

ENGL 3160 - Creative Nonfiction - Fall 2026 Syllabus

Days and Time: Tuesdays & Thursdays 11:10 AM - 12:30 PM

Location: Language Building 222

Instructor: Ross Wilcox, PhD

Instructor Email: ross.wilcox@unt.edu

Instructor Office Hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

Required Texts: none (all readings will be posted on Canvas)

Course Description: This course is designed to shape you as a creative writer by introducing you to, and increasing your understanding of, the genre of creative nonfiction (CNF). More specifically, we're working with the personal essay and its many forms. You will have the opportunity to hone your skills through practice as well as close reading of exceptionally written essays.

Our class will work partly as:

- **Seminar:** We will read several essays by some contemporary practitioners of CNF, discussing how these essays work and the shape they take (form) and how writers use elements of creative writing such as point of view, setting, dialogue, scene, etc. to keep the reader turning the pages (craft)
- **Workshop:** You will write two full essays and several short exercises, in response to prompts or in imitation of published pieces. You also will thoughtfully and constructively critique your classmates' work, keeping in mind the fundamentals of craft and the power of a compelling true narrative.

The primary goal for this course is that you will gain an understanding of the ways in which CNF essayists create art while telling true stories, and that this understanding will help you write better essays, memoirs, and creative works that speak your own truths.

Statement on AI Writing: For this class, no AI writing will be accepted. Personally, I detest the use of AI with respect to human art. I think it robs humans of their intellectual properties, and it also degrades the quality of art in general. Specifically with regard to this class, I do not care what a machine thinks or has to say. I only care about what *you* think and have to say.

Personal Statement on Grading Your Essays: It is my view that assigning letter grades to people's artistic works is counterproductive to the creation of quality art. While I absolutely will critique your work and offer constructive criticism, I think it is rather self-righteous and egotistical for me to quantify the value of your art by assigning it a point total or a letter grade. Even more importantly, I want you as writers to feel comfortable and confident in your ability to take artistic risks without the fear of that risk harming your GPA. Additionally, as a human being, even though I strive to be open-minded and to see the value in all the different kinds of human writing, I inevitably have biases. Sometimes these manifest consciously, and sometimes they manifest unconsciously. Because

of this, I don't want my position as your teacher to in any way influence what or how you write. The last thing I want is for you to be working on your essay and think, "Will Ross like this?" To harbor such thoughts would be stifling to your creativity. To this end, your two essays will be graded pass/fail. This means that so long as you complete the essays, you will get 100 points on each of them. Because I am required to assign everyone a grade, I think this is the fairest way to "grade" your work that is consistent with my beliefs about not wanting to "grade" your work in the first place.

Grades & Assignments: Here is a breakdown of the points for this class, followed by a brief description of the assignments themselves.

Personal Essay (2 @ 100 points each) = 200

Workshop Responses = 100

Writing Experiments (3 @ 50 points each) = 150

Presentation = 50

Total = 500

Personal Essays: The whole course revolves around the two personal essays you will write. The essays can be of any genre of creative nonfiction - memoir, history, literary journalism, cultural criticism, etc. While I don't have a strict word count, I would like for the essays to be around 1500-3000, which amounts to roughly 5-10 pages. They can be longer, but not substantially longer. I would say 5000 words (or around 20 pages) is the upper, upper limit. Each essay will be submitted through our Canvas course page in the Assignments tab. Your essays **MUST** be in Microsoft Word format (more on this later). Once your essay is submitted, I will upload it to a folder in the Files section of our course page. While you can (and should) have a cool, creative title for the essay itself, please name the file "Your Name Essay #1." This makes it easy for us to find and read the essay when it comes time to workshop the piece.

Workshop Responses: I will create a discussion board for each student's essay. Each individual discussion board will simply be titled "Your Name Essay #1." Everyone is required to post responses to each other's essays by 11:59 PM on the day we workshop that essay (more on the schedule later). While I won't be a huge stickler on this, if I notice that you aren't posting any responses to your peers' work, you will lose points for your lack of workshop responses. I do feel strongly about this, because I think it is rude and unfair to have us expend time and energy to read and critique your work while you do not pay us that same courtesy.

Writing Experiments: The writing experiments are short (300-400 words), low-stakes pieces of writing. These offer you the chance to try new styles, take risks, imitate the essays we are reading, and most importantly, to write. Over the semester you will turn in three experiments, some of which we may share among the class. These will be in response to prompts which I will provide you with.

These can also be turned into full-length essays when the time comes to submit your two personal essays.

Presentation: Each of you will be required to give a brief presentation over a piece of creative nonfiction that you love. It could be a book (memoir, autobiography, biography, history, cultural criticism, philosophy, true crime etc.). It could be a documentary (or docuseries). It could be a smaller piece like an essay or opinion piece or something not necessarily book-length or feature-length. The presentation itself revolves around one simple question: why do you love this thing so much? That's what I'm most excited to hear. Of course, you will provide us a little background on the work (the author, when it was published, a brief synopsis and summary, etc.), but the most important thing is for you to tell us what you love so much about the work. Perhaps you admire the craft. Perhaps you were deeply moved by the story. Perhaps you identified deeply with the person's truths and experiences. Perhaps the author shed light on something you had no idea about. There is no wrong way to sing the book's praises. It just matters that you do. I would strongly prefer that you make a PowerPoint (or Canva or whatever presentation software) for this presentation. I will give a brief presentation over a nonfiction work I love (I haven't decided yet).

Submitting Assignments: All the assignments will be submitted digitally on Canvas. Your two personal essays will be submitted as Word Document files. The workshop responses will be submitted by posting feedback to your peers' discussion boards. The writing experiments will be submitted by typing directly into the assignment textbox on Canvas. If you make a PowerPoint for the presentation, you can submit that through the Assignment window as well.

Student Writing and Behavior in Workshops: The wellbeing of my students is of the utmost concern to me. I want people to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions about writing and art, but I don't want anyone to be targeted or traumatized or bullied or in any way denigrated. So while we absolutely will evaluate, critique, and offer you constructive criticism over your work, we WILL NOT belittle you as a person or insult you or name-call or harass or anything of that nature. I will always deliver my feedback with tact and respect. I STRONGLY believe in building writers up, not tearing them down. While I will be honest about what I perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses in your work, I will never make you feel like you are less worthy as a person. We are all trying to help each other become better writers. Any criticism we offer is about the work itself, not about you as a person.

Content Warnings: I absolutely want to offer artistic freedom to all of you with regard to what you write. However, if your work engages with topics that could be triggering or traumatizing to some readers, please provide a content warning at the top of the essay notifying us of any potentially disturbing material. While I will read everything everyone writes, I WILL NOT require any of you to read work that deals with topics that could adversely impact your mental health. If there is an essay being workshopped one day where we will be discussing disturbing content, you can simply email me privately and let me know you'd rather not sit in on that. This is perfectly fine, and no one will be

penalized for not engaging with essays that disturb them. I just ask that you email me in advance letting me know.

When in doubt about whether something in your essay might be disturbing, I would err on the side of providing a content warning.

Here is a list of things that would often require a content warning, though this list is not exhaustive: **sexual violence of any kind, self-harm, suicide, mental illness, eating disorders, bullying, torture, incest, abortion, racism, racial slurs, homophobia, homophobic slurs, transphobia, transphobic slurs, ableism, ableist slurs, harm to children, animal abuse**

ODA (Office of Disability) Accommodations: If you have a disability and need accommodations, please let me know, and I'll accommodate you in any way I can. In my experience, the most common concern deals with timed exams or needing extra time on in-class assignments. You will not have to worry about that for this class. There are no in-class assignments, and there are no timed exams. If, however, you need an extension on any of the written assignments, just let me know and I'll grant it to you.

Course Schedule: The following is our tentative course schedule for the class. Notice that the first third-ish of the class will involve us reading and discussing published essays and craft in general, while the latter two-thirds will involve our workshop.

***Note:** I will read the published essays aloud in class so that you won't have to read them outside of class. However, when it comes time to workshop your peers' essays, you will be required to read the essays outside of class and come prepared to discuss them. That said, I often do read aloud some people's essays in class, especially if they are short. It is fun!

Week 1

8/18: Syllabus; Introductions

8/20: Discussion: What is Creative Nonfiction?

Week 2

8/25: "First" by Ryan Van Meter

8/27: "Typical First Year Professor" by Roxane Gay

Week 3

9/1: Presentations; "Reflections, While Sitting in Traffic" by Jaquira Diaz

9/3: Presentations; "I Come Back to Berryman's" by Vincent Scarpa; "Men Seeking Men" by Vincent Scarpa

Week 4

9/8: “Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure” by Carmen Maria Machado (content warning: depictions of spousal emotional abuse; explicit references to sex)

9/10: Presentations; “Joyas Voladoras” by Brian Doyle

Week 5

9/15: “The Love of My Life” by Cheryl Strayed (content warning: explicit references to sex; infidelity; abortion; drug use)

9/17: Presentations; “Radical Bears in the Forest Delicious” by Amy Leach

Week 6

9/22: Presentations; “Times Square” by Colson Whitehead

9/24: Presentations; “To Scratch, Claw, or Grope Clumsily or Frantically” by Roxane Gay

Week 7

9/29: Presentations; “It Will Look Like a Sunset” by Kelly Sundberg (content warning: explicit depictions and references to domestic abuse)

10/1: The Workshop

10/2: Essay #1 due on Canvas @ 11:59 PM

Week 8

10/6: Workshop Essay #1

10/8: Workshop Essay #1

Week 9

10/13: Workshop Essay #1

10/15: Workshop Essay #1

Week 10

10/20: Workshop Essay #1

10/22: Workshop Essay #1

Week 11

10/27: Workshop Essay #1

10/29: Workshop Essay #1

10/30: Essay #2 due on Canvas @ 11:59 PM

Week 12

11/3: Workshop Essay #2

11/5: Workshop Essay #2

Week 13

11/10: Workshop Essay #2

11/12: Workshop Essay #2

Week 14

11/17: Workshop Essay #2

11/19: Workshop Essay #2

Week 15

11/24: NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING BREAK

11/26: NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 16

12/1: Workshop Essay #2 (LAST DAY OF CLASS)

12/3: NO CLASS