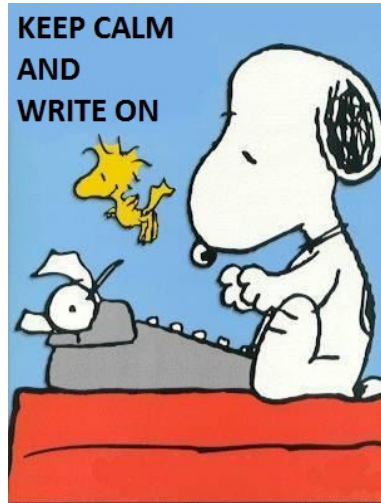


English 505: Seminar in Creative Nonfiction



Winter 2020
Tues/Thurs 2-3:50 HUM 304

Dr. Brenda Miller Office: Hum 303 Brenda.Miller@wwu.edu
Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 4-5 p.m.; Wed 1-3 p.m. and by appt.

It is sometimes comforting to know that others seem to fail as often and as oddly as we do...and it is even more comforting to have such stories told to us with style, the way a writer has found to an individual expression of a personal truth.

—Scott Walker

You should write because you love the shape of stories and sentences and the creation of different words on a page. Writing comes from reading, and reading is the finest teacher of how to write.

— Annie Proulx

This course will be an intensive generative writing workshop. We will write new work every day, practicing the fundamental skills of creative nonfiction and expanding our range of techniques. We will study classic, contemporary, and emerging forms, and by the end of the

course you will have a substantial body of new work and a more nuanced understanding of the genre.

Texts:

- ***Tell it Slant, Third Edition***, Miller/Paola (**You must use the current, 2019, Third Edition**)
- Selected works posted on Canvas (**You must print these out to bring to class**)

In this course, our objectives are to:

- 1) Gain a better understanding of yourself as a writer; insight into your process as a writer; shortcuts to getting words on paper; and/or a breakthrough in revision methods.
- 2) Grasp essential concepts about creative nonfiction: what the terms implies, the forms it takes, the craft elements necessary to its success.
- 3) Practice and refine basic techniques of creative writing, such as: scene, imagery, structure, and syntax.
- 4) Grapple with the ethical implications involved when writing about your own life and the lives of others.
- 5) Learn how to read published nonfiction writers as models for your own work, and learn how to read your colleagues' writing with authority, compassion, and insight.
- 6) Learn how to interact effectively in the group workshop
- 7) Learn how to incorporate oral feedback in your revision process.

Course Requirements

Attentive and Active Participation

You will be allowed two absences; every absence over two will lower your grade. You will be expected to actively participate in class discussions and small-group workshops, thoughtfully responding to both assigned texts and your colleagues' work. I expect you to complete the assigned reading before each class, coming to class prepared with questions and comments.

In-Class and Out-of-Class Writing

Each week we will do in-class writing exercises designed to help you generate ideas, begin new pieces, and/or revise existing work. Some of these may remain fragments or beginnings; others may wind up as complete short essays in themselves. *You must write for the entire time given for the exercise.* **If you refuse to do the writing in class, or if it is obvious you are not doing the work, you will be asked to leave as your disengagement will affect others.** Out-of-class writing assignments may be done alone or in a group.

Presentation on Creative Nonfiction (see handout for more detail)

Toward the end of the quarter, you will each be responsible for a craft presentation using the work of a contemporary or classic creative nonfiction author, or a review of a creative nonfiction anthology. You may choose an author whose work you already know and love, or you may venture into new territory.

Individual Feedback Sessions with Brenda

I find that in-person, conversational feedback is much more effective than written comments. Therefore, I require that you come to my office for individualized feedback sessions *at least* three times during the quarter. (See Handout on How to Prepare for Your Feedback Session). I will keep a file of all your work in my office.

There will be an online sign-up sheet with a wide variety of time slots available. We will schedule twenty minutes for each session. If you have a particularly long piece you wish to discuss, you can sign up for two sessions in a row.

You should spread out these sessions throughout the quarter (i.e. do not save them all for the last week; that defeats the purpose!) I will note due dates on the course calendar.

A Midterm Portfolio and a Final Portfolio

You will create two portfolios: one Midterm and one Final. More details to come. Grades will be based on the work in this portfolio, your class participation, and your proactive approach to getting feedback on your work.

Technology Policy

I prefer that you keep your use of computers, iPads, and phones at a minimum. There may be times when I allow use of devices for in-class work, but please keep your devices put away at all other times. I understand that you may feel that electronics are not a distraction for your learning, but they are distracting to me, and could be distracting to others. So this is an exercise of courtesy in group settings.

You are required to have the textbook and the handouts *in hard copy* for class discussion. For writing, you may bring your computer or other writing device, though writing by hand can often lead to a different style or depth of work. Please keep your computers closed while we are engaged in other classroom activities.

Please turn your phones OFF and put them away when you enter the classroom. Engage with the students around you rather than engaging with your screens.

Late Assignment Policy: I will NOT accept late assignments. If there is an emergency, please let me know as soon as possible. You may utilize the resources of the Student Life Office or the Student Health Center to receive official leave of absence if you will be gone for more than one class meeting. I will not accept assignments via email if you miss a class without advance notice.

A note on plagiarism: The writing you do in this class should be new, original work, created by you for the assignments given in this class. If you turn in work you've written for other classes, and I find out about it, you will receive no credit for the assignment.

Grading

Midterm Portfolio	40%
Final Portfolio/Project	60%

Accommodations: Reasonable accommodation for persons with documented disabilities should be established within the first week of class and may be arranged through: Disability Resources for Students, Old Main 110; Telephone: 650-3083 / Email: drs@wwu.edu

A note on content and classroom climate

In this class, we will not tolerate work that expresses gratuitous violence or graphic sexual content, nor will we tolerate hate speech or aggression toward any group of people. We might encounter work that is able to negotiate sexuality and violence in effective ways, and these might be questions that spur some of our discussions, but it will be my call if I feel your work is inappropriate in the context of this class.

Part of being in a creative writing class is learning how to be a responsible and effective member of a literary community, to be aware of your audience and of the purposes of different types of writing. If you feel this guideline is a restraint on your creative process, this will not be the class for you. Persistent use of offensive language or content that creates a hostile environment will result in a failing grade.

I am committed to establishing and maintaining a classroom climate that is inclusive and respectful for all students; it is important for all of us to listen and engage respectfully with each other. If you feel the classroom climate does not reflect this commitment, I encourage you to discuss this with me.

Support Services:

Western encourages students to seek assistance and support at the onset of an illness, difficulty, or crisis.

- In the case of a medical concern or question, please contact the Health Center: 360-650-3400 or visit Student Health.
- In the case of an emotional or psychological concern or question, please contact the Counseling Center: 360-650-3400 or visit Counseling Services.
- In the case of a health and safety concern, please contact the University Police: 360-650-3555 or visit University Police.
- In the case of a family or personal crisis or emergency, please contact the Dean of Students: 360-650-3450 or visit Dean of Students.
- To seek confidential support related to sexual violence, please contact CASAS (360-650-3700), the Student Health Center, and/or the Counseling Center. To report sexual violence, please contact University Police, Bellingham Police, and/ or the Title IX Coordinator in Western's Equal Opportunity Office (360-650-3307). Faculty are responsible employees who are required to report sex discrimination, including sexual violence that they learn about to the Title IX Coordinator.

Winter 2020 Tentative Course Calendar

Subject to Change: all changes announced in class and on Canvas

Week One

Tuesday, Jan 7: Intros, syllabus, Definitions of Creative Nonfiction

Thursday, Jan 9: What do you already know about creative nonfiction?

Have you read a particular book or short piece that, to you, embodies and illuminates the concept of creative nonfiction? This can be something you read in school or on your own. It may have been published in print or online. It may have been something you read on Facebook or a blog or on Twitter. It may have been something a family member or friend wrote in a letter or email. Write down your memories of this work or seek it out to read again.

- What makes this work memorable?
- What draws you to the writer's voice?
- What can you learn about the genre from this piece of writing?
- If you were to emulate one aspect of this piece—in either the content or the techniques used—what would it be? Come up with a writing prompt based on this work.

Please type up a passage from this work (a paragraph or so), cite where it is from, and then answer the questions above in a paragraph or two. Be as specific as possible in your response. *Bring 5 copies of this paper to class.*

Week Two

Tuesday, Jan. 14

- **Bring** in a piece of writing (approx. 1-2 pages double-spaced) either based on the piece you brought in last week or on someone else's piece. You can use any writing we did in class as a starting point. **Bring TWO Copies to class.**
- **Read: *Tell it Slant: Chapter One: The Body of Memory*.** Come prepared to do extensive in-class writing.

Thursday Jan. 16

- **Read:** "First" by Ryan Van Meter in TIS anthology
- **Read:** Excerpts from *House Built on Ashes* by Jose Antonio Rodriguez (posted on Canvas. BRING HARD COPY TO CLASS)
- **Reading Response Due (See Handout for details)**

Week Three

Tuesday, Jan. 21

- **Bring in a piece of writing** (approx. 1-2 pages double-spaced) based on in class writing last week or another exercise from Chapter One. **Bring TWO Copies to class.**
- **Read TIS, Chapter Two: Writing the Family**
- **Read:** The Fine Art of Sighing” by Bernard Cooper, in TIS Anthology
- **Read:** “There’s No Recipe for Growing Up” by Scaachi Koul
<https://www.buzzfeed.com/scaachikoul/looking-for-my-mother-at-the-bottom-of-a-pot>

Thursday, Jan. 23

- **Read: TIS Chapter 12: The Basics of Good Writing in Any Form**
- **Read:** “The Night my Mother Met Bruce Lee,” by Paisley Rekdal and “The Coroner’s Photographs,” by Brent Staples, both in TIS Anthology
- **Reading Response Due**
- **Bring: family photos to class for extensive in-class writing**

Week Four

Tuesday, Jan. 28

- **Bring** one of your in-class writings from last week, revised a bit, or writing based on another exercise from Chapter Two. Bring TWO copies to class.
- **Read: *Tell it Slant*, Chapter 3, Taking Place and Chapter 8: The Tradition of the Personal Essay.**
- **Read:** “Goodbye to 48th Street” by E.B. White and “On Going Home” by Joan Didion (on Canvas, Bring Hard Copy to Class)

Thursday, Jan. 30

- **Read: *Tell it Slant*, Chapter 5 :“The Body of Identity” & Chapter 9: “Innovative Forms”**
- **Read:** “Math 1619” by Gwendolyn Wallace in TIS Anthology
- **Read** “Undergraduate Admissions Essay Draft” by Elissa Washuta (on Canvas, Bring Hard Copy to Class) *TW: some content about sexual violence.*
- **Reading Response Due**

Week Five**Tuesday, Feb. 4**

- **Read:** *TIS* Chapter 13: **The Writing Process and Revision**
- **Bring:** in a piece of writing you might want to revise for your Midterm Portfolio
- **In class work on revision.**

Thursday, Feb. 6: No class, work on Midterm Portfolio, meet with Brenda for guidance

Week Six

Tuesday, Feb. 11: Midterm Portfolios Due: Midterm Reading in Class. Midterm “Exam”

Thursday, Feb. 13

- **Read:** *TIS*, Chapter 4: **Gathering the Threads of History**
- **Read:** “Leap” by Brian Doyle and “Because the Ferguson Verdict” by Ira Sukrungruang in *TIS* Anthology.
- **Reading Response Due**

Week Seven**Tuesday, Feb. 18**

- **Bring:** a piece of writing based on Chapter 4, Bring Two Copies to Class
- **Read:** *TIS* Chapter 6: **Writing the Arts**
- **Read:** “On Touching Ground” by Jericho Parms in *TIS* Anthology
- **Bring:** in an image of a piece of art you love for in-class writing

Thursday, Feb. 20

- **Read:** *TIS* Chapter 7: **Glorious Facts**
- **Read:** “Jumping the Fence” by Marjorie Hakala in *TIS* Anthology
- **Bring:** computers for in-class research exercise.
- **Reading Response Due**

Week Eight**Tuesday, Feb. 25**

- **Bring:** a piece of writing based on in-class work or one of the other exercises in Chapters 6 and 7 of *TIS*. Bring Two Copies to Class

- **Read** TIS Chapter 11: The Particular Challenges of Creative Nonfiction
- **Presentations** on Creative Nonfiction (4)

Thursday, Feb. 27

- **Read: TIS Chapter 14: The Power of Writing Communities.**
- **Presentations** on Creative Nonfiction (4)

Week Nine:

Drafts due of Final Essay to your workshop group by Sunday March 1 at noon.

Tuesday, March 3: Workshop on Final Essays

Thursday, March 5: Workshop on Final Essays

Week Ten

Tuesday, March 10:

- **Presentations** on Creative Nonfiction (4)

Thursday, March 12: Final Essay Due, Final Reading.

Finals Week

Final Portfolio Due: TBD