

Introduction to Creative Nonfiction  
ENGL S410  
Summer 2024  
Monday, Friday 9:00 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.  
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Students in this course will learn the craft of writing features, essays, and profiles while maintaining the highest standards of journalistic ethics. They will study the mechanics of non-fiction writing and develop skills in critical thinking. Through close readings of reportage, they will acquire a deeper understanding of narrative structure.

#### Skills Learned

Students will acquire reporting and writing skills for a variety of forms, grappling with real-life, ethical questions throughout the course. They will leave this class with a better understanding of the role of media in a democratic society, as well as with a foundation in the skills needed for the craft of writing non-fiction.

#### Class Discussion

Students are invited to participate in the seminar by asking questions and joining in the conversation and by listening carefully and responding to others. For this reason, electronic devices are allowed in class only in special circumstances, with prior approval from me. All perspectives are respected in the classroom, and lively participation, as shown through informed comments and in other thoughtful ways, is encouraged. Class participation is worth 15 percent of a student's grade.

#### Ethical Code

Academic integrity is a core university value that ensures respect for the academic reputation of the University, its students, faculty, and staff, and the degrees it confers. The University expects that students will conduct themselves in an honest and ethical manner and respect the intellectual work of others. Please ask about my expectations regarding permissible or encouraged forms of student collaboration if they are unclear. Late work is accepted only when students have my permission before the due date, and the late assignments will still be marked down, unless there are extraordinary circumstances such as family emergencies or illness. Students are expected to attend class. Absences must be approved in advance, and the students are responsible for making up missed work.

#### Course Design

I am committed to creating a course that is inclusive in its design. If you encounter barriers, please let me know immediately so that I can determine if there is a design adjustment that can be made or if an accommodation might be needed to overcome the limitations of the design. I am always happy to consider creative solutions. Students are also invited to contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) to begin this conversation or to establish accommodations for this or other courses. I welcome feedback that will assist me in improving the usability and experience for all students.

## Diversity

The intellectual environment of a classroom is made richer and more meaningful through diversity in different ways, such as ethnicity, race, gender identity, religion, and class, and students are expected to demonstrate their commitment to the representation of groups historically excluded in all discussions and coursework. Students are expected to reflect these values in their discussions, as well as through a collegial atmosphere in the classroom.

## Office Conferences

Student will meet individually with me on a regular basis to discuss projects.

## Assignments

### One

The Pitch: a memo that proposes an idea for a profile, showing how it will be tackled. Length: 250 words. Due first week of class. Worth 10 percent of your grade.

### Two

Profile about a public figure and their role in politics, film, history, or another realm. Length: 750 words. Due second week of class. Worth 15 percent of your grade.

### Three

Essay with a thesis statement, supported by facts, and rendered with excellent grammar and punctuation. Due third week of class. Length: 750 words. Worth 15 percent of your grade.

### Four

Feature Outline: an overview of the article with its key points, supporting data, and sources. Length: 350 words. Due fourth week of class. Worth 15 percent of your grade.

### Five

Feature with two or more original interviews, triple-checked facts, and with a strong sense of place. Length: 1,100 words. Due fifth week of class. Worth 30 percent of the your grade.

Assignment number	Title/Brief Description	Percentage	Approximate week due
One	The Pitch (proposal for a profile)	10	First week of class.
Two	Profile of an individual	15	Second week of class.
Three	Essay with thesis, reported facts	15	Third week of class.
Four	Outline of feature article	15	Fourth week of class.
Five	Feature article with original reporting	30	Fifth week of class.

Notes: Some items in the syllabus might change, depending upon current events and other factors. The course may cover sensitive material (natural disasters, violent crime, and terrorism).

Topics for each week of the course:

First Class Meeting: Introduction

This class will provide an overview of the skills students will develop during the course -- reporting, interviewing, verifying facts, and the mechanics of writing articles and essays.

Reading: Amanda Gefter, "Modern Love: 'The Night Girl Finds a Day Boy.'" *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2016. As read by Logan Browning ("Dear White People").

Second Class Meeting: Field Work

Students will learn how to become observers in the field, capturing atmospheric elements used to create scenes and build a narrative. They will learn how to take notes and find telling details.

Reading: Raffi Khatchadourian, "Matthew Wong's Life in Light and Shadow: How a self-taught artist became one of the most celebrated painters of his generation." *New Yorker*, May 9, 2022.

Third Class Meeting: The Interview<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

Students will plan for an interview, compiling lists of questions, planning for follow-up queries, and discussing challenges faced by journalists while working in the field. Reading: Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, "A Most American Terrorist." *GQ*, August 21, 2017.

Fourth Class Meeting: The Empathy Test

Students will examine various issues, ethical, moral and practical, of writing profiles about individuals who are controversial public figures and providing context for their stories.

Reading: Tara McKelvey, "Lynndie England: A Soldier's Tale." *Marie Claire*, May 18, 2009.

Fifth Class Meeting: Setting the Scene

Students will learn different methods of describing a backdrop for a character sketch and other kinds of articles, analyzing ways that a sense of place can help shed light on a subject. Reading: Sean Cole, "The Feather Heist: A flute player breaks into a British museum and makes off with a million dollars worth of dead birds." *This American Life*, August 10, 2018.

Sixth Class Meeting: Point of Views<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

Students will explore techniques for ensuring that a variety of perspectives are included in their work, and that their stories reflect the diversity of the community around them. Guest speaker: Shefali Kulkarni, editor, digital storytelling, *New York Times*.

Seventh Class Meeting: Research<sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

Students will examine ways of doing research in an efficient manner, using timelines, mapping out goals and defining (and redefining) their theses throughout the writing process. Reading: Joshua Hunt, "How I Became a Pathological Liar." *New York Times*, July 13, 2022.

Eighth Class Meeting: Constructing a Story

Students will explore different approaches to the writing of fact-based articles, examining the structure of a three-act drama, as well studying the chronological organization of reported pieces. Reading: Xochitl Gonzalez, “M.F.A. vs. GPT: How to push the art of writing out of a computer’s reach.” *The Atlantic*, August 24, 2023.

Ninth Class Meeting: The Art of Revision

Students will learn techniques for shaping and improving nonfiction writing, developing skills needed to edit their own work as well as the work of others. Reading: Michael Forsythe, “A Voice From China’s Uighur Homeland, Reporting From the U.S.” *New York Times*, July 31, 2015.

Tenth Class Meeting: Presentations.

Students will present their work in class, discussing their process for reporting and writing.