CRWR 212: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction

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“The essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest.... I have worn many shirts, and not all of them have been a good fit.” – E.B. White

The best creative nonfiction pairs intellectual curiosity with individual voice. Through narrative, it delivers a unique perspective on the world. It embraces the power of storytelling and employs it in the service of revealing the world to be more complicated, confounding, heartening and, ultimately, understandable. In CRWR 212, we have the good fortune of time together—to create a rigorous intellectual space, to discuss some of the most interesting modern creative nonfiction, and to apply our expanded notions of craft to those stories we most need to tell.

This course is made up of three units. In the first, we will study personal essay and memoir, the second, lyric essays, and the third, literary journalism and longer essays with strong research components. We will read, analyze and discuss a variety of nonfiction, and will employ a number of fundamental reporting and nonfiction writing techniques through short exercises. We will compose and workshop pieces of our own, and each lead a discussion.

EXPECTATIONS

Learning Outcomes

- Acquire foundational skills in reading, discussing, and writing nonfiction
- Demonstrate an understanding of the terminology and concepts that apply to creative nonfiction
- Practice the art of writing and revising nonfiction works
- Learn to critique the quality of your own work, and that of your fellow writers

Course Texts

Primary Texts:

- *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, ed. Williford & Martone

Additionally assigned readings will be posted via email. You are responsible for bringing each reading to class for discussion.

You may do this by bringing the textbooks, printing the assigned reading, or by saving them to your laptop and bringing it to class; however, should I see that you’re using your laptop for reasons other than engaging with course materials, then thereafter you will need to print the assigned readings.

Other requirements

- Notebook and pen (blue or black ink, please), for in-class writing
- Binder, for final portfolio
Grading

Within one week of your workshop, you must schedule an appointment during office hours to receive and discuss my comments, as well as any questions you might have for revision. I encourage you to talk with me at any time to discuss your overall progress and success in the class.

- Final portfolio: 50%
- Class participation, including workshops and discussions: 20%
- Completion of homework and prepared discussion questions: 20%
- Post-Workshop Meetings with Instructor: 10%

**You must turn in your portfolio and complete all major papers by their deadlines in order to receive credit for this course.

Assignments & Final Portfolio

During the first two weeks of each unit, you will write most days. Each writing assignment reflects a critical element of a recent reading. You will receive comments from me on these assignments, but no grade. (See Check System notes.) Short assignments play an important part in your overall participation grade, but are meant to develop your skills as a nonfiction writer. They are an opportunity to wrestle with a new approach.

You are expected to show your familiarity with the assigned reading during in-class discussions. To ensure that you read critically and attentively, I will expect you to bring three questions about the assigned readings to be discussed each class. Nonfiction leans heavily on a careful, intelligent interrogation of the world around you. Learning to ask good questions will reward your future investigations and writing.

Once during the semester, you will lead a discussion on a piece of writing chosen from the Best American series. You will inform the class which piece we will read one week prior. When you lead discussion, you will come prepared with questions, comments, and critical insights on the piece’s subject, themes, structure, and success. When you present, you will provide the class with an overview of the piece’s focus and qualities, and then offer questions to guide a class workshop.

Finally, you will workshop pieces by your classmates, and offer three nonfiction pieces of your own for workshop. The pieces should be a memoir or personal essay, a lyric or braided essay, and a piece of literary journalism, travel writing, or science and nature writing. Each piece should exhibit appropriate genre characteristics; in the case of literary journalism, for instance, you will be expected to include direct quotations from your subjects. PE/M = 5-8 pages. LY/BR = 4-6 pages. LJ/TW = 8-12 pages. For the final portfolio, these collectively should equal a minimum 20 revised pages. You must submit your own piece via email one week before your scheduled workshop date. I will then email the entire class the pieces.

For those workshops that concern a classmate’s work, you will write that classmate a short letter (min. 250 words) that explains to them what you think the piece is about, and how well you think their decisions—of reporting and fact, of style and structure—help them to make their points. You will bring two copies of your letter to each workshop—one for the author, and one for me.

Your final portfolio will include:

- A reflective introduction (1-2 pgs), in which you explain for your reader what you’ve learned, how well you’ve mastered your craft, and how you will continue to develop your skills as a nonfiction writer.
- An anthology of exercises (6-8 pgs), a curated collection of our in-class writing exercises and homework assignments.
- Memoir/Personal Essay (5-8 pgs), must be workshopped in class and revised.
- Lyric Essay/Braided Essay (4-6 pgs), must be workshopped in class and revised.
- Literary Journalism/Travel/S&N (8-12 pgs), must be workshopped in class and revised.
Your three major nonfiction pieces should collectively equal a minimum of 20 revised pages.

**POLICIES**

**General Class Expectations:**
- All reading assignments must be completed by the assigned date.
- All writing assignments must be turned in on time.
- **All homework must be typed.**
- Attend class.
- Actively, vocally, and appropriately participate in class discussions.
- Any individual assignments (including requests for conferences) will be completed by the assigned date.

**Grading Policy:**
Students enrolled in CRWR 212 are graded by the traditional letter grade A, B, C, D, F or are given NC for no credit. The NC grade does not affect grade point average. It is reserved for students who have worked unusually hard, attended class regularly and completed all assignments but whose skills are not at a passing level at the end of the semester.

**Attendance**
This is a discussion-based class, and your participation is crucial, so attendance is mandatory. Of course, nonfiction writers know that unforeseen circumstances sometimes arise. Accordingly, you are allowed three (3) unexcused absences before your grade is affected. Use them wisely: A fourth unexcused absence will lower your final grade by one letter, and a fifth unexcused absence will do the same. **A sixth unexcused absence will cause you to fail this course.**

Following your first three absences, if you should miss a class because of a serious illness, a family emergency, etc., then please provide me with appropriate documentation (e.g., a note from Curry Health Center), and I will forgive your absence.

If you must miss class, **you are responsible for obtaining any handouts or assignments for the class.** Make sure you talk with me in advance if you are worried about meeting a deadline or missing a class.

**Participation.**
Participation includes coming to class prepared and on time, taking part in class discussions, asking questions, contributing your knowledge and insights in whatever form is appropriate, and striving to make all your contributions excellent. It also includes doing the required reading and writing for each class. Note: Please come to class on time. Lateness will hurt your grade because it is an unnecessary interruption and because latecomers are likely to miss valuable information. Please see **Participation Grade Descriptors** for more information.

**Late Work.**
- Late or handwritten homework does not receive credit.
- Late workshop submissions are unacceptable. They will receive no revision comments from me.
- If you miss class, the homework is due the next class period.
- You are always welcome to complete assignments early if you will be missing class.

**Academic Conduct.**
You must abide by the rules for academic conduct described in the Student Conduct Code. If you have any questions about when and how to avoid academic dishonesty, particularly plagiarism, please review the Conduct Code and talk with your instructor.
Students with Disabilities
Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please speak with me privately after class or in my office. Please be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.

EVALUATION

The Check System
Revision is a crucial (and, in this class, mandatory) part of the writing process. While I will assign final grades based on your portfolio, which will document your progress as a nonfiction writer, your assignments and workshop drafts will receive a mark on the Check spectrum, along with written feedback. These marks do not have letter-grade counterparts; rather, taken with my feedback, they reflect your performance on a particular assignment, and suggest how much work you might need to do in order to elevate your writing.

A check-plus, then, suggests work that engages its genre, takes successful risks, meets assignment requirements, avoids grammatical and syntactical errors, and uses narrative writing to tell a true story. Further along the check spectrum—past check and check-minus—a "U" would represent an unacceptable mark, for work that fails to do most of the things listed above.

Finally, a note on workshops

The success of this class relies on the collaborative creation of a safe, encouraging writing community. To best benefit from this workshop as a writer, you must feel willing to write those stories that feel most important for you to tell. However, no writer will want to share those stories with a community that is critical, discursive, inattentive, negligent, or insulting. During our workshop weeks, you will only read two additional readings assigned by the student discussion leaders. Use the extra time to develop your own piece and devote your energy to considering how you can use your critical insights to elevate the work of your colleagues.

While we'll discuss workshop etiquette in class, here's a brief overview. In a writing workshop, an author submits work to a group of peers, who discuss the merits of his or her work and consider ways in which it was effective, or might be more effective. The goal is to help the writer create the piece they want to write, not the piece you would like to read. It's a space for constructive conversation; it should leave the writer feeling as though he or she has opportunities to further clarify his or her work.

A few guiding principles:

- The writer does not speak during his or her workshop. At the end, he or she will have the opportunity to ask questions of the class and small groups about their feedback.
- Workshop comments from the class should be both honest and tactful, both critical and respectful. Feedback should be grounded in the text, and should be constructive.
- Every writer sees his or her piece of writing as a straight line, a piece that begins and ends where it ought to. Accordingly, every act of reading is an act of empathy, not judgment. Your responsibility as a reader is to put yourself in the writer's position, to see how successfully he or she delivered the story.
- Creative nonfiction demands vulnerability, but workshops should help you to better navigate your vulnerability. I will not tolerate disrespectful comments in the workshop.

DISCLAIMER: THIS SYLLABUS IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE AT ANY TIME
Portfolio Grade Descriptors for CRWR 212

A Contains all requirements listed in the syllabus; demonstrates masterful implementation of creative writing techniques in addition to thoughtful and reflective writing practices. The writing will be polished.

B Contains all requirements listed in the syllabus; demonstrates masterful implementation of creative writing techniques in addition to thoughtful and reflective writing practices. The writing will be successful, with some grammatical and syntactical polishing needed.

C Contains all requirements listed in the syllabus; demonstrates acceptable implementation of creative writing techniques with an effort towards thoughtful and reflective writing practices. The writing will be acceptable, with some revision needed, as well as additional grammatical and syntactical polishing.

D Portfolio may be missing some of the requirements listed in the syllabus; demonstrates passable implementation of creative writing techniques, with minimal thoughtful and reflective writing. The writing may require a great deal of revision.

F Portfolio may lack coherent organization, may be missing required elements, and will demonstrate a lack of technique, less thoughtful or reflective writing practices.

Participation Grade Descriptors for CRWR 212

A Superior participation shows initiative and excellence in written and verbal work. The student helps to create more effective discussions and workshops through his/her verbal, electronic, and written contributions. Reading and writing assignments are always completed on time and with attention to detail. In workshop or conferences, suggestions to group members are tactful, thorough, specific, and often provide other student writers with a new perspective or insight.

B Strong participation demonstrates active engagement in written and verbal work. The student plays an active role in the classroom but does not always add new insight to the discussion at hand. Reading and writing assignments are always completed on time and with attention to detail. In workshop or conferences, suggestions to group members are tactful, specific, and helpful.

C Satisfactory participation demonstrates consistent, satisfactory written and verbal work. Overall, the student is prepared for class, completes assigned readings and writings, and contributes to small group workshops and large class discussions. Reading and writing assignments are completed on time. In workshop or conferences, suggestions to group members are tactful and prompt, but could benefit from more attentive reading and/or specific detail when giving comments.

D Weak participation demonstrates inconsistent written and verbal work. The student may be late to class, unprepared for class, and may contribute infrequently or unproductively to classroom discussions or small group workshops. Reading and writing assignments are not turned in or are insufficient. In workshops or conferences, suggestions to group members may be missing, disrespectful, or far too brief and general to be of help.

F Unacceptable participation shows ineffectual written and verbal work. The student may be excessively late to class, regularly unprepared, and not able to contribute to classroom discussions or small group workshops. This student may be disruptive in class. Reading and writing assignments are regularly not turned in or are insufficient. In workshops or conferences, the student has a pattern of missing, being completely unprepared, or being disruptive.
Plagiarism Policy

According to the University of Montana Student Conduct Code, plagiarism is “representing another person’s words, ideas, data, or materials as one’s own.” The Composition program recognizes that plagiarism is a serious academic offense, but also understands that some misuse of information can occur in the process of learning information literacy skills. Therefore, if student writing appears to have been plagiarized, in full or in part, intentionally or unintentionally, or due to poor citation, the following will procedure will take place:

- The student will be made aware of areas in the text that are not properly integrated or cited.
- The student will receive no credit on the paper; it is up to him/her to prove that he/she turned in original work.
- The student will be asked to provide the teacher with copies of the research she/he used in writing the paper.
- The student and teacher will meet to discuss research integration.
- *If the student cannot provide documentation of her/his research, further disciplinary action will be taken.*

In the case that the student is unable to provide evidence of his/her original work or in the case that the teacher has evidence that the student has repeatedly plagiarized his/her work, the teacher will consult with the Director of Composition for direction with further disciplinary action.

In the case of blatant or egregious offenses, or in the case of repeated plagiarism, the Director of Composition will work with the Dean of Students to determine further disciplinary action.

*Students should review the Student Conduct Code so that they understand their rights in academic disciplinary situations. The Student Conduct Code can be found here:* [http://www.umt.edu/vpsa/policies/student_conduct.php](http://www.umt.edu/vpsa/policies/student_conduct.php)