**USC** Dornsife

Department of English

**English 297g (32645): Introduction to the Genre of Nonfiction Units: 4/Spring 2019/GFS 101**

**Professor Chris Freeman**

**Office: Taper Hall 410; T/Th 11-12:15 & by appt.**

**Contact Info: cefreema@usc.edu**

“In nonfiction the notes give you the piece. Writing nonfiction is more like sculpture, a matter of shaping the research into the finished thing.”—Joan Didion

“The gap between what happens in life and what’s on the page is no greater or less, really, in the fiction than the nonfiction. Because some of it is made up in the nonfiction as well. . . It’s all pretty ordinary stuff. But I’m keen on this idea of—I guess I’d use the term the nonfiction work of art—being judged by all of the criteria used to judge novels.”—Geoff Dyer

“The hardest thing in the world is simplicity. And the most fearful thing, too. It becomes more difficult because you have to strip yourself of all your disguises, some of which you didn’t know you had. You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone. That is the goal.”—James Baldwin

“The writer does not and should not have the last word. That belongs to the reader.”—Tobias Wolff

**ABOUT THE COURSE/LEARNING GOALS**

Nonfiction is writing that’s true. Well, sort of. It takes many forms—essays, reviews, histories, biographies, memoirs, scientific and sociological studies. But of course, it is also crafted. In this course, we will work through many genres, many forms of nonfiction writing; we will study the craft and the process, starting with the end product, the published work. When you read for this class, read as a reader and as a writer. Craft, style, form, and content will all figure into our work.

We will do all we can to make this class a conversation about nonfiction writing—how it works, how its forms have changed, how research is involved, how to read it, how to write it and write about it. In lecture, we will cover important writers, movements, forms, theories, and larger questions about the medium and the messages. How do texts connect to their historical moment? To the past? The future? Whose voices are included? Whose are absent? My job is to get you more interested in what nonfiction writing is and what it does; your job, is to be fully engaged with our material; to read our material, to think about it, and to come to lecture prepared to discuss it, to read it out loud, and to try to interpret it.

In your discussion sections, your instructors will elaborate on lecture material, but at the same time, they will pursue their own passions about writing by working with you on work by a few of their favorite authors. The idea is that you’ll get introduction and intermediate take on nonfiction in lecture and an advanced immersion in section.

*NOTE: You must attend and engage with the lectures and the discussion sections fully. Some large lecture courses are lax about attendance; this one IS NOT; it is not a drop in class; it is not nap time. I prefer that you use printed copies of the books and outside material (from Blackboard, etc.) so you can mark them up as you read and reflect on them; that will help you contribute to our discussions and generate ideas for your own writing.* ***You are expected to attend lectures (roll will be taken) and discussion sections; to participate by reading, commenting, and asking questions; and you will of course do a reasonable amount of writing.*** *Likely assignments/responsibilities: write short to medium length essays about our readings (analysis); do some creative writing and reflection; complete a take-home final exam assignment; attend at least one author’s reading, on or off campus and write a short response paper; and do your part to participate in discussion, both in section and in lecture.*

You will leave this course having confronted complex literary texts which deal with many important and controversial issues of our times; you will have participated in discussions about those texts; you will have written about them, honing your skills as a critical thinker and writer. Your professor and teaching assistant will work in conjunction to ensure that the wide range of readings and topics introduce you to the art and craft of nonfiction writing and to the ways in which narrative and storytelling help shape our world and our understanding of it.

**DISCUSSIONS SECTIONS/LEADERS**

There are two TAs for this course. Terry Willingham’s sections are on Tuesday and Wednesday; Eli Dunn’s sections are Friday. Willingham’s focal text is Norman McLean, *Young Men and Fire* (25th anniversary ed.) from University of Chicago (2017); Dunn’s is *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson from Graywolf Press. There will be other readings posted on Blackboard.

**GE CATEGORY B/HUMANITIES LEARNING GOALS:** You will leave this course having confronted complex literary texts which deal with many important and controversial issues of our times; you will have participated in discussions about those texts; you will have written about them, honing your skills as a critical thinker and writer. Your professor and teaching assistant will work in conjunction to ensure that the wide range of readings and topics introduce you to the art and craft of nonfiction writing and to the ways in which such narratives help shape our world and our understanding of it.

**HOT SEAT**: This structure will facilitate the atmosphere of a seminar, instead of a large lecture course. At every class meeting beginning on January 15th, I will write the name of a section on the board before class starts; the students in that section will sit in the FRONT ROW. Everyone in the hot seat is on the spot: you are expected to volunteer to read out loud, to make comments, and to ask questions; everyone else may also participate, but they get recognized AFTER the hot seat students have their turn/say. I will take roll of the hot seat section; if you miss TWICE, you forfeit all of your lecture class participation.

**LIVE LITERARY EVENT:** If you attend an approved literary event and write a 750-word response to it (within a week of attending), you’ll receive full credit for one part of the final exam. We will announce events from time to time in lecture and section; you can also check ALOUD LA, the downtown public library event series, and local bookstores (Skylight Books in Los Feliz; Book Soup in West Hollywood; Vroman’s in Pasadena; The Last Bookstore in Downtown LA). Ask your TA for event approval if you have any doubt about whether it will count.

**JOINT EDUCATION PROJECT:** If you successfully complete JEP affiliated with this course, you will receive full credit for one part of the final exam assignment. Be sure to confirm with your TA that you are participating in JEP.

**A NOTE ON CONDUCT/PROFESSIONALISM**: This is a large lecture course, not an online class. You are expected to attend lecture—in the sense of being in a seat in our room and in the sense of engaging, listening, and participating. ***This is not a ‘drop in’ course; if that’s how you plan to approach it, please withdraw. Also, it is not nap time or lunch time. Anyone who thinks otherwise will be asked to leave.***

**ASSIGNMENTS**

Short response paper/diagnostic exercise (500-750 words; due week three): 10%

Essay One (1000-1200 words; week six): 25%

Essay Two (1200-1500 words; week eleven): 25%

Class Participation and attendance (section & lecture): 15%

Final exam (1200-1500 words; take home, due 5/9 at 4pm electronically to your section leader): 25%.

NOTE: If you attend an approved literary event and write a 750-word essay about the experience, that essay will take the place of one part of your take home final exam. This must be completed and turned in at section by April 20.

A: 930-1000; A-: 929-895; B+: 894-870; B: 869-830; B-: 829-795; C+: 794-770, etc.

**TEXTS**

Melissa Goldthwaite, et al., *The Norton Reader* (14th SHORTER edition), Norton, 2016 (ISBN: 978-0-393-61741-2)

Nick Flynn, *The Reenactments* (Norton, 2013)

NOTE: you will also buy one book for your section (Willingham, *Young Men and Fire*; Dunn, *The Argonauts*)

**SCHEDULE (subject to revision as pacing of the course necessitates)**

Week One: Norton Reader: Personal Accounts

1/8: introduction to the class and to “nonfiction”; Patricia Hampl, “Red Sky in the Morning” (Blackboard); Nick Flynn video clip and introduction

1/10: Readings: Joan Didion, “On Going Home”; Maya Angelou, “Graduation”

Week Two: Norton Reader: Profiles

1/15: First day of hot seat; readings: Scott Russell Sanders, “Under the Influence”; Annie Dillard, from “An American Childhood”; Ian Frazier, “Take the F”

1/17: Judith Ortiz Cofer, “More Room”; E. B. White, “Once More to the Lake”; response paper assigned in section

Week Three: Norton Reader: Gender and Human Nature

1/22: Readings: Anna Quindlen, “Between the Sexes, a Great Divide”; Roxane Gay, “A Tale of Three Coming Out Stories”

1/24: Henry Petroski, “Falling Down is Part of Growing Up”; Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, “On the Fear of Death”; **short response paper (500-750 words, due at section)**

Week Four: Norton Reader: Cultural Analysis

1/29: **guest lecture by TA Eli Dunn;** Blackboard readings TBA

1/31: Readings: Annie Leonard, “The Story of Bottled Water”; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “In the Kitchen”; Brent Staples, “Black Men and Public Space”; Blackboard: Claudia Rankine; **discuss essay one in section**

Week Five: Norton Reader: Education

2/5: Readings: Frederick Douglass, “Learning to Read”; Eudora Welty, “Clamorous to Learn”; Jonathan Kozol, “Fremont High School”

2/7: William Zinsser, “College Pressures”; Mike Rose, “Blue Collar Brilliance”; Blackboard, Louis Menand, “Live and Learn”

Week Six: Norton Reader: Language and Communication

2/12: Readings: Maxine Hong Kingston, “Tongue Tied”; Richard Rodriguez, “Aria”

2/14: Stephen King, from “On Writing”; **Essay One due (1000-1200 words, in section)**

Week Seven: Norton Reader: Nature and the Environment

2/19: **Guest Lecture: Terry Willingham;** readings on Blackboard TBD

2/21: Readings: John McPhee, “Under the Snow”; Brian Doyle, “Joyas Voladoras”

Week Eight: Norton: Media and Technology

2/26: Readings: Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”; Judith Newman, “To Siri with Love”; **discuss essay two in section**

2/28: Eula Biss, “Time and Distance Overcome”; Dennis Baron, “Facebook Multiplies Genders but Offers Users the Same Three Tired Pronouns”

Week Nine: Norton Reader: Science

3/5: Readings: Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, “The (Elusive) Theory of Everything”; Stephen Jay Gould, “Sex, Drugs, Disasters, and the Extinction of Dinosaurs”

3/7: Rebecca Skloot, “The Woman in the Photograph”; Alan Lightman, “Our Place in the Universe”

**SPRING BREAK: Watch “Being Flynn” on Netflix**

Week Ten: Norton Reader: Literature and the Arts

3/19: Readings: Eudora Welty, “One Writer’s Beginnings”; Vladimir Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers”

3/21: Virginia Woolf, “In Search of a Room of One’s Own”; Michael Hamad, “Song Schematics”

Week Eleven: Norton Reader: Philosophy and Religion

3/26: Readings: Langston Hughes, “Salvation”; Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”

3/28: Annie Dillard, “Sight into Insight”; Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth”;

**Essay Two due (1200-1500 words)**

Weeks Twelve through Fifteen: Case Study: Nick Flynn, *The Reenactments* and some work on Blackboard

Week Twelve (4/2 &4/4): Flynn, *Reenactments* (2013): Parts 1-7 and view “Being Flynn” on Netflix if you haven’t

Week Thirteen (4/9 & 11): Flynn, *Reenactments*, Parts 8-13

Week Fourteen (4/16 & 18): Flynn, *Reenactments,* Parts 14-20; **final exam assigned**

Week Fifteen (4/23 & 25): Flynn, *Reenactments*, Parts 15-25; course evaluations

**FINAL EXAM due by email to your section leader (due Tuesday, 5/7, by noon)**

**Definition of Excellence in Teaching**

**USC Department of English**

All writing is creative, and all civic engagement requires a sophisticated understanding of discourse and interpretation. The USC Department of English is committed to the power of the story, the word, and the image. We analyze and organize complex ideas, evaluate qualitative information, anticipate how real audiences respond to language, and study behaviors of complex characters leading uncertain lives with competing values. We develop critical abilities for a successful life, but our stories tell us why life is worth living.

Excellence in teaching is an active engagement with these commitments, perspectives, and values. A student with a major in **English** should graduate with an appreciation for (1) the relations between representation and the human soul, and (2) the relations between words and ideas. Teachers will encourage this appreciation through their knowledge and conveyance of the subject, the appropriateness of instructional materials, and the quality of their students’ responses. We expect our students to:

* understand the major representations in English discourse from earliest beginnings to the current moment; all literatures exist in conversation with earlier literatures;
* organize and interpret evidence;
* feel the experiences of others, both by engaging in literatures and by their own efforts to create new literatures;
* understand how periods, cultural intentions, and literary genres differ;
* grasp the skills and theories of interpretation, and the history of our own discipline;
* see how interpretive interests shift with time and place;
* attend to linguistic details of semantics, phrasing, and structure;
* assume there are reasonable alternative understandings of a text;
* adjudicate differences through reasoned arguments that honestly engage counter-arguments.

Our students will have lives in very different arenas, but all calling for skills in discourse, empathy, civil argument, and civic engagement. We cannot and should not say what those careers will be; we train students for jobs that have not yet been invented.

English Department students with an interdisciplinary major in **Narrative Studies** should expect instruction that inculcates an appreciation for all of the above, and coordinates with definitions of teaching excellence in USC’s corresponding departments.

The Department of English adheres to the modalities of instruction published in the “USC Definition of Excellence in Teaching.”

Approved September 18, 2018

Undergraduate Studies Committee

Department of English

**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 Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards*<https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. 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/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

## **Support Systems**

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* <http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html>provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/>will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.