English 487: Advanced Nonfiction Workshop

Instructor: Barbara Ashwood

Class Meeting: Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:30-4:45 pm in Simpkins 308

Email: b-ashwood@wiu.edu
Phone: 309-298-2431
Office: Simpkins Hall 107
Office Hours: Office Hours: T/TH: 1:00-2:45, W: 1:00-1:30

Course Description:

English 487 is an advanced level creative nonfiction workshop that builds upon the knowledge and skills acquired in English 387. You will continue to improve your writing through exercises, analysis and discussion of creative nonfiction pieces (including memoir, personal essays, literary journalism, and flash nonfiction), texts about craft, and the feedback you receive during workshops. You are expected to not only compose and edit your own pieces, but also provide thoughtful and detailed criticism of all texts.

Course Structure:

For the first three weeks of class, we will read and discuss short creative nonfiction works and complete a variety of writing exercises. There will be conferences, and then we will begin the first round of workshops. We will then read and discuss a few more texts and begin the second round of workshops. The last part of the course will focus on flash nonfiction (including student presentations and a third round of workshops) and preparing pieces for publication and public readings.

Course Objectives:

You will read, discuss, write, and critique, honing your ability to:

- Actively participate in creative writing workshops.
- Recognize and use craft elements to improve your writing.
- Use workshop critiques to help you revise your work.
- Further understand important characteristics of creative nonfiction and analyze the work of writers in the genre.
- Better understand your identity as a writer and prepare for reading prose before an audience.
- Prepare pieces for publication and public reading.

Prerequisite: English 285 and 387
**Required Texts:**

*Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott

*In Fact: The Best Creative Nonfiction*, Lee Gutkind

*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones

**Grade Distribution:**

- **Exercises**: 10% (based on the number completed)
- **Critiques**: 15% (based on the quality of the response and number completed)
- **Workshop Manuscript 1 (12-15 pages)**: 15%
- **Workshop Manuscript 2 (12-15 pages)**: 15%
- **Workshop 3 (two pieces of flash nonfiction each under 750 words)**: 10%
- **Portfolio**: 15%
- **Group Discussion Leader**: 5%
- **Participation/Reading Quizzes**: 15%

**Exercises:**

In this class, we will be doing a number of creative writing exercises intended to help you explore the genre and important craft elements. Homework exercises should be typed and submitted the day they are due-- late work will not be accepted. If you are absent on a day that we do an exercise, you will not be able to make it up.

**Critiques:**

You are required to write a written response to each piece that is workshopped. These responses do not need to be formal, but they do need to provide thoughtful and thorough criticism of the work and be at least a half a page (doubled spaced) in length. You will print out and attach your response to your classmates’ manuscript and give it to him/her the day that the essay is workshopped. You must also electronically submit your critique to english.487.essays@gmail.com before class. Critiques submitted after the workshop will not be accepted, and your grade will suffer accordingly.

**Manuscripts and Final Portfolio:**

You will complete two 12-15 page (approximately 3600-4500 words) pieces this semester and two flash nonfiction works (each under 750 words). All pieces will be workshopped, and you will turn in revised versions of them for your final portfolio. Your portfolio will also include a 2-4 page reflection that considers your growth as a writer and explains what changes you made and why you made them.
All manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins. Please include the work’s title(s) and your name on the first page and include page numbers for the piece. You must carefully edit all manuscripts before and after workshop: do not expect your classmates or me to correct your grammatical mistakes.

Group Discussion Leader

You and a partner will lead a 10-15 minute discussion of two flash nonfiction pieces of your choice. You will assign these readings to the class before you are scheduled to present them.

Participation/Reading Quizzes:

Participation indicates more than just speaking out in class discussion and workshop; it also reflects your dedication to the class. Good participation means coming to class on time having read the material assigned for the day, being prepared to contribute your thoughts on the texts we are discussing and workshopping, and showing respect to your classmates and to me. Active listening and questioning are important components of participation. If anything hinders your ability to participate, please speak with me, and we will work together to resolve the situation.

I give reading quizzes when I don’t think the majority of the class is doing the readings. It is to your advantage to do the assigned readings.

Workshop:

We will establish a workshop schedule for the semester. Please carefully think about the time you sign up for, as you will not be allowed to change it. If you fail to submit your work on time, you will forfeit your workshop and receive a zero.

You are required to bring each person in class a paper copy of your work at least two days before it is scheduled to be workshopped. For example, if your story is being workshopped on Thursday, you need to distribute it to the class on Tuesday. You must also email me an electronic copy of your work to english.487.essays@gmail.com.

When your piece is being workshopped, you need to carefully listen to your classmates’ feedback and avoid responding unless you are asked a question. You will have the opportunity to speak once your classmates have finished reviewing your work.
**Grade Scale:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Range</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100-95</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-90</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67-74</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-66</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57-59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>&lt;1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Course Policies:**

**Attendance** is important to the success of this class and to your development as a writer. You may be absent up to four times for any reason. Absences for university-sanctioned events will count towards your absence limit, so please plan accordingly. Each absence after four will result in the lowering of your final grade by a full letter grade. Seven absences will result in failure for the course.

**Tardiness** is disruptive to the classroom environment and prevents you from fully participating and assimilating the information discussed in class. Excessive tardiness will result in an absence and a lowered participation grade.

**Academic Dishonesty** is a serious academic offense that can result in referral to the Committee on Academic Misconduct and failure for the course. Please refer to Western Illinois University’s Academic Integrity Policy for more information (http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php).

**Your work** must be completed and submitted on time. All assignments should be turned in during the class period when they are due. **Late work will not be accepted, and you will receive a zero for the assignment.** All writing assignments must be typed and double spaced with one-inch margins and a reasonable font (like Times New Roman 12 point).

You are expected to be respectful to your classmates and me. If you are disruptive and/or rude, you will be asked to leave class and will receive an absence for the day. You are also expected to exercise civility in your written critiques and provide constructive criticism of the work.

**Cell phones** are to be turned off and ignored for the entire class period. If I catch you texting during class, you will be marked absent for that day.
Resources:

Me. Take advantage of my office hours. I am here to help!

The Writing Center. The WIU Writing Center (http://www.wiu.edu/uwc) is available to provide free, professional writing tutoring and consultation. You may set up an appointment by calling 298-2815 or by going to the center at 341 Simpkins Hall.

Disability Support Services. “In accordance with University policy and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), academic accommodations may be made for any student who notifies the instructor of the need for an accommodation. For the instructor to provide the proper accommodation(s) you must obtain documentation of the need for an accommodation through Disability Support Services and provide it to the instructor. It is imperative that you take the initiative to bring such needs to the instructor's attention, as he/she is not legally permitted to inquire about such particular needs of students. Students who may require special assistance in emergency evacuations (i.e. fire, tornado, etc.) should contact the instructor as to the most appropriate procedures to follow in such an emergency. Contact Disability Support Services at 298-2512 for additional services.”

Leslie F. Malpass Library: http://www.wiu.edu/library

Information regarding student rights and responsibilities: http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php

And lastly, all assignments, texts, and due dates are subject to change.
CALENDAR

All assigned readings and homework for the day should be completed by the beginning of class.
Assignments, texts, and due dates are subject to change.

(1-20) Day 1: Introductions

- Introduction to course, texts, and syllabus

(1-22) Day 2: Generating Ideas

- *Bird By Bird*: “Introduction,” “Getting Started,” and “Short Assignments” (xi-20)
- *In Fact*: Annie Dillard, “Introduction: Notes for Young Writers” (xi-xvii), Lee Gutkind’s “The Creative Nonfiction Police” (xix-xxxiii)
- *In Short*: Stuart Dybek, “Lights” (31)
- Homework: In half an hour, complete Lamott’s writing prompt (described on pages 4-6) to the best of your ability.
- Open registration ends on 1/26

(1-27) Day 3: Creating Compelling Creative Nonfiction

- *Bird By Bird*: “Shitty First Drafts,” “Perfectionism,” “School Lunches,” and “Polaroids” (21-43)
- Homework: Complete Lamott’s “School Lunches Exercise” (described on page 34) and bring a photo from your childhood to class.

(1-29) Day 4: Character Development and Dialogue

- *Bird By Bird*: “Character” (44-53), “Plot” (54-63), “Dialogue” (64-73), and “False Starts” (80-84)
- *In Fact*: Meredith Hall, “Shunned” (49-70), Charles Simic “Dinner at Uncle Boris’s” (85-91), Andrei Codrescu, “Joe Stopped By” (307-317)
- Bring completed dialogue exercise to class
- Last day of restricted schedule change is 1/27
(2-03) Day 5: Incorporating Research

- *Bird By Bird*: “Set Design” (74-79)
- *In Fact*: Ruthann Robson, “Notes From a Difficult Case” (226-244), Judyth Har-Even, “Leaving Babylon: A Walk Through the Jewish Divorce Ceremony” (269-287), and Mark Bowden, “Finders Keepers: The Story of Joey Coyle” (189-225)

(2-05) Day 6: “I” and “Eye” in Literary Journalism

- *Bird By Bird*: “Looking Around” and “The Moral Point of View” (97-109)
- *In Fact*: Terry Tempest Williams, “Prayer Dogs” (92-108) and Sherry Simpson, “Killing Wolves” (133-162)
- David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster” (http://www.gourmet.com/magazine/2000s/2004/08/consider_the_lobster)
- Bring completed literary journalism exercise to class

(2-10) Day 7: Optional Conferences

(2-12) Day 8: No Class—Lincoln’s Birthday

(2-17) Day 9: Manuscript 1 Workshop

(2-19) Day 10: Manuscript 1 Workshop

- *Bird By Bird*: “Plot Treatment” through “How Do You Know When You’re Done?” (85-94)

(2-24) Day 11: Manuscript 1 Workshop

(2-26) Day 12: Manuscript 1 Workshop

- *Bird By Bird*: “Broccoli” through “Jealousy” (110-130)

(3-3) Day 13: Manuscript 1 Workshop

(3-5) Day 14: Manuscript 1 Workshop

- *Bird By Bird*: “Index Cards” through “Writing Groups” (133-161)
(3-10) **Day 15: Writing Challenges/ Self-Reflection Not Self-Centeredness**

- *Bird By Bird*: “Someone to Read Your Drafts” through “Writer’s Block” (162-182)
- *In Fact*: Lauren Slater, “Three Spheres” (2-23), Leslie Rubinkowski “In the Woods” (318-330); Jana Richman “Why I Ride” (395-418), and Phillip Lopate, “Delivering Lily” (419-440)
- Homework: Complete Lamott’s Letter Exercise (described on pages 172-175)

(3-12) **Day 16: No Class**

(3-17) **Day 17: Spring Break: No Class**

(3-19) **Day 18: Spring Break: No Class**

(3-24) **Day 19: Manuscript 2 Workshop**

(3-26) **Day 20: No Class**


(3-31) **Day 21: Manuscript 2 Workshop**

- *In Short*: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Sunday” (92-93) and Naomi Shihab Nye, “Mint Snowball” (94-95)

(4-2) **Day 22: Manuscript 2 Workshop**

- *In Short*: Bia Lowe, “Across the Street” (102-103) and Bill Capossere, “A Wind from the North” (104-106)
- Last day to drop course is 4/6

(4-7) **Day 23: Manuscript 2 Workshop**

- *In Short*: David James Duncan, “Rose Vegetables” (120-122), Alec Wilkinson “Call Guy” (146-148) and Jane Moress Schuster, “Sanctuary” (244-246)

(4-9) **Day 24: Manuscript 2 Workshop**

- *In Short*: Michael Shay, “We Are Distracted” (288-292) and Bernard Cooper, “The Fine Art of Sighing” (301-304)
(4-14) Day 25: **Manuscript 2 Workshop/ Intro to Flash Nonfiction**
- *In Short:* Bernard Cooper, “Preface: The Disproportionate Power of the Small” (20-22) and Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones, “Editor’s Introduction” (23-28)
- Bring your notes for *In Short* pieces to class

(4-16) Day 26: **Flash Nonfiction**
- Presentations

(4-21) Day 27: **Flash Nonfiction**
- Presentations

(4-23) Day 28: **Flash Nonfiction Workshop**

(4-28) Day 29: **Flash Nonfiction Workshop**

(4-30) Day 30: **Flash Nonfiction Workshop**

(5-5) Day 31: **Flash Nonfiction Workshop**
- *Bird By Bird:* “Writing a Present” through “Giving” (185-207)

(5-7) Day 32: **Beyond the Workshop**
- *Bird By Bird:* “Publication” through “The Last Class” (208-237)

Your portfolio is due during the final exam period (5/14 @ 3:00)