

ENGL 604: The Nonfiction Experience  
Section 32785  
Fall 2018  
WPH 200, Wednesday, 4:30-6:50 p.m.  
Instructor: M. G. Lord  
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**ENGL 604 The Nonfiction Experience (This is a provisional syllabus and it may change or evolve during the semester.)**

**Introduction and Purpose:**

This is a graduate-level course with a focus on nonfiction. It will help you build a portfolio in essential genres so that you are prepared when an editor invites you to write a specific kind of piece.

This course will have two components: We will read exemplary published stories and discuss why and how they work. **I have set up a bulletin board on Blackboard on which I expect you to write at least two paragraphs about the assigned reading—which we will also discuss in class.** At times we will do exercises that are suggested by what we have read. Then we will write—and revise—our own pieces. The big challenge in this class—and a challenge you yourselves suggested when we met last Spring—is to craft a proposal for a nonfiction book.

Because you are also in the internship class, we may discuss some of the ethical issues raised by the reading for that class. By the end of this course, you will have expanded your literary skillset through exercises that could lead to publishable articles. Most significantly, you will have an original book proposal that you have revised and that, if you are so inclined, you might show to agents or editors.

**Course Requirements:**

This is not a lecture course. My role is not to decode the class readings. I expect students to read as writers so that they can discern what the author of the assigned text achieved and how he or she achieved it. The best writers read widely and extensively in the area in which they choose to work.

I will give you scans, photocopies, or links for most of the assigned reading. But you will also need to be familiar with some material in the required texts.

Each student will also generate original work and submit it for critique in class. I expect each student to share useful observations **both in class and on paper** about his or her fellow students' writing exercises, stories and essays.

I will be available for conferences all semester. We will see one another in the LEAP internship class. We will work to avoid being bored or up to our eyebrows with each other. We will value our shared journey into the universe of nonfiction.

**Specific requirements:**

- **Portfolio:** By the end of the semester, you should have produced a portfolio of writing: a piece about a place, a book review, a long piece that may have evolved out of one of the exercises, and a nonfiction book proposal. I need to see the revised version of your book proposal and one of the longer pieces. Please email them to me by December 5.
- **Attendance:** This is a small workshop class. As a consequence, your presence is essential—physically, mentally, and in conversation. More than one unexcused absence can reduce your grade. If an emergency comes up and you cannot be in class, please discuss this with me beforehand.
- **Class Participation** is critical to student grades. This means that you will post at least **two paragraphs** of commentary on Blackboard in response to the reading assignment.
- **Class Discussion/Workshop** During workshop sessions, you should be prepared to offer oral comments on your colleague's work. Please also annotate printed copies of each exercise. *If there are long stretches of silence during a discussion period, each student's grade will drop—even if he or she writes like Tolstoy.*
- **Deadlines** Because this is a workshop-style class, you will need to email your exercises and essays to your classmates by six p.m. two days before the class. **I will provide you with an email list for our class. It's your responsibility to email your work to your classmates and to print out and annotate the exercises and essays you receive from them.**
- **Flexibility** From time to time, visitors—agents, editors or other writers--may visit this class. If this happens, students may have to deviate from the syllabus. *We may also change the reading assignments if a distinguished visitor is available to come to class.* The distinguished visitor's schedule will take precedence—just as it would in real life. Students will learn to be flexible. Inflexibility will have a negative impact on a student's grade.

### **Grade breakdown:**

Class participation: 25%

Quality of Writing: 50 %

Exercises/ homework/ submitting work for class critique and critiquing other students' work: 25%

For more information about University grading policies, please refer to the USC Grading and Correction of Grades handbook, found at:

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/ARR/grades/gradinghandbook/index.html>

**Required Texts:**

William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*

Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*

Susan Faludi's *In The Darkroom*

Sheila Weller's *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon—And the Journey of a Generation*

**Suggested Texts:**

Stephen King's *On Writing*

Carolyn See's *Making a Literary Life*

*We Wear the Mask: 15 True Stories of Passing in America*, edited by Lisa Page and Brando Skyhorse

**WEEK 1: August 22: Introduction**

We will introduce ourselves and make sure we're on the same page about what's expected in terms of attendance and delivery of assignments. If we have time, we'll do an in-class writing exercise.

**Reading Assignment:** Read William Zinsser's "Writing About Places" and Anne Fadiman's "Under Water."

**Writing Assignment:** This assignment, like many of our assignments, will have two components—a critical part, that you will post on Blackboard, and a creative part, that you will write as a double-spaced essay and email to your colleagues, who will print and annotate the document. Anne Fadiman's "Under Water" is on its surface about an incident at a summer camp. After many years, however, Fadiman transformed the incident into a pretext for a deeper meditation. Please comment on Blackboard. Then write 500 words on a place that is significant to you. You may want to expand this later into a longer piece. But for now, give us an evocative appetizer that we can discuss in class. **You will email this exercise to your classmates no later than six p.m. on the Monday before the Wednesday class.**

**WEEK 2: August 29: Writing About Places**

Discuss your short pieces about a place.

**Reading Assignment:** Read Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*. If you haven't seen Jason Reitman's movie, *Tully*, this would be a good time to stream it, but this isn't required.

**Writing Assignment:** Please write a conversation between your present self and your much-younger self. Alternatively, write one between your much-older self (as you envision this person) and your present self. Or combine all three, if you can do this in 500 words. Exercises should run 500-600 words, or no more than three typed, double-spaced pages. The exercise does not need to be formatted like a play. You can include information about where the scene is taking place. It's okay to speculate—or use an imaginative device—in nonfiction as long as you clearly indicate what is speculation and what is reported fact.

You will email this exercise to your classmates no later than 6 p.m. on the Monday before the Wednesday class.

### WEEK 3: September 5: Writing in Scenes

We will discuss your exercises. We will also discuss how Albee structured his play. What strategy did he use to reveal information—and how did that strategy enhance its drama? In class, we'll look at a scene from a real-life news program and how the writers of *The Newsroom* dramatized it. Nonfiction can unfold in scenes.

**Reading Assignment:** Read the preface and the opening chapters--“Returns and Departures,” “Rear Window,” “The Original from the Copy,” and “Home Insecurity”-- in Susan Faludi's *In the Darkroom*.

**Writing Assignment:** Comment on how Faludi uses scenes—and her personal story—to introduce the larger story. Then write a mesmerizing 500-word opening scene that will catapult us into a story you want to tell.

### WEEK 4: September 12: Biography and Identity

**Reading Assignment:** Read Lisa Page's “Slipping into Darkness” and Margo Jefferson's “Negroland” in *We Wear the Mask*, edited by Lisa Page and Brando Skyhorse.

**Writing Assignment:** Please come up with questions for Lisa about her essay. Then write 500 words about a time in your life when you were deceitful about your identity. If you have always been scrupulously honest, write about how this has challenged you.

### WEEK 5: September 19: U and I

Discuss your essays on “passing”—or choosing never to “pass.” Lisa Page will join us via Skype from Washington, DC, to discuss her essay and the anthology.

**Reading Assignment:** Read Alice Walker's “Finding Zora,” Joy Castro's “No más Monkey,” and more of Susan Faludi's *In The Darkroom* (pages TBD).

**Writing Assignment:** In *U and I*, Nicholson Baker constructed a biography of John Updike that was entirely about Baker's relationship with Updike's work. I'm not assigning this book (you can read it if you want), but I'd like you to write 500 words suggested by “Finding Zora” and “No más Monkey,” essays that are similar in some ways to Baker's project. In each of these pieces, a writer profiles a person by detailing the writer's relationship to that person, often in the absence of the person. In Walker's piece, for example, the location of Zora Neale Hurston's formerly unmarked grave becomes a character. In Castro's essay, an object—and the writer's evolving feelings about that object—chart the course of her relationship with a friend.

Cut to the chase: Write 500 words about a person through a place or an object that is linked to that person.

### WEEK 6: September 26: More U and I

Discuss your pieces.

**Reading Assignment:** Read Sheila Weller's *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon--and the Journey of a Generation*.

**Writing Assignment:** Prepare questions to ask Sheila Weller in class. Comment on Blackboard about the advantages and disadvantages of a group biography—or a biography themed to a cultural phenomenon.

WEEK 7: October 3: So You Want to Write About Popular Music

Sheila Weller will join us from New York via Skype or conference call to discuss the challenges of reporting and writing her book. [Revised plan as of 10/2/2018: Weller will join us next week. Instead we'll discuss book proposal structure and look more closely at the structure of *In the Darkroom*.

**Reading Assignment:** Read more of Faludi's *In the Darkroom*.

**Writing Assignment:** Interview a person you want to profile. Write the introduction to a profile of the person you have interviewed. This can't be a canned piece. You will need fresh quotes to build this piece during the term.

WEEK 8: October 10: Show, Don't Tell. (Unless You Have To Tell.)

Weller will join us today. Discuss your plan for your introduction—I want to know whom you are interviewing or have interviewed and why. The interviews should also serve as pitches for a longer iteration of a profile.

**Reading Assignment:** Read selected music reviews (I will post scans) by Tim Page and an excerpt from his biography of Dawn Powell.

**Writing Assignment:** Continue the profile you began last week. Prepare questions for Tim Page.

WEEK 9: October 17. Looking at Books

Tim Page, a Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic and the biographer of Dawn Powell, will visit class to discuss biography and music writing.

**Writing Assignment:** Finish the profile. Try to keep it between 750 and 1,000 words. Email it to your classmates.

WEEK 10: October 24: Scenes and Circumstances

Discuss the finished profiles.

**Reading Assignment:** Finish reading *In the Darkroom*.

**Writing Assignment:** Write a book review of *In The Darkroom*, as if it were newly published and you were telling the world about it.

WEEK 11: October 31: So You Want to Write a Nonfiction Book

Discuss and critique the book reviews. If her schedule permits, Susan Faludi may Skype with us. This is not yet confirmed. But don't skip out on class because it's Halloween. Please.

**Reading Assignment:** Read Leon Edel's "Time" in *Literary Biography*. Read suggestions from agents and editors on how to structure a nonfiction proposal. I will post links and scans. (If you want, I will also share two of my successful nonfiction book proposals.)

**Writing Assignment:** On Blackboard, discuss the differences between a biography, a memoir, and a magazine-length profile. Write a short (600-word) book review of a book in the genre you prefer. You'll want this to be entirely your own—and something you might show to an assigning editor. And yes, you can do it in 600-words. I'll send a link of my own to prove this, if necessary.

#### WEEK 12: November 7: Incubating the Manuscript

Discuss your book reviews and the differences between the biographical genres that you have highlighted on Blackboard. We may have an agent visit the class to further discuss the crafting of a proposal.

**Reading Assignment:** TBD. Possibly material suggested by Edel's essay.

**Writing Assignment:** Time to take your first stab at a finished proposal. Remember that the writing in the proposal itself is part of what will sell the book. Remember to include comparable books—and discuss why your book occupies a unique space. If you can find sales figures for the comps, this, too, can be useful.

#### WEEK 13: November 14: Sell That Book.

Workshop your proposals in their larval form.

**No Reading Assignment.**

**Writing Assignment:** Keep polishing the proposals based on feedback.

#### WEEK 14: November 21: Thanksgiving. **No class.**

WEEK 15: November 28: This is our final class—a last opportunity to workshop sections of your book proposal as you see fit. A final version of this will be due on December 5. Please send it to me along with a revision of one of your other pieces via email.

### Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

#### Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](http://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

#### Support Systems:

*Student Counseling Services (SCS) – (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. [engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling)

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255*

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call*

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp)

*Sexual Assault Resource Center*

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: [sarc.usc.edu](http://sarc.usc.edu)

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086*

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. [equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu)

*Bias Assessment Response and Support*

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support)

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. [dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

*USC Support and Advocacy (USCSA) – (213) 821-4710*

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa)

*Diversity at USC*

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. [diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

*USC Emergency Information*

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible. [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

*USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime.*