English 91: Creative Nonfiction
Summer 2013, M/W, 1:15pm-3:05pm
Building 20, Room 21B
John W. Evans, wevbo@stanford.edu
Office: Margaret Jacks (Bldg 460), Room 211 * 650-723-2638
Office Hours: M/W 3:15-4:15pm

Course Description: English 91 introduces the groundbreaking genre of creative nonfiction. Focusing on the many different forms of the essay, we’ll examine works from across time and nationality for craft and technique. Then, we’ll experiment with our own writing exercises. We will pay special attention to the diversity of subjects—travel, science, sports, personal memories, memorable encounters, etc.—that have been examined through this democratic and inclusive form. The latter half of the course will be devoted to workshop, in which students will read and respond to each other’s longer nonfiction projects. A variety of creative and critical exercises, as well as required readings from the course texts and handouts, will foster your understanding and appreciation of the form. Writers at all levels of experience/comfort with creative nonfiction are welcome. Energetic, committed participation is a must.

Required Texts:

Course Requirements:
Class Participation, Discussion Leading & Creative Work (40%): A workshop succeeds when its participants are punctual, engaged, thoughtful, and intellectually invested in each other’s growth and success. Please arrive to each class on-time, in possession of the course materials, having completed the assigned work, and ready to make regular contributions to the class conversation. I expect you to read each other’s work carefully in preparation for workshop. The class will move swiftly and cover a lot of ground. You will write two (2) brief creative nonfiction writing exercises and one (1) 7-12 page quarter project. You will write a thoughtful 2-4 paragraph critique of each of your colleagues’ quarter projects, turning in a copy to the student and to me on the day that each is work-shopped. These critiques will include specific recommendations for revision with an emphasis on editing and formal structure, as well as personal reaction, and will be returned to the writer as a resource for revision. You will also write brief responses to essays from the course text. Finally, you will be responsible for leading one (1) class discussion on one assigned reading during the quarter.

Mid-Term Portfolio & Conference (20%): During Week 5 (In-Class Writing Lab), we will meet individually in the classroom for 15-20 minutes to discuss your work during the first half of the quarter. The requirements for the Mid-Term Portfolio are detailed later in this syllabus.

Final Portfolio (30%): In lieu of a final exam, you will prepare a final portfolio in a two-pocket folder. The requirements for the Mid-Term Portfolio are detailed later in this syllabus.

End-of-Term Analysis (10%): During the last week of class, you will speak for 1-3 minutes about a cited passage from an essay in the course anthology that had a direct impact on your development as a writer during the quarter.

Course Grading: The highest grade that you can earn in this class is an “A.” As detailed above, your grade breaks down by the following percentages:
Class Participation, Discussion Leading & Creative Work (40%)
Final Portfolio (30%)
Mid-Term Portfolio & Conference (20%)
End-of-Term Analysis (10%)

Coursework Formatting: Please type all assignments in 12-point Times New Roman font. Double-space your prose. In the header of each document, include your name, assignment title (e.g., “Reading Response #2”), and page number. All work must be titled. When submitting work to the class, bring enough copies for each member of the class, and a couple of extra copies. Printers are notoriously unreliable machines; anticipate their failure and plan accordingly. Assignments may NOT be submitted via e-mail.

Attendance and Missed Work: You are allowed two absences for the duration of the quarter. Thereafter, your grade will drop a full letter with each absence. If you are more than ten minutes late to class, or if you leave early, it will count as an absence. There are no such things as excused absences in this course – you are given two absences in case of unforeseen circumstances, and additional absences will be penalized regardless of the reason given. Chronic lateness of less than ten minutes may also negatively affect your grade. In coordination with a medical professional, I will work with you to best accommodate long-term illnesses or medical situations. If you miss class, for any reason, it is your responsibility to follow-up with a colleague regarding what you missed, to arrange any missed work, and to come prepared to participate in the next class. You will receive an automatic grade of ‘C’ for any assignment submitted after the due date, unless we have made other arrangements prior to the assignment’s deadline.

Paperwork: You will receive a lot of paper in this course, including handouts, student work, and critiques from your fellow students. Be prepared to get organized and consider purchasing a file folder or binder. Do not discard any of your work during the quarter.

The Digital Age: As a courtesy to your colleagues, do not use your laptop, phone, PDA, etc., during class. You will not need to use the internet, create electronic documents during this class, or send electronic messages during this class. Please keep your cell phones turned off and stowed away. Exception: You may use your laptop during Week 5’s In-Class Writing Lab.

Office Hours and Etiquette: I will hold regular office hours on M/W 3:15-4:15pm. Feel free to drop by to talk about your work, creative work in general, your grade, etc. These office hours are for your benefit and use. Also, if you have a question or concern about the course, please see me in office hours before you email me. I only check email once a day (at most), and choose not to have an internet connection at home. Please help me in trying to cut down on the amount of email.

Conferences: As noted above, I will meet individually with every student at the mid-point of the quarter. I may request an additional conference with you if I think that it would benefit your work or progress.

Students with Documented Disabilities: Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae).
**The Honor Code:** The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work. The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. That they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. That they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code;
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code;
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

**Emergency Numbers:** Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): 650-723-3785; The Bridge Peer Counseling: 650-723-3392.

Finally—I will do everything in my power to make this an enjoyable and valuable learning experience for you. I will do all that I can to make this your favorite class!

**NOTES:**
WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
(please note that I may choose to modify or omit the following, as our progress permits)

Writing Assignment #1 (500-700 words)—due in-class with copies for all on M 7/3.
[Note: See p.99-100 of Tell It Slant for a brief definition of the portrait form.]
Write a brief portrait of yourself or someone you know. Use observation and physical detail to make the person come alive to the reader. For every piece of “basic information” that you give, write a footnote to explain how that information helps to make this subject more real to the reader. For the purposes of the assignment, define “basic information” as information that you might exchange during a brief conversation with someone you’ve just met (e.g., “She’s 33,” “She’s a writer,” “She lives in Palo Alto”). Do not footnote non-basic information (e.g., “Her right eye is slightly smaller than her left eye,” “She likes to eat sardines out of the can,” “She rubs her eyes when she’s nervous.”) The point of these footnotes is not to make you exclude basic information about your subject, but rather to help you to think about the effect of using different kinds of details as you write creative nonfiction.

Writing Assignment #2 (500-700 words) —due in-class with copies for all on M 7/10.
Write about a secret, lie, or mystery related to a person or place you know well. What about this secret interests or troubles you? Include at least one scene in the essay. Some ideas: an inconsistency in family history, a person or object gone missing, a time you lied to someone; a time when someone lied to you, an unusual custom or belief in the place where you grew up.

Quarter Project Pitch (1 page)—due in-class with copies for all on W 7/17.
Create a query letter to introduce yourself and your Quarter Project essay to an editor at a publication where you would like to see it published. Do not format the letter with addresses. Write in block letter format, in more or less the following organizational scheme:

- **Paragraph 1 (1-3 sentences).** Introduce your essay by name with an opening sentence that immediately establishes the topic and scope of the piece in an engaging and forthright manner. Look to include an irresistible hook that compels the editor to keep reading.
- **Paragraph 2 (2-4 sentences).** Explain why the essay is important, what research you have done or plan to do to enhance your knowledge of the subject, and to whom this essay would most appeal and why. Include a word count.
- **Paragraph 3 (1-3 sentences).** Explain why you’re the person to tell the story. Include autobiographical details that are relevant to your writing career only.
- **Paragraph 4 (1-2 sentences).** Thank the editor for reviewing your pitch and give at least two ways that you can be contacted for additional questions.

Come to class on the date that the pitch is due ready to both defend and amend it, as well as the project it proposes.

Feedback Letters (1/2 to 1 page, single-spaced)—due to me and your peer on the day of his/her workshop.
After reading each classmate’s essay, you will respond with a half page or longer letter of written feedback. You will bring two copies to the next class, one for the writer and one for me. These will not be graded individually, but the work should conform to the standards of the class. The perspective and content should follow the guidelines set out in The Workshop (see below). You will be asked to rewrite letters that seem especially global or unconsidered in their attention, at my discretion. If you write all of these, provide serious and considerate feedback, and turn them in on time, you will receive full credit for this writing assignment.
Quarter Project (7-12 pages, with a separate process letter)—due in-class with copies for all on M 7/29.

I regard ‘the essay’ as a verb-like noun—not so much an object as an action disguised as one. Beneath the object—the physical piece of writing with its unpredictable content—is the action that produced it. The action, it seems to me, is easier to characterize. The difference is like that between a golf ball in the air and the swing of the golfer that propelled it: the flight of the struck ball tends to be the same. An essay is a golf swing, an angler’s cast, a tennis serve. For example, say an experience happens to you, one that seems to have literary potential. You wait for it to grow in your mind into a short story or even an episode of ‘Friends,’ but somehow it doesn’t. Then a further experience, or an odd chance, or something a friend says, or something in the newspaper chimes with the first experience, and suddenly you understand you can write about it, and you do. You quit longing for form and write what’s there, in whatever serviceable prose that comes to hand, for no better reason than the fun and release of saying. That sequence—that combination of patience with sudden impatience, that eventual yielding to the simple desire to tell—identifies the essay.


Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a life-time ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.

--Tim O’Brien, from “Love” in The Things They Carried.

Your Quarter Project essay may be on any subject in any style. They only stipulation is that you actively investigate experiential and documentary sources specific to this essay, and include that research in your essay.

Experiential sources include interviews, travel, personal experiments, etc.

Documentary sources include photos, letters, newspaper, books, musical recordings, official documents, etc.

Here are some successful examples taken from previous Creative Nonfiction classes:

--A student who wrote about her mother’s suicide looks at police reports and letter.
--A student who wrote about his relationship with food documented the contents of his family’s refrigerator, and interviewed them about his eating habits.
--A student who wrote about a trip to South Africa looked at photos and re-listened to music from that summer.

The Process Letter—due in-class with copies for all on M 7/30, stapled at the end of the Quarter Project. When you have finished writing the draft of the essay that you will bring to class, write a one-page process letter answering the following question. The purpose of The Process Letter is to orient your colleagues to those areas which you feel require the most attention in discussion and revision.

--What were your intentions when you wrote this piece?
--What parts do you think were the most successful?
--What parts were frustrating to write or need more work?

See the formatting requirements on the syllabus and be sure to follow them exactly. A penalty will be assessed for poorly edited and/or formatted work.
Mid-Term Portfolio—due to my office no later than 6pm on TH 7/18.
In lieu of a mid-term exam, we will meet individually during class on either M 7/22 or W 7/24. During that time, we will discuss your Quarter Project, as well as your progress in the course. In preparation for the conference, you will prepare a mid-term portfolio in a two-pocket folder that includes:

- Your revised Quarter Project Pitch, taking into consideration the peer feedback. You should be able to point to specific places in the Pitch where you have made specific revisions. You should also be able to explain the decisions you made about the work in revision.
- A brief outline of your Quarter Project, including specific research. This outline should take the critical or creative form that you find most useful for organizing your thinking about and planning for the Quarter Project. It should contain a reasonable plan for how you will pursue completing a draft of the Quarter Project, as well as indicate or include the specific research that you are conducting for it.
- 3-5 questions about the Quarter Project that you would like to answer during the Mid-Term Conference. Your goal in seeking answers to these questions should be to help you to clarify the planning and execution of your Quarter Project.
- A Quarter Contract statement, in bulleted list format. Respond in bulleted list format to the question, “I would earn an A in English 91 this quarter if I walk out of class able to do the following five things.”

The mid-term conference is an opportunity to discuss and develop the Quarter Project, your goals for the course, and potential revisions from the first half of the class. It is also a venue for us to talk informally about creative nonfiction, your interest in form, and your writing. Please come to the conference with a specific idea of the kind of feedback that you would find most helpful for your Quarter Project. Our conference will be most successful if you walk away from it having sought helpful feedback during our discussion, with a clear idea of how to use it.

During the time that you are not holding your Mid-Term Conference, you will work in-class individually and with your colleagues to plan, research, write, revise, and generally execute the Quarter Project. You are encouraged to structure this time as you would find most productive. Electronic devices are permitted during these sessions, but please do be considerate of your colleagues and their work spaces.

We will select mid-term portfolio conference times and dates during class on W, 7/17.

Final Portfolio—due to me in-class on W 8/15.
In lieu of a final exam, you will prepare a final portfolio in a two-pocket folder. It will include:

- Revised Quarter Project with the original draft and selected peer draft feedback. Include in the portfolio a clean copy of your revised Quarter Project, the workshop draft with my written feedback and letter, and your colleague’s annotated copies of your workshop draft containing written feedback that you found helpful in revision.
- A Process Letter. Write a 200-250 word statement that explains how you approached revising your Quarter Project. Address the changes you made in successive drafts, and how you observed your essay evolving from one draft to the next. Explain how you used my and/or peer feedback to shape the revision.
- A specifically formatted statement of self-evaluation. The self-evaluation statement will contain three paragraphs of 250-400 total words. The first paragraph will articulate your thoughts about the creative nonfiction form, in general, and your evolution as a writer of creative nonfiction during the quarter. The second paragraph will discuss specific essays and exercises to which you responded strongly during the quarter. The third paragraph will evaluate the extent to which you successfully achieved your five goals from the mid-term portfolio.
READINGS & PROVISIONAL CALENDAR
(subject to change, as our progress permits)

Week 1:
6/24 Introductions, enrollment; formal and thematic readings (Handout).
6/26 Ginzburg, He And I; Fisher, Once A Tramp, Always. Chapters TBD in Tell It Slant.

Week 2:
7/1 Soyinka, Why Do I Fast?; Sanders, Under the Influence. Chapters TBD in Tell It Slant.
7/3 Rich, Split at the Root; Tanizaki, In Praise of Shadows; Dillard, Seeing. Chapters TBD in Tell It Slant. Writing Assignment #1 due (bring 15 copies).

Week 3:
7/8; Writing Assignment #1 Workshop.
7/10 Berry, An Entrance at the Wood; Fitzgerald, The Crack-Up. Writing Assignment #2 due (bring 15 copies).

Week 4:
7/15 Didion, Goodbye To All That, In Bed. Writing Assignment #2 Small Group Workshop.
7/17 Woolf, The Death of the Moth; McCarthy, My Confession. Quarter Project Pitches due (bring 15 copies). QUARTER PROJECT PITCH WORKSHOP.

[Mid-Term Portfolios due to my office no later than 6pm on Thursday, 7/18]

Week 5: In-Class Writing Lab & Conferences.
7/22 First two pages of final project due in conference. Writing Lab & Conferences, Part 1.
7/24 Writing Lab & Conferences, Part 2.

Week 6:
7/29 Quarter Projects due in-class. The Creative Non-Fiction Form across Media (in-class).
7/31 Workshop 1, 2, & 3.

Week 7:
8/6 Workshop 4, 5, & 6
8/8 Workshop 7, 8, & 9.

Week 8:
8/13 Workshop 10, 11, & 12.
8/15 LAST DAY OF CLASS (TBD). Final Portfolios due in-class.

PLEASE NOTE: YOUR DATE FOR LEADING DISCUSSION IS _______________________.

THE DATE OF YOUR QUARTER PROJECT WORKSHOP IS _______________________.
The Workshop: An Introduction

A workshop can be a wonderful opportunity to seek feedback from talented and intelligent fellow writers who have your best interests, and those of your writing, at heart. A workshop can also be a frustrating exercise in any or all of the following: misunderstanding, isolation, showboating, intolerance, score-settling, psychobabble, passive-aggressive back-and-forth, backstabbing, grade-grubbing, chain-yanking, hot-air-balloon-inflating, ego-massaging, echo chambering. While we cannot, as a class, anticipate every success and frustration, we can do our best to anticipate and avoid many of the pitfalls of workshops past. With that in mind, I propose some workshop guidelines for the quarter.

1. **Copies.** Your essays are due prior to the period during which they will be work-shopped. On the due date, please bring extra copies of your essays for everyone (I would recommend 20).

2. **Reading.** Read each essay at least 2 times before you come to class on the day that it is due to be work-shopped. Do not write Comments (see below) during the first read. Do not react to the essay during your first read. Instead, read the essay completely, then read it a second time and make your Comments.

3. **Curiosity > Authority.** Read and write Comments from a place of curiosity rather than authority. Assume that every line, sentence, and word is chosen with intention and skill. Work to understand the choices that are made in the essay, rather than to criticize them.

4. **Avoid Benign Neglect.** Do not decide to love everything in an essay, or all of the essays written by one person. Choose your praise carefully and express it intelligently and concisely. Avoid wholesale judgments of every kind.

5. **Comments [Logistics].** Marginalia is criticism written in the margins of the essay that express line-specific praise, questions, and wondering. A good rule of thumb is to write 2-3 marginalia notes per page of the essay. The Process Letter should set out macro-level feedback specific to the whole essay.

6. **Comments [Quality].** The comments that you offer to a colleague should indicate thoughtful engagement with the essay, born of careful reading and re-reading. Where appropriate, incorporate ideas from our class discussions. Consider your feedback an opportunity to practice and demonstrate your critical mastery. Write thoughtfully about how you perceive the writer's stance toward reality, how the essay thinks, the object of the writer's attention, and the positive and negative space in which the essay sets out its ideas and images. Avoid yes/no questions. Remember that your comments will be a departure point for revision.

7. **Suggestions.** Offer suggestions for revision. When you do so, give a clear and concise context for the suggestion. Do not simply make a change to a word, phrase, line, sentence, stanza, etc. without explanation. The person reading your feedback should understand clearly why you have recommended a revision.

8. **Keep It On The Page.** During discussion, locate your comments with references to specific moments in the essay that occur on the page. Do not infer intention or interpretation.

9. **Avoid Clustering.** There are many different kinds of essays and writers. No doubt, aesthetic preferences will converge and diverge as the quarter progresses. Consider these fluctuations an opportunity to understand better unfamiliar or unattractive ideas about reading and writing.

10. **The Good.** However you feel about the kind of essay that you are reading, keep your comments and feedback specific to the essay in front of you. Do not consider it representative of anything. Likewise, do not read an essay exclusively through the lens of a single kind of interpretation or criticism (e.g., Marxism, New Criticism). Use criticism/ideology to clarify your understanding of an essay —not vice-versa.

11. **Easter Island and Authority.** While your essay is being work-shopped, listen carefully and with an open mind. Avoid making faces. Whether you like or dislike what you hear, let it roll off your back. As with everything else in life, no quality or amount of external approval or disapproval will sustain a writing life.

12. **Safe Space.** Respect the safe space we create as we work together. Seek me out if you feel it has been violated.

13. **Other.** What did I leave out?