

# ENG 5300: Creative Nonfiction

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SPRING 2024

## Course Information

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**Instructor:** Dr. Kate Simonian  
**Class Info:** Tu 6-8.50 PM (Zoom)

## Course Overview

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*Catalogue Description:* Advanced-level writing workshop exploring historical and contemporary approaches to literary nonfiction, including but not limited to memoir, diary, autobiography, personal essay, and lyric essay. Students generate their own creative works and participate in critical workshop discussions. May be taken 3 times for a total of 9 units.

In this class, you will delve deeply into your memory and experiences and mine them for literary work. **It will involve being uncomfortable sometimes, and both sharing and responding to emotional content, but you are not required to write about trauma (unless you want to!)** Rather than focusing on writing other people's stories, you will write your own, bring it to life with techniques of fiction, and then weave argument, interviews, fact, and pop culture into a rich tapestry. Let's write some memoir!

Our first weeks will focus on learning various skills of creative nonfiction writing. You will do two small assignments. Mid-term, you will start working on your major (third) assignment, which is an autoethnography (aka, piece of personal writing). Throughout the semester, you will be expected to work on your project in your own time, although we'll work on it in class, too. By the end of term (May 18) you will submit all three of your revised assignments, including a reflective statement.

### Student Learning Outcomes (By the end of this course you should be able to):

- Apply specific practices of revision to your own creative work, including time-management, structural design, self-motivation, and overcoming writer's block.
- Identify enquiry questions that arise from your own aesthetics and reach a point where you can thoughtfully articulate your own beliefs about what writing can do.

- Explicate, through your own writing, how identities are in conversation with the external world.
- Embrace moral ambiguity and complexity, apply interpretive lenses, outline multiple perspectives, and reflect on how social context affects meaning.
- Thoughtfully analyze the work of peers using a neutral observation method, to develop literary citizenship and the ability to have writer friends.
- Find areas of your own experience that inspire, connect with, and uplift others. Embrace writing as powerful play that connects you to others, the world, and yourself.

### [Adding/Dropping Procedures](#)

February 16 is the CENSUS date, the last day to drop classes via MyCoyote.

## **Course Materials**

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- No books. Everything will be a PDF on Canvas. Once I start coming into the facility, I will give you all copies of the next week's readings.
- You will need access to a computer, the internet, and Canvas.

## **Course Assignments and Exams**

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There will be 1000 points possible in this course. You must submit all the assignments below to pass. If you do not, it will be up to my discretion whether you pass the course.

Whole-Class Workshop (50 points submission)	50
Assignment One Share (50 points submission, 50 feedback)	100
Assignment Two Share (50 points submission, 50 feedback)	100
Assignment Three Share (50 points submission, 50 feedback)	100
Writing Exercises (about 10, each 10 points)	100
Lit Logs (about 10, each 10 points)	100
Participation	200
Final Portfolio (100) with Reflective Statement (150)	250

Grading Scale: 940=A, 900 =A-, 870 =B+, 840=B, 800=B-, 750=C+, 710=C, 670=C-, 600=D+, <600=F

### [Whole Class Workshop \(Dates Vary\) \(5%\)](#)

The idea of the large group workshop is that you get a chance to share your work with the whole group. You will learn from the feedback they give you, but you will also learn through observing how others have enacted craft elements. You will automatically get full marks for the share if you participate. You can workshop ANYTHING you've written that is creative nonfiction: a class exercise, an assignment you want more feedback on, a draft of your major autoethnography assignment. It does not need to have been written for this class. There will be a sign-up sheet distributed in the next few lessons.

### [Three shares \(Assignment 1-2/27\) \(Assignment 2—4/9\) \(Assignment 3—5/7\) \(Each 10%, with 5% for submitting original and 5% for submitting feedback\)](#)

On these dates, we will have a three-way share session. For the first two, you will just show up and read your work aloud. For the third, I will put you in groups. You will post up to ten pages to Canvas **by the Friday prior** to the share session. Then on Tuesday's class, we will break into groups and give feedback.

You will automatically get full marks for the share if you participate (which means reading the work of peers and responding online before the day the piece is workshopped). If you did not come to the actual class, contact me. **Note: The shares are only posted to a discussion board on Canvas, not any additional assessment folder. The feedback responses to your peers are posted as replies to the original thread for the essay.**

Manuscripts should be formatted in the following way: 12 pt. Times New Roman/Arial/Helvetica/Any Legible font, double-spaced, one-inch margins, with page numbers. You may print/copy on both sides of the paper. Your header should look like this:

Your Name

My Name

English 5190

Word Count: #

Title

**NOTE ON SHARES:** Some of you will have come into this class hoping to be told that your work is good or that you have the “stuff” to be a writer. I understand; I felt that way when I started out. There is a long tradition of writing workshops based on a kind of “trial by fire,” within which a work is criticized and torn apart, with the idea that it somehow makes you stronger. Such a model is not only based, often, on the whim of an instructor, but also on inscribing social oppression, and codifying “rules” that destroy creativity. Such a system, I believe, produces rigid, inauthentic writing, damages writers (especially those from historically marginalized groups), and makes writing into an exercise in pleasing the professor. We will take a different approach.

Now, I expect that some of you want to hear “the brutal truth” about your work. Yes, we will be practicing craft elements, and I will give you feedback on your work that pronounces judgment if you desire (tell me if you’d prefer me to frame private feedback to you in that way), but in shares, we will be using a method of feedback that is more positive, and based on moving you towards your next draft, rather than pronouncing judgment. (My approach is based on best teaching and writing practices. Reach out if you’d like more details.)

You may also be annoyed by having to read or respond to the work of your peers. We often learn more from the flaws in the writing of others than in our own work, which we are too close to see clearly. Analyzing the work of your peers is one of the fastest ways to grow.

### **Writing Exercises (10%) and Lit Logs (10%)**

Most of your homework is in the form of a writing exercise or lit log. These must be posted to the discussion board by the NEXT Tuesday, **before class**. These are low stakes exercises: if you meet the word requirement and have answered the prompt, you receive full credit.

**IMPORTANT: This class is a safe space. Please provide trigger warnings. Also, if your piece contains graphic violence or depicted sexual assault, please send me an email in which you explain what purpose you feel the inclusion of this element is serving.** Generally, I subscribe to the “punching up/punching down” theory, which is that any “attack” on a group

that is in a position of power may be justified if it is liberating the marginalized, while any attack that further entrenches social inequality should be held to a higher level of scrutiny. If you are unsure about a piece, write to me. Really! I won't judge you. I may say the piece is okay for assessment but ask you not to share it with the class or share after a trigger warning. Let's be respectful of the lived experiences of our peers.

### Participation (20%)

Because much of this course depends on in-class discussion, participation is a huge part of your grade. Participation is partly about attendance. For attendance, you need to come in person and on time. **At the end of semester, I count the number of classes you have participated in and give you that as an initial grade, but I reserve the right to reduce that grade if you do not participate actively in class.** Please email me if you must miss a meeting.

Participation is also about communication. If in doubt, it is always better to let me know what is happening, even if you email me after class has started. Participation involves coming to classes prepared (having done the readings), paying attention, and speaking. If you have an anxiety condition, email me and I will come up with some other way for you to participate, such as coming up to me afterward and telling me what you thought, or emailing me a response. If you have not had time to read the assigned material, come to class anyway. **If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed, make up any work, or contact me for an explanation of assignments that were distributed.** Finally, participation is gauged by your ability to engage in polite and constructive feedback with your peers, contribute new or valuable material to discussions, and be a good team-player.

Every semester, there will be things that come up. It is common to get overwhelmed and drop the ball. Even if you have missed a lot of classes and feel ashamed, please reach out. There is likely something I can do, but if you wait until the end of semester to reach out, that is harder. **You can reach out to me through the “Questions for Kate” discussion board, which is located in the “Important Things Live Here” module.**

### Final Portfolio (10%) with Reflective Statement (15%)

We have no exam, but your final portfolio is to be uploaded to Canvas on 18 of May, by midnight PST. The portfolio should be:

- 1) A substantial body of work. I imagine this will be around 10-30 (double-spaced) pages, but we can speak about length, which may vary from project to project. It will be your revised assignment 1, your revised assignment 2, and your revised assignment 3.
- 2) A 1000-word reflective statement in which you talk about any of these (not all!):
  - What you hoped to achieve with your autoethnography/memoir
  - How your memoir ties into your overall sense of who you are as a writer/your writer journey/your artistic philosophy
  - How your writing process has changed
  - What major changes you've made/how your writings have evolved over the semester
  - How your revision process has changed
  - In what ways you hope to expand/revise the works in the future
  - Whether you plan to continue exploring a certain narrative innovation in your work
  - A particular text, theory, or writer we looked at that inspired you and why
  - How this writing has connected you to others, the world, or yourself

This reflection does not need to be formal (first-person and slang are fine), but it should be analytical, precise, and make use of the terms and techniques we've discussed in class. You may quote authors we have discussed in class and should quote specific lines and words from your own work. I do not expect your final thesis to be *perfect*—many of them will still be works in progress! But your final submission should be clean and proofread. I will give you more formal notice later in the semester.

## Key Due Dates

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2/27: Draft of Memory/Character Essay Due (AS1) and Share 1 in Class

3/12: Final of Memory/Character Essay (AS1) Due

4/9: Draft of Space/Event Essay Due (AS2) and Share 2 in Class

4/23: Final of Space/Event Essay (AS2) Due

4/27: Draft of Autoethnography (AS3 Due)

4/30: Share 3 of Autoethnography Draft, peer responses due *before class*

5/7: Share 3 in class and Final Showcase (not graded)

## Grading Policy

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- I grade based on three things: 1) Whether you follow the rubric, 2) Effort, 3) Improvement. Everyone, if they try, can get an A in my course.
- I design assignments to be as transparent as possible. I want you to succeed. If you are on academic probation, have a specific grade average you want/need to maintain, or are just keen to improve your grades, email or talk to me ASAP and we can come up with a plan to keep you on track.
- I recommend completing all easy grades, such as participation and homework, because just completing them gives you 100% for that component.
- I use a version of labor-based grading. This means if you do the work, you get the grade. This does not mean that writing exercises and logs are “busy work,” however. It is because numerous studies have shown that the best way to improve writing is by **doing** it, consistently, especially in tandem with instruction. For this reason, nearly all of the grade, except for the final portfolio, is dependent on completion. **I am understanding, but if you submit something late, I may choose to give you credit, but I reserve the right to not award credit for significantly late work.**
- Upload to Canvas. Please try to upload your exercises, when possible, to the discussion post, or the assessment folder if there is one.
- If your work is late (for the “Share Sessions” or the final portfolio submission), I may not be able to give you feedback.
- Extra Credit. If you like, you can resubmit an assignment with revisions for an improved grade.

## Course Policies

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- This document serves as a contract of agreement between you and I. It is up to you to read it.
- **Emails.** I check the “Questions for Kate” board daily. Expect a response within 24-48 hours unless it is on the weekend. If you post after five PM, I may not read it till the following

morning. If you send me a question the night before an assignment is due, I will try to respond in time. **You may get one, but please do not expect a response outside 9-5, M-F.**

- **Don't panic.** Tech glitches happen, things fail to upload. I am not unreasonable in the face of these mishaps, but please communicate with me via the “Questions for Kate” board.
- **Be courteous.** You may make a point passionately, but the following will not fly: interrupting, hogging the floor, raising one’s voice, sarcastic put-downs, eye-rolling/scoffing, or making others feel like their contributions are not important. This classroom is a safe space for everyone, regardless of political affiliation, religion, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, or illness. It is crucial to frame our opinions in a constructive way. Any behavior that threatens the safety in which true intellectual thought can occur will result in a warning, and if it persists, in removal from the class.

This class is a place to practice the professionalism and social grace required of you as fair-minded adults, writers, and public intellectuals. Part of your participation grade depends on your ability to entertain ideas that are foreign to your own, and to accept the co-existence of more than one value system. It is acceptable to challenge an opinion, provided it is done in a non-hostile and reasoned way. In this class, you will never be penalized for the stance that you take; you will be graded solely based on the *nuance, expression, and techniques* that you marshal to make your point or tell your story. Feel free to write what you want, but be aware that what you think, like what everyone else thinks, is open to criticism and must be defended artistically or intellectually. I will be held to the same standards. Basically, respect your peers as equals.

- **I'm here to help.** Communicate with me if you have concerns about the course or other related topics. I am willing to review drafts and provide feedback (usually within 48 hours). I do not want you to worry or feel uncertain about something because you’re nervous about asking. I want you to enjoy this class, and that’s hard if you’re stressed. **In sum, communicate, communicate, communicate, via the “Questions for Kate” discussion board! I am understanding, but I need to know what’s happening.**

- **Finally, raise issues with my teaching.**\*\*\* I am a learner too. Let me know if you think I could handle assessments better, if readings are too difficult, or if I am doing something that makes your learning tricky. No criticism will be held against you; in fact, I consider feedback a sign of investment in the class. Half-way through the semester, I will do an in-class survey on how the course is going, where you can comment anonymously on my teaching and course.\*\*\* I am trying to figure out how to allow you to do this anonymously, as in, not via the “Questions” board.

## Tips to Succeed in This Course

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- **Speak.** It can be challenging to express thoughts aloud, but please, try. Your voice is an essential contribution, and your perspective important. You have no idea who else is sitting there, trying to summon up the courage to ask a similar question. There are no silly questions: often questions that seem silly reflect the most profound engagement. Very often I will ask the class for thoughts and feelings. Usually, feelings come before thoughts. For example, that line makes me uncomfortable, or that idea is beautiful. Emotions can be lightning rods. If you feel something about the text, say so! It is likely that we can take that feeling up like a string, and it will lead us to an important thought.
- **Be uncomfortable sometimes.** Sometimes, I may ask you to do a prompt that leaves you feeling exposed. Please, sit with this discomfort if you can. You never need share anything you don’t want to, but in my experience, the stuff that I am the most scared by is almost always the best, most original, and most moving content I have to offer, and the most likely to lead to personal transformation. This is good discomfort.

Alternatively, you may feel uncomfortable because you are directionless and don’t know what to write about. I understand. The pressure to create can be overwhelming. “Blanking” is a thing, but that there are plenty of strategies to overcome it. If you’re stuck, or have been painfully stuck for a more-than-usual amount of time and don’t know what to do, reach out. This is bad discomfort.

Another *bad* kind of uncomfortable is if you feel unsafe in the class or unsure of what you are meant to be doing or why you are being asked to do it. If you feel uncomfortable in this way, speak to me immediately.

- **Take notes.** The action of taking notes aids retention, even if you never look at them.
- **Don't try to please me.** I am not a professor who grades you based on whether you agree with me. What produces the best writing is you exploring your own voice, ideas, passions, and experiences. That said, it can take a while to come up with your own voice, so don't feel bad about emulating styles and texts we encounter in class. The point is that you find things you like and engage with them. Whenever I give you a prompt, feel free to take it in a wildly different direction. Prompts are there to get you started, not slow you down.
- **Share Ideas.** If there's something—a text, or concept—you'd love us to discuss in class, let me know, and I'll try to include it!