

# English 355 – Nonfiction Writing I

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## Course Description

The English word “essay” finds its root in the French word *essai*, meaning “to make a trial of something, the way one assays an ore to determine its value. The term suggests an experiment, a testing, a weighing out.” It is through this effort to understand that the genre of creative nonfiction emerged. While creative nonfiction shares traits with other literary genres (i.e. scenes, dialogue, setting, characterizations, symbols, themes, etc.), those who write it define their work along a distinct set of goals; it is an intimate genre, bringing readers into the most personal crevices of an author’s life, building connections and community as it chips away at shame and isolation. It is a genre that reaches out, seeking to make some sense of our chaotic world.

This course invites you to explore and participate in the craft of creative nonfiction as you compose original pieces and respond regularly to your peers’ work through written critiques and oral feedback. To accommodate the balance between reading and composition, our class sessions will alternate between reading discussions and workshops. Throughout the semester, we will engage a range of nonfiction subgenres (e.g. memoir, lyric essay, personal essay, and literary journalism). The class will also consider some of the driving debates currently surrounding the genre (i.e. the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, the so-called “memoir-craze,” and ethical obligations of the genre, to name a few). Come to class prepared to keep up with a demanding reading and writing load, a willingness to give and receive feedback, and an inclination to engage critically with this unique genre.

## Required Texts (always bring copies to class, whether hard-copy or electronic)

- *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: Work from 1970 to the Present*. Martone and Williford, eds. Simon and Schuster 2007.
- PDFs and links will also be posted to Blackboard

## Other Requirements

- A notebook/writing utensil for in-class writing
- When you have questions about the mechanics of your writing, I recommend the following:
  - The Owl @ Purdue: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl>
  - KU Writing Center: <http://writing.ku.edu>

## Ways to Succeed In This Class

- Full engagement in all discussions/workshops – be present, physically and mentally
  - Because the productivity of our time together depends on your engagement/interaction/discussion, it’s very important to attend class and to come prepared. This means before you arrive to class you will have

1) read, 2) commented on the student stories we will be discussing that day, as well as 3) closely read/annotated all other assigned readings. *Come prepared to share your thoughts and questions!*

- Quality of the work and improvement across the semester
  - Remember this is a writing class: you will be evaluated on your ability to articulate clearly and thoughtfully
  - This may be the first experience many of you have writing creative nonfiction. You will be given many opportunities to write, reflect, and revise – if you remain engaged in the writing/workshopping process, your work will improve as you hone your craft.
- Turning in all required work on time
  - Unlike most classes, a workshop depends on *your* timely submission of work. Your peers need enough time to read and respond to your work before class. Because of this, assignments submitted late lose considerable points. In other words, keep up with the schedule – you don't want to be the person losing points (and pissing off your peers) just for late submissions!

### **Final Grade Breakdown**

Leading Class Discussion: 10%

Participation (discussion, etc.): 15%

Workshop Letters (for each workshop piece): 15%

Essay #1 (including reflection essay): 20%

Essay #2 (including reflection essay): 20%

Revision Essay (including reflection essay): 20%

*\* Fifty percent of each essay grade is comprised of the accompanying 750 – 1000 Reflection Essay, discussed below.*

CAL defines grades as follows: A = outstanding quality, B= high quality, C= acceptable quality, D= minimally passing, F= failing. You will be graded on a +/- scale, approved by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to describe intermediate levels of performance between a maximum of A and a minimum of F. Intermediate grades represented by plus or minus shall be calculated as .3 units above or below the corresponding letter grade.

### **Late Work and Attendance**

You must post your workshop pieces and workshop letters on Blackboard by the deadlines listed (details on pages 3).

**Make sure to check with me well before the due date if you don't understand how to post your work and/or comments to BB; I will not accept "technological problems" as an excuse for late work or not reading/workshopping the stories. If you don't turn in an essay on time, a penalty of one letter grade will be deducted for each day it is late. If you do not write your workshop letters before the essay is workshopped, you will lose the chance to earn these points (in other words, there is no "make-up" opportunity for workshop letters).**

Although rare, extenuating circumstances do come up. Please see me **well ahead of the due date** if you're having a problem or if you're missing class because of a university sanctioned event (if you're on the football team, for example).

**Specific attendance policy: Your final grade will drop by 1/2 of a letter grade for each absence after three. You are still responsible for submitting comments for any workshop missed. Anything else missed during class cannot be made up.**

### **Our Classroom Environment:**

Writing and sharing any piece of writing is a vulnerable experience; this is especially true when the writing engages our own lives/thoughts/feelings/experiences. In addition, we will be reading published work that engages sensitive, controversial, and potentially triggering material. In the midst of this, our classroom space will be defined by unwavering respect and care for each other. This does not mean that our discussions will be hollow and void of emotion/opinion, nor does it suggest that our workshops will fill with empty compliments intended to bolster our egos. Hollow praise and dismissive critiques are *equally* useless. Instead, we will keep our minds open. We will submit our essays knowing that

they are unfinished and imperfect. We will talk about the pieces of writing, not the individual writers. We will share our impressions and questions, giving the writer final ownership of the piece and what they want it to become. *The success of this workshop depends on the environment we create together; challenge, inspire, and support each other.*

## Workshop Procedures

### When Workshopping the Work of Your Peers

- As we workshop a piece in class, **you must have a copy of it in front of you** (either in hard-copy or electronic form).
- Read each essay thoroughly at least once before you begin making marginal comments.
- Write (or type, using the “comment” function in Word under “Review”) comments in the margins of the essays. These comments serve two purposes: they help you remember what you want to discuss during the workshop, and they provide your peers a glimpse of what you experienced/thought as you read their essays, highlighting areas that are working well or that need attention. Once workshop is complete, you can give the author a copy of the draft with comments (again, either hard-copy, or emailed electronically).
- Write a (minimum 350 word) letter to each writer being workshopped. If we’re workshopping 2 people that day, you will post letters for 2 writers. If we’re workshopping 3 people, you’ll post letters for all 3 writers. You will post these as a reply to their Discussion Board thread that contains their piece. I will be looking for *specific* and *clear* feedback on what is already working well and what might be improved in the piece. (Phrases to avoid: “It really flowed.” “I liked it/ didn’t like it, and I can’t say why.” The letters will offer useful, supportive feedback for the writer to consider during revision and ***must be posted before class time on the day of their workshop.***
- Come to workshop ready to thoughtfully and constructively contribute to discussion about each piece. Involvement in the workshop discussion is essential and required, and I expect to hear from each voice at the table.

*\*I will give you 2 handouts - one with suggestions for things you should focus on when writing workshop letters/marginal comments and one on how to conduct yourself during workshops. Sometimes it’s hard to get started, but these suggestions should be a good start.*

### When We Workshop Your Work

- Submit your piece as a thread on our Blackboard Discussion Board by the due date **(All essays are due Sunday by 5pm if your piece is scheduled to be workshopped the following week).**
- REFLECTION ESSAYS: In addition to turning in your story by the deadline, each story must be accompanied by a 750 – 1000 word reflection in which you discuss your writing process for the story. For example, you could include how you got started writing the story, where your ideas came from, how you put the story together, how you presented the characters, the setting, the conflict, the form, the dialogue, the tone, etc. What stories were your inspiration? Where did you get stuck? Where did you feel confident? What was the most challenging part of writing this piece? What did this piece reveal to you about yourself as a writer, and what do you want to prioritize in your writing as you move forward? Use this space to share any relevant author-insights about the work you just submitted.
- Come prepared to receive constructive feedback on your work

### **Other notes about work for this class**

- All writing for this class should be new. In other words, don’t turn in a piece you have already workshopped in another class. Not only is this plagiarism, but it is disrespectful to your peers and the time they spend reviewing and commenting on your work.
- All three required essays should be no less than 6 and no more than 15 double-spaced pages long. Anything in between those page lengths is fine.

- **A note on privacy:** The Vegas Rule applies in our class – what happens here stays here. Students will likely be writing about personal, sensitive subjects, so we will keep all discussion of those in the classroom. Don't discuss peers' work with your roommate, girlfriend or boyfriend, best friend, mom – not with anyone.

### **Communication**

Check your KU email and/or our Blackboard site daily as this will be our source of communication outside of class. Blackboard announcements automatically send to your KU email.

### **Office Hours**

Use them! My office hours are for your benefit, and I am happy to meet with you and talk about your writing at any stage in the process. Just make sure to come with specific questions so we can use our time efficiently. In addition, let me know if you have other commitments that conflict with my regular office hours, and we can schedule an appointment. Please do note that having a conversation with me about your writing does not guarantee that you will receive a high grade. Use my feedback as you see fit and know that you are ultimately responsible for the quality of your own writing.

### **Email**

I will respond to e-mail in a reasonable time, but be aware that I keep different hours than the average college student, so if you send an email after 9pm before class the next day, I will probably not see it until after class. Questions by email should be short and require short answers. I will not conduct lengthy conversations over email; please come see me during office hours or by appointment for longer conversations. And definitely check the syllabus/handouts *first* to see if I have already addressed your question through those.

## **Departmental Policies**

### **Prerequisites** (from University timetable)

Admission to English courses numbered 300 and above is limited to students who have completed the KU Core Written Communication requirement.

**Recommended:** *Prior completion of one 200-level English course.*

### **KU Core**

English 355 satisfies Goal 6, Learning Outcome 1.

*Upon reaching this goal, students will be able to analyze and combine information from different areas within or across disciplines to approach and explain existing questions and problems from new perspectives, to pose new questions, and to generate new ideas.*

### **Enrollment** (from University timetable)

Students may neither add nor change sections in any English course after **Monday, January 25** without departmental permission. For courses numbered above 200, instructor's permission is required to add or change sections. The last day to petition to add classes is **Monday, February 8**. The Department of English reserves the right to terminate administratively the enrollment of any student who misses two consecutive class meetings during the first two weeks of the semester. Should an emergency situation cause the student to miss two consecutive class meetings, the student should contact the instructor(s) or the English Department, 864-4520, immediately. Students who decide to drop English classes should do so promptly so that other students may enroll in the class. The last day to withdraw from classes under any circumstances is **Monday, April 18**.

### **Plagiarism**

Stealing and passing off as your own someone else's ideas or words, or using information from another's work without crediting the source, is called "plagiarism." Some specific examples of actions that constitute plagiarism include pasting together uncredited information or ideas from the Internet or published sources, submitting an entire paper written by someone else, submitting a paper written for another class (and thus not original work), and copying another student's work (even with the student's permission). In order to avoid unintentional plagiarism and to represent your work honestly, you will need to be meticulous about giving credit to any and all sources, whether directly quoted (even a few words) or paraphrased.

Because one of the goals of this course is to help you improve your writing, plagiarism hurts you as much as it does anyone. If you plagiarize another’s work, you will not be receiving the needed feedback to improve your own writing. There will be a zero tolerance policy for any type of plagiarism in this class. All incidents of plagiarism will be penalized, reported, and kept on file in the English Department, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and the University Provost’s Office.

**Writing Help**

For help with your writing, I strongly encourage you to contact the KU Writing Center. At the Writing Center you can talk about your writing with trained tutors or consult reference materials in a comfortable working environment. You may ask for feedback on your papers, advice and tips on writing (for all your courses), or for guidance on special writing tasks. Please check the website at <http://www.writing.ku.edu/students/> for current locations and hours. The Writing Center welcomes both drop-ins and appointments, and there is no charge for their services. For more information, please call (785) 864-2399 or send an e-mail to [writing@ku.edu](mailto:writing@ku.edu). The website is loaded with helpful information about writing of all sorts, so even if you consider yourself a good writer, check it out!

**Disabilities**

The Academic Achievement & Access Center (AAAC) coordinates accommodations and services for all KU students who are eligible. If you have a disability for which you wish to request accommodations and have not contacted the AAAC, please do so as soon as possible. Their office is located in 22 Strong Hall; their phone number is 785-864-4064 (V/TTY). Information about their services can be found at <http://disability.ku.edu>. Please contact me privately in regard to your needs in this course.

**Drop Policy**

If you are having trouble succeeding in the course, it is especially important that you consult with me so that we can develop a plan of action that may enable you to complete the course. If you decide to drop this class, please refer to the Website below:

<http://www.registrar.ku.edu/current/schedule.shtml>

From \_\_\_ to \_\_\_, you will be assigned a grade of W. **You may not drop or withdraw after \_\_\_.**

**Civility Statement**

Civility and respect for the opinions of others are very important in an academic environment. It is likely you may not agree with everything that is said or discussed in the classroom. Courteous behavior and responses are expected at all times. When you disagree with someone, be sure that you make a distinction between criticizing an idea and criticizing the person. Expressions or actions that disparage a person’s or race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, gender, gender identity/expression, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, or marital, parental, or veteran status are contrary to the mission of this course and will not be tolerated.

**Daily Schedule**

*\*This schedule is partial, tentative, and subject to change. You will be notified of all changes/additions.*

*\*\*Note: “BB” refers to Blackboard//“TA” refers to Touchstone Anthology*

DATE	AGENDA	DUE TODAY
Day 1	Intro to Course	////
Day 2	<b>Introduction to Creative Nonfiction</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> “Introduction,” Scott Russell Sanders ( <i>TA</i> xv-xviii) <input type="checkbox"/> Lee Gutkind, “The Definition Debate” and “The Fastest Growing Genre” <input type="checkbox"/> Read the syllabus and jot down questions you have about the course <input type="checkbox"/> Email me introducing yourself. Some things you could talk about: What is your previous experience with creative nonfiction? With workshop? What are you most excited about for this class? Most anxious about? What do you hope to gain from this class? What kind of writing do you like to read/write? Who are your favorite authors? What kind of music do you like to listen to while you read/write?

<b>Day 3</b>	<b>Crafting//Drafting Creative Nonfiction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Marion Roach Smith, Chapter 1 and “How We Write About What We Choose to Tell” and “Structure. Period” (Bb)</li> <li>□ George Saunders <a href="http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/12/14/george_saunders_shares_his_secrets_of_storytelling_in_a_short_animated_documentary.html">http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/12/14/george_saunders_shares_his_secrets_of_storytelling_in_a_short_animated_documentary.html</a></li> <li>□ Joy Castro “Grip” and “Getting ‘Grip’” (Bb)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 4</b>	<b>Finding a Story//Weaving a Theme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Marion Roach Smith “Every Page Must Drive One Single Story Forward” and “Read It In the Want Ads, See It In the Cards” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Mike Birbigulia “My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend” (Netflix, Amazon, or iTunes)</li> <li>□ David Sedaris on <i>This American Life</i>, “Home Movies” at 50:20</li> <li>□ Joy Castro “Vesper Adest” (Bb)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 5</b>	<b>Writing About Loved Ones, Pt 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Philip Lopate, “On the Ethics of Writing about Others” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Lee Gutkind, “Libel Defamation – And Writing About the Dead,” “Share Your Work with Your Subjects,” “Covering Yourself,” and “Final Thoughts About Ethical, Legal, and Moral Boundaries” (Bb)</li> <li>□ David Sedaris “Repeat After Me” (TS 443)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 6</b>	<b>Writing About Loved Ones, Pt 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Joy Castro, <i>Family Trouble</i>, “Intro” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Cheryl Strayed “The Love of My Life” (TS 500)</li> <li>□ Michael W. Cox “Visitor” (TS 141)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 7</b>	<b>The Question of “T/truth” in Nonfiction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Lauren Slater, excerpts from <i>Lying</i> (Bb)</li> <li>□ William Giraldi, “The Art of Reading Lauren Slater” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Dan Kois “Facts are Stupid” <a href="http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2012/02/the_lifespan_of_a_fact_essayist_john_d_agata_defends_his_right_to_fudge_the_truth.html">http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2012/02/the_lifespan_of_a_fact_essayist_john_d_agata_defends_his_right_to_fudge_the_truth.html</a></li> <li>□ Lee Gutkind, “Truth and Fact” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Lopate “Facts Have Implications: or, Is Nonfiction Really Fiction?” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Marion Roach Smith “Writing Memoir Is About Telling the Truth” (Bb)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 8</b>	<b>How to Write the Hardest Things//Trauma Writing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Kelly Sundberg “It Will Look Like a Sunset” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Tig Notaro, “Live” (iTunes)</li> <li>□ Jo Ann Beard “The Fourth State of Matter” (TS 1)</li> <li>□ Tony Earley “Somehow Form a Family” (TS 167)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 9</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	□
<b>Day 10</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	□
<b>Day 11</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	□
<b>Day 12</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	
<b>Day 13</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	□
<b>Day 14</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	□
<b>Day 15</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	□
<b>Day 16</b>	<b>Introducing Public Creative Nonfiction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Lee Gutkind, “The Public or ‘Big Idea’” (Bb) and “The Story Behind the Story” (Bb)</li> <li>□ Rebecca Skloot, Prologue, “Deborah’s Voice,” and Part I of <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i> (Bb)</li> </ul>
	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>	
	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>	
<b>Day 17</b>	<b>History//Psychology</b>	□ Lauren Slater, excerpt from <i>Opening Skinner’s Box</i> (Bb)
<b>Day 18</b>	<b>Culture//Identity</b>	□ Andrew Solomon, Ch 1 of <i>Far From the Tree</i> (posted in two parts to Bb)
<b>Day 19</b>	<b>Animals//Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Elizabeth Kolbert, Preface and Ch 2 “The Mastodon’s Molars” from <i>The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History</i> (Bb)</li> <li>□ David Foster Wallace “Consider the Lobster” (TS 525)</li> </ul>

		<input type="checkbox"/> Annie Dillard “Living Like Weasels” (TS 148)
<b>Day 20</b>	<b>History</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Sarah Vowell, excerpt from <i>The Wordy Shipmates</i> (Bb) <input type="checkbox"/> Eula Biss, “Time and Distance Overcome” (Bb) <input type="checkbox"/> Elizabeth Gilbert, Ch 3 “Marriage and History” (Bb)
<b>Day 21</b>	<b>Race</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Ta-Nehisi Coates “Letter to My Son,” Jul 4, 2015 <a href="http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/">http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/</a> <input type="checkbox"/> “Advice on Writing From The Atlantic’s Ta-Nehisi Coates” <a href="http://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2013/09/advice-on-writing-from-i-the-atlantic-i-s-ta-nehisi-coates/280025/">http://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2013/09/advice-on-writing-from-i-the-atlantic-i-s-ta-nehisi-coates/280025/</a>
<b>Day 22</b>		
<b>Day 23</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Day 24</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Day 25</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Day 26</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Day 27</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	
<b>Day 28</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Day 29</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Day 30</b> <b><u>LAST DAY</u></b> <b><u>OF CLASS</u></b>	<b>Class Reading</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Last Day of Class
		<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Final Revision Project due to Blackboard by midnight</b>