COURSE BASICS

Course Overview: This course is a creative nonfiction writing workshop focusing on personal essay writing. The personal essay has wide and dilute boundaries and is often used as a generic umbrella term for any personal creative nonfiction (or even, perhaps incorrectly, as a synonym for “creative nonfiction” altogether). So it may help to start with what this class is not about. This is, of course, not a class on academic or scholarly writing (emphasize the “creative” in creative nonfiction), but perhaps less obviously this is also not a class directed at strictly autobiographical or memoir writing. The personal essay has many forms and variations, but for our purposes the personal essay should be seen as a gateway between ourselves and the world around us (both physical and conceptual)—essentially a meeting place for things in the world to inform us and for our own experiences to inform the world. (Though “inform” seems too bland and misrepresentative—“illuminate” is perhaps a better word.) What the personal essay always remains is a combination of personal and external writing. And that’s what you will be doing this semester, in one way or another: writing pieces that in some way combine your own life and experience and your observations and understanding of the outside world. For this class, and in particular for the topics you decide to write about, you should consider yourself both the main character and the lead reporter—both participant in and observer of your chosen topic. As a class, we will discuss examples of this form in practice and, most importantly, share your own creative essays with the group.

Reading Materials: We won’t be using a textbook or anthology. A series of selected published essays will available to access on Blackboard. Some additional short or craft essays will be available as handouts in class. Creative work from the group will also be shared and discussed.

Participation: As a workshop, this class will rely heavily on student discussion and participation. Your contribution to class discussions, including reading discussions and writing workshops, is vital to the success of the class. Before class, be sure to read that week’s material carefully and formulate your thoughts and questions about it. In class, please offer up your contributions freely and engage with what others in class are saying. Everyone being involved is crucial, but your regular participation should otherwise be seen as a casual and informal part of our workshop setting.

Attendance: Since our class will be based almost entirely on our group working together as a whole, everyone needs to be able to attend class regularly and consistently. One absence (equivalent to one week of class) will be excused without penalty for whatever reason (work, travel, illness, etc); a second or third absence will each lower your final grade by 10 points. Absences beyond three will be reason for failing the course. Some exceptions may be made for extreme hardship or religious observation. Excessive tardiness, if repeated, will be counted as absence. Class will get started between 6:00-6:10pm; please arrive and be ready to begin within that time. (Class will end by or before 8:30 depending on how much we have to cover each week.)

Grading: Grading for this class will be simple and straightforward. The assignment grades, as listed below, will be earned for adequate and timely completion of the assignments, including your creative essays. If you meet the basic expectations of the assignment and turn it in on time, you will earn the available points. Late or broadly inadequate work will be deducted accordingly. Written feedback will be provided for your three main nonfiction assignments, but these comments will be independent of a given
assignment’s point score. If you can complete all your assignments on time and regularly come to class and participate, it will be easy for you to earn an A in this class. Feel free to ask questions about your grade at any point. Final grades will break down as follows: A (90-100); B (80-89); C (70-79); D (60-69); F (0-59).

**Assignments:**
- Personal Essay #1 20 points
- Personal Essay #2 20 points
- Assignment #3 20 points
- Discussion & Participation 25 points
- Feedback Letters 15 points

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**THE WORKSHOP**

**Workshops:** We will hold three rounds of workshop, one for each of our three main creative assignments. During workshop, our classes will consist of open and casual discussions of student essays. During workshop discussions, the author will be asked to listen and take notes, but not participate in the discussion. The rest of the class will address their comments to the group, not directly to the author. Before the conclusion of each discussion, authors will join in with the group to bring up questions or concerns about their own writing and to ask further questions of the group’s feedback.

**Due Dates:** At the start of each round of workshop, essays will be due to turn into the group. Due dates will be the Sunday before each scheduled workshop. Essays will be shared electronically, but you should print each week’s material so you can make written comments and return the essays to their authors. The essays you turn in to the group for workshop are not expected to be perfect (of course—that’s why we’re workshopping them) but they should be “complete” drafts (as opposed to partial drafts) that have been sufficiently polished and proofread (i.e., they should be “ready to share”). In class before due dates we will hold “cold workshops” where you can get some feedback on your in-progress (or revised) material before turning it in.

**Feedback Letters:** In addition to offering your feedback as a part of class workshop discussions, you will also write a letter of feedback to the author explaining your reactions, thoughts, and questions. This will help you formulate your feedback for the class discussion and give you a chance to communicate your thoughts directly with the author. Each letter should be one page single-spaced; the letter should be signed with your name and addressed to the author, though beyond these formalities the letters should be seen as informal. Write your comments in a straightforward manner with thorough details and explanations. In all your feedback, you should see yourself as an advocate for the work you are addressing, always supporting its improvement and success. All feedback for workshop should be honest, charitable, and constructive. Along with your letter comments, please also include helpful margin comments and line notes on the essay itself. Your printed letters and written comments are due to return to the authors on the night of each workshop. I will also collect a copy of each of your feedback letters.

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**THE ESSAYS**

**Personal Essays:** At least two original, completed essays will be submitted for workshop. In terms of content and style, the essay assignments are generally wide open, meaning overall you can do whatever kind of writing you want to do for a given essay (funny or serious, intellectual or emotional, lyrical or narrative, etc, or of course all of the above) so long as the general intent of the class—nonfiction per-
sonal essay writing—is met. What you write about and how you write about it is up to you, and deter-
mining this for yourself is an important part of effective creative writing. However, your essays should,
in one way or another, consist of both personal experience and external observation and insight. Finding
the creative, artistic ways in which both of these elements align is exactly what this sort of writing is all
about.

Assignment #3: For our final assignment you will have the option to revise or expand one of your first
two essays from class or to produce a third new essay; revisions or new essays for assignment #3 will be
turned in for our final round of workshop. Additionally, at the end of the semester, one last revision will
be due in place of a final exam.

Length & Format: The essays should be around 9-12 pages in length with standard formatting: Times
New Roman 12, double-spacing, and one-inch margins. Some fluctuation in length is obviously natural
depending on content and style, and while you should meet at least the minimum length, do let your ma-
terial guide you instead of writing only for the sake of length. Of course, it’s always fine to write more
than the suggested page length. Essays should include page numbers as well as a title and author name
on the first page. Please submit essays as PDFs if possible.

Essay Selections: In addition to composing your own essays for class, you should also try to take an
active interest in reading published nonfiction. Reading creative writing is one of the first and best steps
in improving your own creative writing. Basically, you can figure out how you want to write by finding
the sort of writing you like to read. So in addition to our assigned readings for class, be on the lookout
for authors and essays you enjoy, and select something to share with the class. Later in the semester, we
will share copies of these essays, read excerpts, and discuss them in class.

A Final Note: Please remember that the writing you produce for this class is intended to be fun—or at
least heartening and enjoyable, if perhaps not exactly “fun” in the traditional sense (though it could be
that, too). We are in an academic setting but this is definitely a creative writing class. Please be original
and genuine with your writing. Let it be honest and heartfelt, as well as emotional and insightful. The
personal essay is a wide open and free-form style of creative writing; its main hallmark is an intimate
and conversational tone that anyone can write and easily make artistic and distinctive. Ultimately, you
should just try to find the things in your life that you find fascinating or frustrating, baffling or amazing,
and communicate your related insights and experiences as vividly as possible. Make that the focus of
your work this semester, and otherwise just relax and have fun.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES & RESOURCES

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism, including stolen or inadequately cited material, will not be tolerated in
this course and will result in failure of the assignment and potentially of the course. Turning in work not
original to you or to this class is considered plagiarism. Please note that violations will be reported. Read
the full academic integrity policy here: wustl.edu/policies/undergraduate-academic-integrity.html

Classroom Environment: The university promotes learning environments that offer the best possible
educational experiences for all students. To that end, this class is intended to provide a space that is both
supportive and challenging. All members of this class are expected to strive toward a positive and in-
clusive atmosphere that values the diversity of its members, allows and encourages its members to express
themselves freely, challenges assumptions and stereotypes in favor of critical thought and inquiry, and
lastly expects thoughtful consideration, courtesy, and respect between all its members.
Disability Resources: If your work for this class requires special arrangements because of a disability, please contact the Cornerstone office at 935-5970 or at cornerstone@wustl.edu. As long as I receive timely guidance in writing from Cornerstone, you may receive any specific accommodations for which you are eligible. Cornerstone serves as the official university resource for approving and arranging students’ accommodations and handles all information confidentially. Requests for accommodation must be made at the beginning of the semester. For more see: cornerstone.wustl.edu/DisabilityResources.aspx

Title IX Resources: The university has designated the Title IX Coordinator identified below to coordinate its compliance with and response to inquiries concerning Title IX, which prohibits discrimination based on sex (including sexual harassment and sexual violence) in the university’s educational programs and activities. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find the appropriate resources by contacting Jessica Kennedy (Title IX Coordinator) at jwkennedy@wustl.edu or 935-3118. Additionally, employees of Washington University who are in a position of authority, including instructors, are obligated to report cases of sexual harassment or assault brought to their attention. All information reported to Jessica Kennedy will be handled as confidentially as possible. For more help, including resources and accommodations for victims of sexual assault, contact Kim Webb (Director of the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center) at kim_webb@wustl.edu or 935-8761, visit the RSVP Center in Suite 435, Seigle Hall, or go to shs.wustl.edu/SexualViolence

Bias Reporting: The university has a process through which students or other community members who have experienced incidents of bias, prejudice or discrimination, or who have witnessed such incidents against others, can report to the Bias Report and Support System (BRSS) team. See: brss.wustl.edu

Mental Health: Mental Health Services’ professional staff members work with students to resolve personal and interpersonal difficulties, many of which can affect the academic experience. These include conflicts with or worry about friends or family, concerns about eating or drinking patterns, and feelings of anxiety and depression. Find more here: shs.wustl.edu/MentalHealth

Writing Resources: The Writing Center offers free writing advice to all Washington University students. The tutors will work with students on any kind of writing project, including your essays for this class. They can help at any stage of the writing process, including brainstorming, developing and clarifying an argument, organizing evidence, or improving style. Instead of editing or proofreading papers, the tutors will emphasize the process of revision and teach students to edit their own work. To make an appointment call 935-4981 or go to Level 1 of Olin Library. Find more here: writingcenter.wustl.edu