

Creative Writing: Nonfiction

Hartwick College
ENGL 310 (3 Credits)
Spring 2019

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WF 2:30 – 3:55 pm, Clark Hall 252

Office Hours: WF 11:00 am – 12:00 pm
and by appointment

Required Texts

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. 1963. Vintage, 1993.
Boyer, Anne. *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*. Ugly Duckling, 2018.
Didion, Joan. *The White Album*. 1979. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.
Gutkind, Lee. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction—from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*. Da Capo, 2012.
Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Graywolf, 2015.
Thompson, Kara. *Blanket*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
Walsh, Joanna. *Hotel*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Recommended Materials

I highly recommend acquiring a *folder* dedicated exclusively to this course. Students may also want to set aside roughly ten dollars for printing costs if they go beyond their allotted quota.¹

Catalog Description

Practice in writing a variety of kinds of nonfictional prose. Readings in the New Journalism, study of professional writing in such periodicals as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. Does not count as a literature course. (EL)

Course Description and Purpose

Welcome to Hartwick's workshop in creative nonfiction. In this course, students will explore the genre of creative nonfiction by reading the work of published essayists and memoirists, composing essays of their own, and writing critically about contemporary creative nonfiction. Building upon work students may have already done in Introduction to Creative Writing, the primary focus of this class will be on honing students' *craft* in a workshop setting by engaging with the "nuts and bolts" of nonfiction writing, the techniques, choices, and strategies that will allow students to explore their voice. We will cover a wide range of modern essays in order to learn about and explore the formal elements necessary for successful prose composition in different genres. Students will write a memoir, an essay on their experience of culture, and an essay devoted to looking carefully, creatively, and critically at an everyday object. The course will foreground an attention to form, to the effective use of scene, voice, point of view, figurative language, information, narrative, objectivity, rhetoric, experimentation, and other formal

¹ Students who have any difficulties with printing should feel free to speak with me to work something out.

elements of nonfiction prose. This focus on *form* is geared toward giving students a better understanding of the various writers we will be reading and for helping workshop participants to explore the possibilities of the essay as a genre.

We will discuss a wide range of prose pieces by different authors. It is essential for writers to develop ways of thinking and talking critically about the work of others and to be aware of their social and cultural milieu, so students should be prepared to read a substantial amount of nonfiction concerned with contemporary issues. Readings will begin Lee Gutkind's primer on creative nonfiction and important twentieth-century essayists Joan Didion and James Baldwin; we will then look at experimental memoirs by Maggie Nelson and Anne Boyer; and we will conclude with books in the Objects Lessons Series by Joanna Walsh and Kara Thompson. Encountering the work of important modern essayists will prepare students to think about broad issues within contemporary prose art, analyze and assess other students' writing, and evaluate their own compositions. Readings will also invite students to think about the role and function of nonfiction writing at the present time. As people increasingly rely on digital platforms for both writing and reading, the digital age has seen an explosion in the quality and quantity of nonfiction prose. Given the political and economic realities of our era, this course will explore how the essay—considered as a medium capable of delivering information *and* a site for creative, critical thinking—might continue to respond to the pressing challenges facing inhabitants of the twenty-first century.

How This Course Works

The main concern of this class is *your* writing, and because of that, though we will be reading the work of established essayists, you will be asked to bring in a substantial amount of your own work. You will be expected to write three essays, each in response to a specific assignment, though you should have considerable freedom within these assignments to write about your own interests.

The primary way we will focus on your writing will be during class in a writing workshop. Some classes will be devoted to discussing the assigned reading and others to conversations about student writing. It is rare for me to deviate from a course calendar, so come ready to discuss the various texts to be covered or workshopped each day.

Workshops will be run in a traditional fashion. Each student will have around 20–25 minutes devoted to their work by the class three times during the semester. Within the next two weeks, I will hand out a workshop schedule and assign a primary reader for each student. The primary reader will be principally responsible for responding to their assigned writer's work in writing and at the beginning of the workshop. (See "Primary Reader Assignment" for more details.) Each student will also be expected to write brief comments on their peers' work.

In workshops, students will read an excerpt from their work aloud, followed by a group discussion about the piece. During workshop, the student whose work is being discussed will remain silent until the end, at which time they will be able to ask questions (note: not provide explanations). Though we will be forthright in the criticism of our peers' work, all members of the workshop should strive to make their criticism *generous* and *constructive*. Comments during workshop should aspire not only to improve the work but to better situate it within a student's larger project as a writer. Rather than nitpicking about small issues, I will always be more interested in the bigger ideas at stake and the specific matters of craft and form in a student's work, so please be aware of this and always be respectful of your peers.

Learning Outcomes

In addition to the basic skills of literary and prose analysis, students in this course will: 1) learn to identify conventional creative writing techniques; 2) learn to read as writers and use this knowledge to more successfully write and discuss creative nonfiction; and 3) learn to produce essays that demonstrate an understanding of literary and formal conventions while also articulating a personal artistic vision.

Other Course Requirements and Assignments

Texts—As this course is structured around the knowledge that becoming a strong, careful reader of creative nonfiction is essential for developing as a writer, students will be required to have read and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts for each class meeting, including the writing of your peers. This also entails that students bring the texts to class, whether the book or copies of your peers' work. Please do not let the nature of this class fool you, as students sometimes assume that little reading is involved with creative writing courses. On the contrary, this course asks students to read quite a bit and *very* carefully. Our meetings and discussions will depend upon the rigorous, intelligent, and frequent involvement of each and every participant of the class, and this involvement is simply not possible if students do not come to class prepared. All students must obtain the edition of the texts specified above. Unless individual arrangements are made with the instructor, electronic versions of the texts will not be permitted. Students should expect to read between 100 and 150 pages per week.

Portfolio—Submitted during the week of final exams, the portfolio will represent the culmination of your work throughout this semester and will make up the most significant portion of your grade. Your portfolio should include all the original essays you wrote with my comments on them and two newly revised essays. The writing in the portfolio should consist of what you feel best represents the work you did in this course. The two revised essays should display an awareness of the various issues that were discussed in class, should be thoughtfully revised based on comments provided during workshop and in written feedback, and the final drafts should be polished, finished writing. The writing submitted in your portfolio should also display a firm grasp of the conventions and craft of creative nonfiction discussed throughout the semester. More details about the expectations for your portfolio will be provided later in the semester.

Individual Essay Assignments—You will write three essays during the semester. These will not be graded, though they will be returned to you with my comments after each of your workshops. For logistical reasons, essays will not be accepted late. Failure to turn in an essay will cost a student 33% of their final portfolio grade. The due dates for essays are below and assignments will follow. All essays *must* be handed in as hard copies in class to me and to each of your peers; they must also be uploaded to D2L (that way, if you have to miss class, you will still receive credit for turning in your assignment on time and it will be available digitally to your peers). On D2L, there will be a link under “Discussion” to upload your essays.

D2L Uploads—To make it easier to find someone's writing on D2L, save all files in the following format: Last Name, First Name--Essay #. For example: Fest, Bradley--Essay 1.

Reading Responses—Throughout the semester, you will have ten Reading Responses due that discuss a passage from that day’s reading assignment and that demonstrates you have done the assigned reading. Responses will be a minimum of 250 words, will be posted on D2L, will receive full, half, or no credit, and will not be accepted late. I will drop the lowest two grades. More information is available on the “Reading Response Assignment” handout.

Responses to Your Peers’ Work—All members of the course will be responsible for writing marginal comments on their peers’ work, and must write a brief paragraph about what they thought each piece was doing well, along with their thoughts on how to improve it. Make sure to read and comment on your peers’ work prior to coming to class. Though I will not be formally checking on the comments that you provide to your peers, if it is clear that students are failing to provide comments on everyone’s work, every class, their participation grade will be negatively affected. If necessary, I will begin collecting these comments.

In addition to comments on your peers’ work, each member of this class will be a primary reader for another member of the class. Primary readers should write notes and comments on each piece of writing from this student, along with writing a 1–2-page reflection on that student’s writing each time they are workshopped. These responses will be collected for credit. Please consult the handout, “Primary Reader Assignment,” for further details.

Participation—As we will frequently be engaged with critically reading texts and discussing each other’s work, a crucial part of this class is student participation. Though I will occasionally lecture, the class is conceived as a collective inquiry into the subject matter and class time will primarily be based around discussions that privilege students’ thinking and writing. I am quite excited to delve into the material, as it is both challenging and, in all honesty, quite fun. But this class will be a two-way street and will require the input of all its participants. I know that some students may be more vocal than others, but if I see a student consistently attempting to add to the discussion, I will take this into consideration. I have a habit of a rambling a bit, so please help me with this by asking questions of me if you are unclear. Asking questions can be an excellent way of participating. Since this class will rely heavily on student participation, your attendance is a necessity. *More than three absences will negatively affect your overall grade and can be grounds for failure, in which case you may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances.*

Grading

Participation: 20%

Primary Reader Responses: 5%

Reading Responses (10 total): 25%

Portfolio: 50%

Classroom Etiquette

To ensure a positive learning environment for all participants, and to ensure that everyone's work is given the respectful and thoughtful attention it deserves, students should adhere to the following guidelines for classroom etiquette. Failure to do so may result in being marked absent or in penalties applied to a student's overall grade.

Texts—Students who do not have their text in class, including their peers' writing for workshop, will be marked absent (whether I draw attention to it or not).

Lateness—I often give crucial information and reminders about the course at the beginning of class, so being late is not only disruptive but means that students may miss information that is important to their success. Any student who is more than five minutes late will be marked absent.

Notes—Students are expected to take notes during class meetings and should have the materials to do so every day. After nearly fifteen years of teaching, I have found that students who take notes in class perform better than students who do not. A student who fails to have a pen or pencil and notebook out for each class meeting—and most importantly, fails to visibly be taking notes when appropriate—will result in an absence (whether I draw attention to it or not).

Laptops, Phones, Tablets—Anyone observed using their mobile phone or another digital device during class, whether I draw attention to it or not, will be marked absent for the day.² Phones will not be tolerated in this class, and the use of laptops or tablets in this course will not be permitted unless special arrangements are made with the instructor.

Leaving Class—Ideally, students will not have to leave class, but as a variety of things may necessitate leaving class, students should feel free to get up and leave without my permission as long as they do so quietly and unobtrusively. If, however, individual students make a habit of leaving and returning during class time, I will have to have a conversation with that student about disrupting class. If students continue leaving frequently after this conversation, they will be marked absent each time they leave regardless of circumstance (whether I call attention to it or not). If a student has any issue that would cause them to need to get up frequently, please talk with the instructor in the first weeks of class or at any time during the semester.

Preparation—A key part of this class involves reading the work of your peers. If it is clear that you have not done the reading or have not read your peers' work in order to be prepared for workshop, you will be marked absent (whether I call attention to it or not).

Respect—Sharing your work with others can be often be a bit intimidating, so I urge all class members to be generous, respectful, constructive, and kind to your peers, even when critiquing their work.

² On how students more fully retain information if notes are taken by hand rather than on a computer, see Meyer, Robinson. "To Remember a Lecture Better, Take Notes by Hand." *Atlantic*, 1 May 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/05/to-remember-a-lecture-better-take-notes-by-hand/361478/>.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism is a serious and intellectually inexcusable offense, and it will simply not be tolerated. It will result in an immediate zero for the assignment and I will file a formal charge with the Office of Academic Affairs; plagiarism could also result in more serious action, including a student failing the class completely and being suspended from the College. *Plagiarism includes: lack of proper citations when quoting from someone else's work, representing someone else's work as your own, and knowingly allowing one's work to be submitted by someone else.* This should ultimately be a fun and stimulating class, and there is absolutely no reason for you not to take advantage of being able to do your own work and discuss it in an academic environment. Violations of Hartwick's Academic Honesty policy are not limited to plagiarism—for example, cheating and submitting a paper to more than one class would constitute violations—so students should familiarize themselves with Hartwick College's policy on academic honesty at: <https://www.hartwick.edu/academics/student-services/academic-affairs/academic-policies/>.

Academic Adjustments and/or Modifications

Students must present me with an updated Academic Plan Letter for the Spring 2019 semester in order to be eligible for academic adjustments. Hartwick College is committed to upholding and maintaining all aspects of the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. If a student with a disability wishes to request academic adjustments, they should contact Lara Sanford, Director of AccessAbility Services, at sanfordl@hartwick.edu or AccessAbilityServices@hartwic.edu. AccessAbility Services is located on the fifth floor of Yager Library in the Center for Student Success. Any information regarding a student's disability will remain confidential. Requests for academic adjustments should be made as early as possible.

The Writing Center

Located in Clark Hall 230, the Writing Center offers events, courses, and one-on-one tutorials for students. Tutors can help you with your writing for classes or any writing project, and can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a tutor once or regularly over the course of the semester; the Writing Center will also respond to queries via email. In some cases, I may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can seek assistance on your own. Their services are free. You can browse the services at <https://www.hartwick.edu/academics/student-services/writing-center/>, or make an appointment by emailing wcenter@hartwick.edu or calling (607) 431-4910.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a College e-mail address (username@hartwick.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the College for official communication with students. I will also communicate with students via their hartwick.edu address. Students are expected to regularly read e-mail sent to this account. Failure to read and react to communications from either the College or from me in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to communications sent to their Hartwick e-mail address.

Special Assistance

Hartwick offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties. The Counseling Center is located in the Perrella Health Center and offers psychological services and sexual assault services. Appointments can be made Monday to Friday, 9 am – 5 pm, by calling 607-431-4420 or emailing counselingcenter@hartwick.edu.

Mandatory Reporting

Faculty at Hartwick College are considered *responsible employees* and are legally required to report to Hartwick's Title IX Coordinator, Traci Perrin (607-431-4293; perrint@hartwick.edu), incidents of sexual harassment or violence that they witness or are advised have occurred. Exceptions to this requirement include when incidents of sexual violence are communicated by a student during a classroom discussion, in a writing assignment for a class, or as part of a university-approved research project. For more information, visit: <https://www.hartwick.edu/about-us/employment/human-resources/title-ix/>.

Statement on Classroom Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion, or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

Calendar³

- 2.6 Syllabus
Introductions
- 2.8 **Reading Response 1 Due to D2L**
Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (pp. 3–31, 35–37, 55–77)
Lee Gutkind, “Difficult Decisions,” in *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (pp. 140–49)
- 2.13 **Reading Response 2 Due to D2L**
Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (pp. 83–134)
Lauren Slater, “Three Spheres,” in *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (pp. 151–67)
- 2.15 **Reading Response 3 Due to D2L**
Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (pp. 186–203, 218–25, 230–45)
Eve Joseph, “Yellow Taxi,” in *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (pp. 169–82)
Rebecca Skloot, “Fixing Nemo,” in *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (pp. 206–15)
- 2.20 **Reading Response 4 Due to D2L**
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (pp. 1–53)
- 2.22 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (pp. 54–106)
- 2.27 **Reading Response 5 Due to D2L**
Joan Didion, *The White Album* (pp. 11–78)
- 3.1 Joan Didion, *The White Album* (pp. 79–152)
- 3.6 **Essay 1 Due: Experience/Culture**
Joan Didion, *The White Album* (pp. 153–222)
- 3.8 Workshop
- 3.13 Workshop
- 3.15 Workshop
- 3.20 **Reading Response 6 Due to D2L**
Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (pp. 1–76)
- 3.22 **Reading Response 7 Due to D2L**
Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (pp. 77–143)
- 3.27 No Class, Spring Break
- 3.30 No Class, Spring Break
- 4.3 **Reading Response 8 Due to D2L**
Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (pp. 9–77)
- 4.5 Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (pp. 79–160)

³ Please note that additional readings or handouts may be assigned when appropriate and that the schedule is subject to change. For ease with citation, bibliographic endnotes to the readings available on D2L (anything with an endnote rather than page numbers) have been provided below in MLA style.

- 4.10 **Essay 2 Due: Memoir/Lyric Essay**
Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (pp. 161–234)
- 4.12 Workshop
- 4.17 Workshop
- 4.19 Workshop
- 4.24 **Reading Response 9 Due to D2L**
Joanna Walsh, *Hotel* (pp. 1–157)
- 4.26 **Reading Response 10 Due to D2L**
Kara Thompson, *Blanket* (pp. xiii–132)
- 5.1 **Essay 3 Due: Object**
Continue the Discussion of Kara Thompson’s *Blanket* and Joanna Walsh’s *Hotel*—make sure to bring both books to class.
- 5.3 Workshop
- 5.8 Workshop
- 5.10 Workshop
- 5.16 **12:00 – 2:00 pm | Final Portfolios Due and Class Wrap-Up: Group Reading**