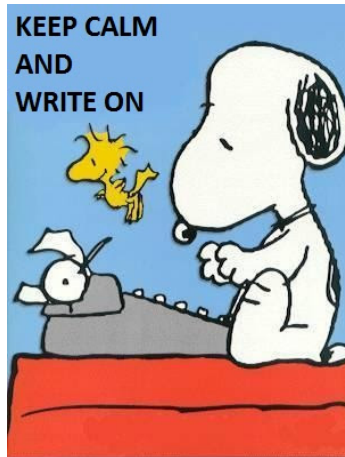


English 354: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction

Asynchronous Online, Spring 2020



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If you are a writer, or want to be a writer, this is how you spend your days—listening, observing, storing things away, making your isolation pay off. You take home all you've taken in, all that you've overheard, and you turn it into gold. (Or at least you try.)

— Anne Lamott

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

In this time of global struggle, personal stories matter more than ever. This course is meant to be an intensive generative writing workshop; now that we're conducting the course online, I hope this same spirit of writing as much as you can will still prevail. We will write new work every week, 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 creative nonfiction genre.

Texts:

- ***Tell it Slant, Third Edition***, Miller/Paola (**You must use the current, 2019, Third Edition**)
- Selected Readings posted on Canvas
- Course Handouts Posted on Canvas

NOTE: I strongly suggest that, if you have access to a printer, that you print out this Syllabus, the Selected Readings, and the Course Handouts and keep them all together in a folder or binder for easy reference. Or you could download all the files to one place on your device.

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 incorporate oral feedback in your revision process.

Course Requirements**Weekly Modules**

I've set up the course with weekly modules to follow. In each module there will usually be some or all of the following requirements for you to complete:

1. **Assigned Reading** in *Tell it Slant* and/or Readings posted in Files on Canvas.
2. **Assigned Viewing or Listening** to podcasts, YouTube videos, PowerPoint lectures.
3. **A Reading Response Paper** (See Handout: *Reading Responses*).
4. **One or Two Discussion Board Posts**; these will most often be small-group discussions, but there may be occasional whole-class discussion boards as well. (See Handout: *Discussion Board Expectations* for more details on what I expect in your postings).
5. **"In-Class" Writing** (see Handout: *In-Class Writing Guidelines*).
6. **A Creative Writing Assignment** (Detailed instructions given for each assignment).

Please do the all the components of a module in the order listed on the Module for each week. You will usually have a couple of deadlines in one week. All work will be turned in via Assignments or Discussion Boards on Canvas.

A Final Portfolio: More details to come. Due during Finals Week.

Individual Feedback Sessions with Brenda and Hannah

I find that in-person, conversational feedback is much more effective than written comments. In our normal lives, these sessions would happen in my office; now we'll be conducting them through video chats: either through Zoom or Skype (unfortunately I don't have Facetime available). We will schedule these sessions on the Canvas Calendar.

The first session, to be held within the first week of the quarter, will be a short "getting to know you" chat. After that, you'll be required to meet with either Hannah or Brenda **at least two more times**. The majority of the feedback on your work will happen in these sessions! (See Handout *Individual Feedback Sessions*).

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. I will not accept assignments via email if you miss a deadline 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.

Managing Your Time

Though we won't be meeting together during our regularly scheduled class time of Tues/Thurs 8-10 a.m. (this may be a relief to many of you!), I suggest that you still set aside two consecutive hours a day on Tues/Thurs (or whatever days work best for you) to do the work for this class. For the most part, you should be able to do all the work required during this time frame, with a few more hours of homework time as the course progresses.

On Canvas, we will be setting up the weekly Modules as we go along. There will always be two Modules up for you to see: one for the current week, and one for the following week. We are doing it this way to avoid overwhelming you, but also to give us flexibility to change things up as we see how the structure is working for you. Generally, we are working on Part I of *Tell It Slant* for the first part of the quarter, and you will settle into the pattern of the weeks.

Each week, you will have a deadline of Wednesday at noon and Friday at 5 p.m. I've set it up this way so that we can build on our work from the beginning of the week to the end. You can do the work for this class Monday-Friday, and have a weekend!

My classes generally rely quite a bit on **hands-on practice** in class. There is a power to writing together that can't really be duplicated on your own, but I will provide you with instructions on how to do what would be "in-class" writing at home. The most important part of this process is focusing for a set amount of time on the writing practice, without interruption, so think about how you'll set up your time and physical space for writing. (see Handout: ***In Class Writing Guidelines.***)

Keep all your practice writing in a place dedicated to this work: either a notebook or a computer file. I encourage you to try writing by hand, if that is possible for you, before turning to the computer, as writing by hand usually spurs more unfiltered, unexpected material.

While you won't be turning in much of this raw, practice writing, you will be relying on it for future assignments. So please do this work and see it as an essential component of the class.

Disability, equitable access, and accommodations

This course is intended for all WWU students, including those with visible or invisible disabilities. Students with disabilities will be provided equitable access to educational experiences and opportunities. If, at any point in the quarter, you find yourself not able to fully access the space, content, and experience of this course, please first contact the Disability Access Center (DAC) to discuss potential accommodations. Faculty and staff partner with the DAC in the implementation of accommodations.

If you already have accommodations set up through the DAC, please be sure to send your Faculty Notification Letter to me, through the myDAC portal, and reach out so we can discuss how your approved accommodations apply to this course.

If you are unsure if accommodations are appropriate for you, contact the DAC for more information, temporary assistance, or connections to other resources: Disability.wvu.edu or 360-650-3083.

Grading

Modules: You will receive a number of weekly points when you complete each module. These points will accumulate toward your final grade, to a maximum of 80 points.

Final Portfolio: The Final Portfolio, which will showcase what you've learned throughout the course, will be worth up to 20 additional points toward your grade.

Grading Rubric

The University has determined that Spring quarter 2020 will be run on a Pass/No Pass grading system. I fully expect that everyone will pass this course if you simply engage with the work. You are also entitled to ask for a letter grade at the end of the quarter. I'll be keeping a tally of your work and noting what the grade would be if you ask for it.

Pass/No Pass Grade:

Minimum of 71 points = Pass

Below 71 points = No Pass

Letter Grade:

96-100 points = A

91-95 points = A-

87-90 points = B+

85-86 = B

81-84 = B-

75-80 = C+

71-74 = C-

65-70 = D+

61-64 = D-

Below 61 = F

A Note on Content and Classroom Climate

In this class, we will not tolerate any work—including creative writing and work posted on Discussion Boards—that expresses gratuitous violence or graphic sexual content, nor will we tolerate hate speech or aggression toward any group of people. Now that we are online only, it will be even more important to monitor your tone, your language, and your intent.

All students must feel safe in this virtual classroom, and 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 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 course climate does not reflect this commitment, I encourage you to discuss this with me.

Support Services

- 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.

Modules

Here are what the first two Modules will look like. I will have the instructions for each Module on Canvas, as well as links to all the Assignments. I will send the Weekly Module Assignments every time a new one is ready.

Module One **April 6-April 10: Introductions!**

Please complete the following tasks by Wednesday April 8 at noon:

1. Assigned Reading:

- Read the Syllabus and Course Handouts in Files on Canvas. Note any questions you have.
- Read *Tell it Slant*: “Preface to the Third Edition” and “Appendix I: Good Habits for Healthy Writers.”

2. Response to Assigned Reading:

Complete the Student Introduction Handout and turn in via Assignments.

3. Introductions Discussion Board:

Share something from your Student Introduction Handout, whatever you feel comfortable sharing. If you feel comfortable sharing a photo of yourself, please do! **You could also post your response as an audio or visual file**, using the menu of options on the “reply” page.

4. Sign up for a “getting to know you” video chat with Brenda and Hannah using Calendar on Canvas (see Handout *Individual Feedback Sessions* for Instructions on how to access the sign-up page)

Please complete the following tasks by Friday April 10 at 5 p.m.:

1. Small Group Discussion Board: 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 as you understand it? 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, Instagram, a blog, or on Twitter. It may have been something a family member or friend wrote in a letter or email.

Please type up a passage from this work (a paragraph or two), cite where it is from, and then answer the questions below (2 or 3 paragraphs):

- What makes this work memorable?
- What draws you to the writer's voice?
- What can you learn about the creative nonfiction genre from this piece of writing?
- If you were to emulate (base your own work on) one aspect of this piece—in either the content or the techniques used—what would it be?
- **Come up with a creative writing prompt based on this work.** (If you're not sure how to word a creative writing prompt, look through the "Try-Its" at the end of the chapters in *Tell it Slant*. These are all creative writing prompts and exercises.)
- Be as specific as possible in your response. Avoid "I like" phrases in favor of "I notice..." Try to figure out how the writer, consciously or not, makes you want to read or keep reading.

Post your response to your Small Group Discussion Board: "What Do You Already Know About Creative Nonfiction?" by Friday April 10, 5 p.m.

2. Have your first "getting to know you" video chat with Brenda and Hannah.

Brenda and Hannah will meet with you together to match names with faces and get to know you a little bit. The *Individual Feedback Sessions* handout page has instructions on how to access us via Zoom or Skype. Please come prepared to tell us a little about yourself and with any questions you have.

Module Two**April 13-17: Working with Writing Prompts and Memory**

Please complete the following tasks by Wednesday April 15 at noon.

1. Small Group Discussion Board Response-What Do You Already Know About Creative Nonfiction?

- **Read all the posts** in your small group Discussion Board, and briefly respond to each one. This can be as simple as “thank you for sharing this,” or it can delve more specifically into what you find interesting about the post. You can respond in writing or with an audio or video response.
- **Try one of the creative writing prompts** offered by your classmates on your own as practice (or you can try your own writing prompt). **Give yourself 15 minutes and write for the whole time.** (see the *Writing Down the Bones* excerpt by Natalie Goldberg in the “Readings” file on Canvas to better understand the purpose and practice of timed writing.)
- Keep this writing in a notebook or computer file dedicated to “in-class” writing. You won’t be turning this in yet, but you will be accountable for these “in-class” writings in the future. (See Handout: *In-Class Writing Guidelines*.)

2. Reading Assignments:

- Excerpt from *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg (file in “Readings” folder under Files)
- *Tell it Slant*: Chapter One: The Body of Memory.

3. Listening Assignment:

- Listen to the Lynda Barry Interview “Writing the Unthinkable” on the podcast *To The Best of Our Knowledge* (12 minutes):
<http://archive.ttbook.org/listen/60906>
- See Handout: *Lynda Barry Image Deck* for a more complete description of her writing process. You could try this process on your own, but it is not required (yet!)

4. Reading/Listening Response:

On your new **Small Group Discussion Board “Working with Writing Prompts and Memory”** please post a response that addresses the following:

- What are your main “take-aways” from *Writing Down the Bones* and from the Lynda Barry interview “Writing the Unthinkable?” (please also read/respond to

the handout *Lynda Barry Writing Prompt* to understand her writing process). Be specific. How might you use this information in your own writing process? What does Lynda Barry mean by “writing the unthinkable?” Is there anything that makes you resist this kind of process? Or what do you look forward to trying? Is this the way you already generate material or is it new for you?

- What interests you the most from Chapter One in *Tell it Slant*? What concepts are you interested in exploring further?

Please complete the following tasks by Friday, April 17 5 p.m.

1. Reading Assignment:

- “First” by Ryan Van Meter in *Tell it Slant* anthology
- “dark loud” and “milk” from *House Built on Ashes* by José Antonio Rodríguez (Canvas file--there are several excerpts in the file, but you need to read just the two specified here.)

2. Reading Response Due via Assignments (See Handout *Reading Responses* for details).

3. “In-Class” Writing: Using the Senses in Your Writing (“Imagistic Endurance”)

- On page 17 of TIS Chapter One: The Body of Memory you’ll see the “Try-It” section with several writing exercises.
- Please try your hand at Try-Its #1 and #2. Give yourself at least a half-hour of focused writing time, writing for the whole time, curious about where your writing mind will take you.

4. Small Group Discussion Board Post—“Working with Writing Prompts and Memories”

- Please share a brief summary of what you wrote for the Reading Response Assignment.
- Please share your experience of the “in-class” writing with early memories. You don’t have to share what you wrote (though you could share a few lines, if you like) but talk to us about what you noticed about the process. What senses do you normally use in your writing? Which are left out? Did anything unexpected come up in this memory? What theme or idea or emotion seemed to come through as you wrote this scene? Might you be able to follow this theme further?
- Please respond to at least two other postings in this Discussion Board. What are you learning from other people's posts?