

Beginning Creative Nonfiction

Fall 2026

Instructor: Samantha Sorenson
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Course Info:
English 3160-002
MW 3:55-5:15PM
GAB 527

“The world is everywhere whispering essays.”

—Alexander Smith

REQUIRED TEXTS

Readings will be provided as a link or PDF file in Canvas.

COURSE OVERVIEW

English 3160 introduces students to the craft and practice of creative nonfiction. As students engage with craft discussions, read an assortment of flash, personal, and memoir essays, students will explore how writers transform lived experience into meaningful literary works. We will examine various craft techniques and conventions of creative nonfiction writing while practicing and developing a creative process. Throughout the semester, students will generate, workshop, and revise their own creative nonfiction using the craft and conventions we unpack together through course readings and discussion. In so doing, students will begin to understand the importance of moving beyond mere storytelling and into the realm of creating art out of the mundane and ordinary content of daily life.

COURSE GOALS

By the end of the semester, students will be able to:

- Read texts critically and creatively, with attention to craft techniques, modalities, and conventions of creative nonfiction.
- Practice applying craft and genre conventions to their own creative attempts.
- Develop writerly attention to the self and the world in which the self exists.
- Practice the arts of collaboration, revision, and reflection as writers.

A NOTE ON CONTENT

Creative nonfiction is built from lived experience. As a result, the essays we read and the work we write will often engage with joy, grief, violence, illness, trauma, loss, injustice, and other difficult subjects. Some readings may challenge your assumptions, present perspectives different from your own, or depict experiences that are uncomfortable, painful, or unfamiliar. As members of this class, we each share responsibility for engaging with these works thoughtfully and respectfully.

Because this is a creative writing course, our primary task is to approach each text as writers. Rather than asking only what a piece says or whether we agree with it, we will ask how it achieves its effects. Approaching difficult work through the lens of craft does not require us to set aside our emotional or ethical responses; rather, it asks us to remain curious about the artistic choices that produce those responses, while treating both the work and one another with respect.

At the same time, I encourage you to be attentive to your own well-being, to recognize your personal limits, and to practice appropriate self-care when reading and writing. If you anticipate that a particular reading will present a significant concern for you, please reach out to me so we can discuss an appropriate path forward.

GRADING

ASSIGNMENTS & WEIGHTED CATEGORIES

Reading Responses	15%
Generative Exercises	20%
Revision Experiments	15%
Workshop Submission & Commentary	20%
Discussion Lead	10%
Further Draft & Class Reading	10%
Reflection Paper (Final)	10%

UNT SCALE

A	90-100
B	80-89.9
C	70-79.9
D	60-69.9
F	0-59.9

ASSIGNMENTS

Reading Responses

Throughout the semester you will be responsible for responding to the assigned reading. For these assignments, we will be using Canvas discussion boards. Each reading response should be a minimum of 250 words and is due prior to class. Though you are responsible for reading all of the material assigned on the syllabus, you will only be expected to post a reading response once per week when reading is assigned.

Generative Writing Exercises

You will submit writing starts from 6 generative prompts given throughout weeks 2-7. One exercise will be due in each of these weeks. Exercises must be typed and submitted through Canvas as a .doc or .docx file type. Writing exercises will be graded credit/no credit.

Revision Experiments

You will submit 4 revision experiments based on revision prompts given in class during weeks 11-14. One revision exercise will be due each of these weeks. Experiments must be typed and submitted through Canvas as a .doc or .docx file type. Experiments will be graded credit/no credit.

Discussion Lead

At the beginning of the semester, you will sign up to lead a class discussion on one craft piece assigned throughout the semester. The goal of leading discussion is not for you to talk the entire time, but rather for you to come prepared having completed a close-read of the assigned texts for the day. You will be expected to bring three substantive discussion questions pairing the craft essay with the creative work assigned for that day. You will be expected to facilitate discussion for at least 20 minutes. Think of your job as setting up the class discussion, identifying key concepts in the craft pieces and examples in the creative pieces that showcase how to implement the craft we are learning on that day.

Workshop Submission

Once during the semester, you will submit a fully drafted essay (maximum 8 double-spaced pages) for workshop. Students are required to post their draft to the appropriate workshop discussion board as a fully accessible word document at least 48-hours in advance of their scheduled workshop. Please note, if you do not upload your essay 48-hours in advance of workshop, or if the draft you upload is not accessible to myself and your classmates, you will be ineligible for the workshop and will lose the submission credit. Your classmates and instructor need adequate time to read and respond to your work prior to the in-person workshop discussion. Workshop submissions are graded credit/no credit.

Workshop Commentary

You will receive access to your peers' work at least 48-hours before each scheduled workshop. You are expected to download a copy of their draft, read through it carefully and respectfully, leave marginalia comments, and write a 150+ word end note. More instructions on responding to your peers will be provided in class. All workshop responses are due prior to coming to class on the day the piece is scheduled to be workshopped. Workshop commentary is graded credit/no credit, allocated across all of the peer work you had access to.

The Latest Draft and Class Reading

In the final week of class, you will submit a revised version of your workshop piece to Canvas. This is not intended to be a "final" draft. Instead, think of this as a new iteration, or another attempt toward the art that you have spent the semester creating. In addition to your submission, you are expected to participate in our final week celebrations by reading a portion of your revision to the class. Each component of this assignment is credit/no credit—you will not be graded on the quality of your public speaking, but on your willingness to engage in the writing community we have fostered all semester.

Reflection Paper

For all intents and purposes, this paper is your "final" for the course. The paper will be 1250-1500 words in length and will prompt you to consider your overall writing identity and processes

throughout the semester. You will be expected to think critically about your engagement with course content as well as your own written art. More information will be given in class.

COURSE POLICIES

Communication

The best way to contact me is via my university email (samantha.sorenson@unt.edu). You can expect a response from me within 24-48 hours during the business-as-usual work week. As a standard practice, I do not respond in the late evening, over the weekend, or on university breaks/holidays. What this means: if you email me late on Friday, the earliest you should expect a response from me will be Monday morning, as it is likely that I will not see your email until Monday rolls around. I encourage you to email me according to your own schedule and with any questions you have related to the course. I also encourage you to utilize my student office hours.

NOTE: I do not check my Canvas inbox and you will likely not get a response from me if you use that method of communication.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory in this class, but I understand that illnesses and other conflicts may arise unexpectedly. To accommodate personal illness and other circumstances, you are allowed two excused absences during the semester no questions asked. You do not need to email me when you will be absent unless you are scheduled for a discussion lead or workshop on that day. I will automatically apply excused absences on my attendance record. With the exception of university-excused absences (those approved and communicated by the Dean of Students' office), any absence beyond *two* will begin to affect your grade for the course. Each unexcused absence will result in the loss of half a letter grade (-5%) from your final grade in the course. Per University Policy 06.039, if you accrue more than 6 unexcused absences (20% of the semester), you will not be able to pass the course and will receive a failing grade.

Class Participation

Participation is more than attendance. You are expected to engage in course discussion, activities, exercises, and collaborations throughout the semester, and must do so in a respectful way. Let's discuss what appropriate participation looks like together as a class, and come to an agreement on the kind of class culture we want to cultivate this semester.

Late Work

Barring a serious extenuating circumstance (i.e. something that would qualify you for a university-excused absence), late work will not be accepted in this class. Plan now to submit your work on time.

Formatting Assignments

All work should be formatted professionally with one-inch margins, 12-point serif font, page numbers, and your name included on the draft. Unless the form dictates otherwise, all written work should be double-spaced. Please be sure to include your last name and the page number in the header information of your work.

AI

Take pride in your election to participate in a writing course and do the work yourself. The use of AI to generate or revise creative work is widely frowned upon and will not be tolerated in this course. Using AI will limit your ability to grow as a writer and engage in the larger literary landscape. Don't shortchange your integrity or creativity.

Changes to the Syllabus

The content of this syllabus is subject to change.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Academic Integrity Standards

According to [UNT Policy 06.003](#), Academic Integrity standards are violated when students engage in academic dishonesty behaviors, including, but not limited to, cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty and my decision on academic sanctions will be reported to the [Office of Academic Integrity](#).

Acceptable Student Behavior

According to [UNT policy 07.012](#), student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be notified verbally or in writing and may be directed to leave the classroom. Additionally, the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct.

For additional information, refer to the [Dean of Students](#) website.

ADA Accommodations

According to UNT policy 16.001, UNT will make reasonable academic accommodations for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA). Then, the ODA will provide them with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty members detailing the students' accommodation needs. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours. Students may request reasonable accommodation at any time; however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation and meet with all faculty members prior to accommodation implementation every semester.

For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website.

Title IX and CARE

UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. Federal laws (Title IX and the Violence Against Women Act) and UNT policies

prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, and therefore prohibit sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. UNT's Survivor Advocates can assist a student who has been impacted by violence by filing protective orders, completing crime victim's compensation applications, contacting professors for absences related to an assault, working with housing to facilitate a room change where appropriate, and connecting students to other resources available both on and off campus. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at <mailto:SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu> or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648. Additionally, alleged sexual misconduct can be non-confidentially reported to the Title IX Coordinator at <mailto:oeo@unt.edu> or at (940) 565 2759.

NOTE: As a faculty member, **I am a mandatory reporter.** In this class, students sometimes share vulnerable things from their past or present. Please know that if you choose to write/share an experience, even one from your early childhood, involving sexual misconduct, domestic violence, stalking, eating disorders, etc., I am required to complete a university CARE report. In such an event, you can expect an email from the university offering you access to resources and support. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to pursue anything beyond that point.

Emergency Notification & Procedures

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly provide students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials. For additional information, refer to the Eagle Alert website.

Course Schedule

NOTE: It is expected that all reading listed on a day will be completed *before* class. Additionally, please bring copies of each day's reading to class on the date we will discuss it. "Copies" can be digital.

WEEK 1 - INTRODUCTION

08/17 Course and Syllabus Overview; In-class handout ("The Sloth") and activity

08/19 "On the Writing of Essays" by Alexander Smith
"Joyas Voladoras" by Brian Doyle

Due this Week:

Week 1 Reading Response due prior to class

WEEK 2 – GENERATE MATERIAL (Notice/Attention)

08/24 "On Keeping a Notebook" by Joan Didion
"The Death of a Moth" by Virginia Woolf

08/26 "Seeing" by Annie Dillard
"Ace of Spades" by Julie Marie Wade

Due this Week:

Week 2 Reading Response due prior to class
Generative Exercise 1 due by Sunday 11:59PM

WEEK 3 – GENERATE MATERIAL (Persona and Voice)

08/31 "The Multiple Selves Within" by Michael Steinberg
"Under the Influence" by Scott Russell Sanders

09/02 "The Sounds of Yourself" by Sonya Huber
"Islamic Revolution Barbie" by Porochista Khakpour

Due this Week:

Week 3 Reading Response due prior to class
Generative Exercise 2 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 4 – GENERATE MATERIAL (Memory)

09/07 No Class / Labor Day

09/09 "The Fault Lines of Memory" by Brenda Miller
"An Offering" by Robin Wall Kimmerer
"Mastering the Art of French Cooking" by E. J. Levy

Due this Week:

Week 4 Reading Response due prior to class
Generative Exercise 3 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 5 – GENERATE MATERIAL (Digression)

09/14 "Against Getting It All Down" by Patrick Madden

“Joy Is Such a Human Madness” by Ross Gay

- 09/16 “The Turning Point of All Things” by Randon Billings Noble
“The Fourth State of Matter” by Jo Ann Beard

Due this Week:

Week 5 Reading Response due prior to class
Generative Exercise 4 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 6 – GENERATE MATERIAL (Research)

- 09/21 “Research and Personal Writing” by Phillip Lopate
“All Apologies” by Eula Biss
- 09/23 “Point Sublime: Research as the Ultimate Creative Act” by Elena Passarello
“We Were Here” by Natalie Kinkade

Due this Week:

Week 6 Reading Response due prior to class
Generative Exercise 5 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 7 – GENERATE MATERIAL (Structure)

- 09/28 “Me, Myself, I: Idiosyncrasy and Structure in Nonfiction” by Michael Downs
“We Regret to Inform You” by Brenda Miller
- 09/30 “Middling” by Shifra Sharlin
“On Coming Back as a Buzzard” by Lia Purpura

Due this Week:

Week 7 Reading Response due prior to class
Generative Exercise 6 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 8 - WORKSHOP

- 10/05 Workshop drafts due 48-hours in advance of each class
10/07 Workshop Commentary due prior to each class

WEEK 9 - WORKSHOP

- 10/12 Workshop drafts due 48-hours in advance of each class
10/14 Workshop Commentary due prior to each class

WEEK 10 - WORKSHOP

- 10/19 Workshop drafts due 48-hours in advance of each class
10/21 Workshop Commentary due prior to each class

WEEK 11 - REVISE

- 10/26 “The Latest Draft” by Dinah Lenney
“Two Truths and a Lie” by Mauri Pollard Johnson
- 10/28 “Surprise and Subtext” by Desirae Matherly
“Thanatophobia” by Christen Noel Kauffman

Due this Week:

Week 11 Reading Response due prior to class
Revision Experiment 1 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 12 - REVISE

- 11/02 “Good Noticing” by Tarn Wilson
“A Kist O’ Whistles” by Chris Arthur
- 11/04 “Nancy Drewing the Essay” by Sonja Livingston
“One Missing Piece” by Jill Talbot

Due this Week:

Week 12 Reading Response due prior to class
Revision Experiment 2 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 13 - REVISE

- 11/09 “A Note on the Misuse of Adverbs” by Brian Doyle
“How to Avoid the Use of Adverbs While Telling You How My Husband Died” by Jan M. Flynn
- 11/11 “A Dash of Dash” by Heidi Czerwiec
“In Praise of the Humble Comma” by Pico Iyer

Due this Week:

Week 13 Reading Response due prior to class
Revision Experiment 3 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 14 - REVISE

- 11/16 “Hello, Goodbye” by Jenny Boully
“We Are Stardust” by Anna Vodicka
- 11/18 “Revision Strategies: Endings” by Amy Butcher
“Memory” by Patrick Madden

Due this Week:

Week 14 Reading Response due prior to class
Revision Experiment 4 due Sunday by 11:59PM

WEEK 15

- 11/23 No Class / Thanksgiving Break
11/25 No Class / Thanksgiving Break

WEEK 16 – Creative Sharing

- 11/30 The Latest Draft Readings
12/02 The Latest Draft Readings

Due this Week:

The Latest Draft due Wednesday by 11:59PM

FINALS WEEK

- 12/07 Reflection Paper due by 11:59PM