

Engl 309-001: Introduction to Nonfiction Writing Spring, 2003

Professor: Byron Hawk
Email: bhawk@gmu.edu
Time: MW 300PM-415PM
Place: Rob B103

Texts:

Required:

Bloom, Lynn. *Fact and Artifact: Writing Nonfiction*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994.

Minot, Stephen. *Literary Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre*. NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.

Evans, Harold, ed. *The Best American Magazine Writing 2001*. NY: Public Affairs, 2001.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed: on (not) getting by in America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

Recommended:

Loughery, John, ed. *The Eloquent Essay: An Anthology of Classic and Creative Nonfiction*. NY: Persea Books, 2000.

Course Description:

Introduction to Nonfiction Writing begins the sequence of 300, 400, and 500 level courses in the English major for students interested in nonfiction prose writing. At issue will be the nature of nonfiction writing—just what is it and what are its characteristics? In order to develop initial answers this question, we will read about writing and use the ideas that we find there to examine various forms of nonfiction that we will read. The class will also focus on reading works as examples of these types of writing and generalizing models of writing from these examples. You will then be asked to turn what you learn through these investigations toward your own production of these genres.

Nonfiction's primary distinguishing rhetorical feature is the purpose of giving an accurate account of an event, a realistic perspective on the world, or an ethical/persuasive depiction of a current situation. The overarching term "nonfiction"—or, writing that deals with perceptions, people, and events that are "not made up" by the writer—means that the writer strives for a truthful account as the writer sees/understands it. The problem, of course, is that every account of an event or issue comes from some perspective, set of assumptions or values, or ideological predisposition. Even in news reporting the author's/reporter's biases can appear simply in the decision to cover one person over another or to pull one quote instead of another. Yes, our reporting may be an accurate depiction of what this person said, but by choosing to quote this person as opposed to another means that his/her ideological position is put forward while another's is repressed. In short, the writer and reader of nonfiction share the tacit expectation that the work strives for accuracy, even if the product will inevitably fall short of this goal and even though humans are always limited in what they can know. As many rhetoricians of the past

knew, the probabilistic nature of truth requires writers to establish themselves as credible, fair, and ethical in their constructions of persons, places, and events. This is what the nonfiction writer should strive for.

Because this basic concept of nonfiction can apply to a wide range of texts, from technical/scientific reports to short newspaper pieces to extended academic arguments, the focus of this course will be narrowed to writing for a general audience. The venue of publication should be conceived as a magazine or newspaper. While the course is not a course in journalism, it is a course that asks the writer to assume a journalistic audience. The particular genres under consideration (personal essay/memoir, critical review, reflective essay, and feature article or biographical profile) are found in typical journalistic venues but the approach we will take to each is one that will recognize the writer's role and language's mediation of the world.

This class will operate on a workshop format: there will be no lectures, lots of in class writing, and lots of peer/group work. Students will be expected to be responsible for completing work, staying on time and up to date on all work, and especially for participating in class peer reviews and discussions.

Assignments:

Your grade this semester will be based primarily on four main writing assignments (personal essay/memoir, critical review, reflective essay, and feature article or biographical profile), three portfolios due at the end of the semester, and class participation. Participation includes attendance, in class discussion, in class writing, and peer reviewing.

Four writing projects:

1. Personal essay/memoir - This essay should link the personal to the social, making an experience relevant to a larger audience by connecting it to larger social concerns. Your primary source will be individual experience. (1000 words)
2. Criticism/review - This essay will be an extended review of some (pop) cultural event: live or recorded music, film, performance, book, etc. Your goal will be to describe and evaluate the event (use theory/criteria and apply it to the particular event). Your primary source will be "textual" in the broadest sense. (1500 words) [I may accept three 500 word reviews or two 750 word reviews, but they will have to be very detailed and specific. Shorter may actually be harder.]
3. Reflective essay - This essay should be a "philosophical" reflection on an element of life in the tradition of Montaigne, Coleridge, and Borges. While the work of these writers varies, their nonfiction writing reflects on social, theoretical, and literary issues and links personal, social, historical, and theoretical texts. Your primary sources will be individual experience and textual evidence. (1500 words)
4. Feature article or biographical profile - This essay should be approached as if you were writing to submit to a magazine or newspaper. The feature should be an analysis of a subculture, an issue, a person: it can be a feature article, a biographical sketch, a historical report, an essay on place. Use Ehrenreich as one of your primary models. Your primary sources will come from research: experiential, textual, and/or oral (in the form of interviews). (2500 words)

Three portfolio projects:

1. Reading portfolio - collect articles that are examples of the types of things you will write, keep a reading log/journal of notes on those readings as well as the readings that will be assigned in class. At least 10 outside articles (2 each for first three essays, 4 for the last feature).
2. Working Portfolio - this portfolio should contain all ungraded writing, notes, drafts, in class writing, idea journal/log (jot stuff down as it comes to you) etc. As you write over the semester, throw it into a folder. Be sure to date all material.
3. Writing portfolio - this portfolio should contain the final versions of your four projects and a short cover essay reflecting on the writing you have done over the semester.

*For the reading log and idea journal you may use a basic writing pad for each or simply keep word files. Just date entries as you make them throughout the semester. I'll be looking for at least 20 entries each.

Grades:

The first three writing projects will be turned in on certain dates and will receive a number grade from 1-5 along with my comments. You will be expected to revise these three projects and send them in with your final writing portfolio and final writing project. I will assign a letter grade on the final versions submitted for the portfolio. The average will make up the Writing Portfolio grade.

Participation	10 %
Drafts of first three projects	20 %
Reading Portfolio	15 %
Working Portfolio	15 %
Writing Portfolio	40 %

	100 %

For a final grade, students will receive an A+ (4.0), A (4.0), A- (3.67), B+ (3.33), B (3.0), B- (2.67), C+ (2.33), C (2.0), C- (1.67) D (1.0), or F (0.0).

Rewrite Policy:

Essentially, you will be expected to revise the first three essays. You should have time to revise them all after I've given them back with comments. My recommendation is to revise them quickly to get it done and out of the way. I will ask you to turn in the versions with my commentary in your working portfolio. I will look to see that revisions have been made. You obviously won't be revising the final essay.

Late Papers:

Since the bulk of your grade will come from final portfolios, the issue of late papers doesn't fully apply. You will be graded on turning in initial versions of the first three essays, however. Turning these in late will give you a lower grade and give you less time to revise them. I will periodically ask to check your reading logs and idea journals and give you participation grades for keeping them up. Whatever you do, don't get behind on them. This course expects a certain amount of responsibility on your part. Don't leave yourself desperate to finish everything at the end of the semester.

Attendance:

Because everything we discuss builds on previous class periods and the class relies heavily on regular in-class writing and group-work, attendance is extremely important. Consequently, attendance will count as a part of your participation grade. If you stop coming to class, it will be your responsibility to drop. Failure to do so will result in an 'F'.

Office Hours:

I will have office hours in RobA 405D, from 4:30 to 7:00 MW. Simply put, if you need to speak with me, catch me after class. If you need to speak to me and cannot make these times, then ask me to schedule a time that is convenient for both of us. I also check my e-mail several times daily, so this will be the best way to contact me in a hurry if you have a question or problem, especially about what is due the next day. The only other option is to call and leave a message, but I will not receive it immediately. Telephone: 703-993-3174

Specific Needs:

If you require accommodation based on a disability, I would like to meet with you privately after class on the first or second day to be sure you are properly accommodated. If you need a faculty contact sheet, call the Disability Resource Center at 703-993-2474.

Syllabus:

This is a tentative schedule by week and day, for assignments, readings, and activities. Tentative means I can vary it as much as seems appropriate. However, plan on sticking very close to this outline especially on major due dates. I will post all revisions/additions of/to the syllabus on this web page. The updated web version (<http://classweb.gmu.edu/bhawk/309/syllabus.html>) will always override the printable PDF version.

Week 1: Introductions

W Jan 22 – Introductions: homework—read FA Ch. 1, LN 1-4

Week 2:

M 27 – What is Nonfiction? In class writing, discussion: homework—read FA Ch. 2, LN 5-8

W 29 – Style. In class writing, discussion: homework— read LN 9, 10

Week 3: Personal Experience/Memoir

M Feb 3 – Personal experience; In class writing, discussion: homework-read FA Ch. 3

W 5 – In class writing/draft; discuss revision: homework-draft of personal/memoir

Week 4:

M 10 – peer review/workshop

W 12 – peer review/workshop

Week 5: Criticism/Review

M 17 – PM due; In class writing: homework-read FA Ch.6, LN 13

W 19 – Argument/criticism; In class writing, discussion: homework-read BAMW, Gold (414), Tartt (431), Wolcott (446)

Week 6:

M 24 – In class writing, discussion: homework-collect critical examples, bring to class W

W 26 – discussion what you see in examples: homework-start draft of Criticism

Week 7:

M Mar 3 – peer review Criticism

W 5 – peer review Criticism

(Spring Break gives you time to review a new object if you wish. The following movie is encouraged but obviously not required.)

• **March 6th (Thur)(date still tentative): Film Screening: *Real Women Have Curves*.** A popular contemporary movie directed by Patricia Cardoso that features working women as central characters. See *Real Women Have Curves* for more information. **Time TBA, Johnson Center Cinema.**

Spring Recess March 9 - 16

Week 8: Reflective Essay

M 17 – Criticism due: in class writing, discussion: homework-read FA Ch.5, LN 14, 15

W 19 – March 19-22 CCCC

Week 9:

M 24 – In class writing, discussion: homework-read BAMW, Vaughn (36), Fadiman (228), Montaigne, (Coleridge, Borges?)

W 26 – In class writing, discussion: homework-read Ehrenreich (first half)

Week 10:

M 31 – In class writing, discussion: homework-draft of reflection paper

W Apr 2 – peer review Reflection: homework-draft of reflection paper

- April 3rd (Thur): Lecture: Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, author of *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Worker Women Take on The Global Factory*. Louie has devoted over three decades to empowering Women of Color, immigrant women workers, and grassroots Asian communities. Time and location TBA.

Week 11:

M 7 – peer review Reflection: homework-read Ehrenreich (second half)

W 9 – In class writing, discussion: homework-finish reflection paper

- **April 9th (Wed): Multi-Disciplinary Panel Discussion on *Nickel and Dimed*** featuring Peter Boettke (Economics), Mike O' Malley (History), Mark Jacobs (Sociology), Julie Mahler (Public and International Affairs), Barbara Melosh (English) and Claire Snyder (Public and International Affairs). **5:55-7:10, Lecture Hall One.**

Week 12: Final Project/Feature

M 14 – RE due; in class writing: homework—read FA Ch 4, LN 11, 12

W 16 – In class writing, discussion: homework—read FA Ch 10, LN 16

Week 13:

M 21 – In class writing, discussion: homework—write feature proposal

W 23 – In class pitch, discussion: homework—read BAMW Ehrlich (2), Kurson (84), Wallace (106)

Week 14:

M 28 – In class writing, discussion: homework—read BAMW Malan (50), Gilbert (294), Bartlett/Steele (350)

W 30 – In class writing, discussion: homework—read FA Ch. 11

Week 15:

M May 5 – group teacher conferences on final papers (final pitch?)

Week 16: Finals Week, Turn in Portfolios

May 7 - 15