

English 618b
Graduate Writing Workshop: Nonfiction
M 4-7

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Texts: pdfs of individual essays posted to eCampus: **print** and bring to class

The focus of our work this semester will be on the "personal essay." Hard to define. Indeed, the umbrella term, creative nonfiction, suffers from the same generic muddledness. Not journalism, not fiction, not poetry, not expository prose. Still, nonfiction is porous, communes with all these things it is not and more. The personal essay doesn't so much confine this mess as throw a loop into it, the persona of the writer, saying "I," just as you were told not to in English 1 (or somewhere). We won't sort out the generic difficulties. Better, I think, to exploit the possibilities of something not too formed, and therefore malleable to your hands.

That said, I plan to continue to include professional essays that are not particularly personal, and to encourage those who are interested to write such an essay. While personal writing makes a good fit for a workshop, in that it requires less research, it is only one kind of literary nonfiction. We should all have several arrows in our quivers. And, of course, different mags prefer different kinds of work.

Together, we're going to work on learning to write good essays, or better. We'll do this by writing, reading, and talking. You don't need a class to write essays. One of the great and simple beauties of writing is that it only takes a pad and a pencil. But you have decided to take a workshop, which entails responsibilities. Which means you'll be prepared. You'll be there with your own work when the class is set to talk about it, you'll have studied assigned work by professionals, and you'll give the work of your peers your sustained attention when you're working as an editor. Be honest but courteous. Other people are people, too; if you forget it you endanger the goodwill of the whole class.

Your essays will pass through three drafts. None of them should be conceived of as "rough." For this class to work for you, you must bring forward your best effort at every stage of the process. Sloppy or ill-considered drafts will not elicit responses about your real problems: they will elicit comments about the slop. This is not acceptable. No one should expect their classmates or me to do their copyediting for them. Respect your own work and your classmates' time: clean prose only.

In return, you should expect a close commentary on your work, the kind of response you won't often get in this life. This is not to say we readers will always make useful comments, and final decisions about your work are always yours, but you will get a sense of how your work comes across to readers, which may be a very different thing than what you imagine.

You'll be required to complete two essays for this class, each ten to twenty pages (aim for fifteen). These will need to be finished on time.

Class time will be divided up more or less as follows: discussion of professional writing, workshopping of your work, discussion of writing problems, and formal readings.

While your course grade will be most dependent on the quality of your finished essays, everything counts: drafts, final versions, your contributions to class discussions, your helpfulness in workshops and as an editor, and your attendance--if you're not there, you're not being helpful (over one absence begins to be a problem).