafts of your essays several times during the course. It will be your responsibility to make copies of your work and distribute them to the class **BEFORE** your workshop session. **Note: When you receive someone else's work to critique for workshop, please mark up the manuscript to point out problematic or praiseworthy writing, and then type a detailed (one full page) response to the author, which you'll return to her with the manuscript. I will specify the guidelines for this critical response.**

Assignment/Workshop Schedule

- M 8/24: Introductions, syllabus, in-class journal writing ("Keeping a Journal," *Winding Roads*, pp. 7-8)
- W 8/26: *Winding Roads* – Introduction pp. 1-4
- M 8/31: *Winding Roads*, Beginning: Points of Inspiration, pp. 7-17
 Essays: "Westbury Court" (p. 171); "Making the Truth Believable" (p. 267)
 Exercises: At least one journal entry (to be done for each class after this one); Ex. 1, p. 10;
 Ex. 1, p. 11
- W 9/2: *Winding Roads*, Essays: "Superman and Me" (p. 128); "Biography of a Dress" (p. 209) – bring an old snapshot of yourself to use for writing about yourself in class
- M 9/7: No class
- W 9/9: *Tell It Slant* – Introduction, pp. vii-xi/*Unearthing Your Material*, pp. 1-70
 Informal writing assignment due/share
- M 9/15: *Winding Roads*, Part Two – Developing Your Craft and Technique, pp. 21-79

- W 9/17: *Tell/It Slant* – Chapter 12, pp. 135-150
 Essays: “Mother Tongue” (p. 241 – *Winding Roads*)
 Exercises: Think of a scene for Ex. 2, p. 148 (*Tell/It Slant*) which we will do in class
- M 9/22: *Tell/It Slant* – Chapter 9, “The Personal Essay,” pp. 91-104/Chapter 10, “The Lyric Essay,” pp. 105-115
 Writing Assignment #1 handed out
- W 9/24: Essays: “Shunned” (p. 49 – *In Fact*); “Three Spheres” (p. 3 – *In Fact*)
 Exercises: *Tell/It Slant* – Ex. 6, p. 114
- M 9/28: *Tell/It Slant* – Chapter 14, “The Writing Group” – p. 161-168
- W 9/30: Writing Assignment #1 due with copies
 In-class exercises
- M 10/5: **WORKSHOP #1 (Groups 1 and 2)**, critiques of peers’ essays due
- W 10/7: **WORKSHOP #1 (Groups 3 and 4)**, critiques of peers’ essays due
- M 10/12: No class
- W 10/14: *The Glass Castle* – have it read!
 Midterm Exam (on reading up to this point, including the memoir)
- M 10/19: Discuss *The Glass Castle* memoir
 Writing Assignment #2 handed out
- W 10/21: Essays: “Joe Stopped By” (p. 307 – *In Fact*); “In the Woods” (p. 318 – *In Fact*)
- M 10/26: In-class writing exercises (associated with Assignment #2)
- W 10/28: Writing Assignment #2 due with copies
- M 11/2: **WORKSHOP #2 (Groups 3 and 4)**, critiques of peers’ essays due
 Handout for next week’s exercises
- W 11/4: **WORKSHOP #2 (Groups 1 and 2)**, critiques of peers’ essays due
 Handout for next week’s exercises

- M 11/9: *Tell/It Slant* – Chapter 11, “The Basics of Personal Reportage,” pp. 117-132
 Essays: *In Fact* – “Looking at Emmitt Till” (p. 24); “Prayer Dogs” (p.92)
 Exercises: see handout
 Writing Assignment #3 handed out
- W 11/11: Essays: *In Fact* – “Being Brians” (p. 163); “Notes from a Difficult Case” (p. 226); “Gray Area: Thinking with a Damaged Brain” (p. 288)
 Exercises: handout
- M 11/16: In-class research exercises (associated with Assignment #3)
- W 11/18: In-class writing/research exercises (associated with Assignment #3)
- M 11/23: Writing Assignment #3 due with copies
- W 11/25: No class
- M 11/30: **WORKSHOP #3 (Groups 1 and 3)**, critiques of peers’ essays due
- W 12/2: **WORKSHOP #3 (Groups 2 and 4)**, critiques of peers’ essays due
- M 12/7: **REVISION DISCUSSION** (set up revision conferences)
Winding Roads – Chapter 17, “Revision,” pp. 83-96; *Tell/It Slant* – Chapter 13, “The Writing Process and Revision,” pp. 151-160
 Essays: “Crossing the Border” (*Winding Roads* – p. 245); “The Creative Nonfiction Police” (*In Fact* – p. xix)
 Exercises: *Winding Roads* – Ex. 1, p. 90; *Tell/It Slant* – Ex. 1, pp. 3-4

Final Portfolio due by 5:00 p.m. on Friday, 12/11/09, in my office (Hartzel Hall 220).