

English 297g (32656): Introduction to the Genre of Nonfiction Units: 4/Spring 2022/Tuesday & Thursday 3:30-4:50pm PT THH 102/Zoom

Professor Chris Freeman: cfreema@usc.edu

Office hours 2-3:15pm T/Th and by appt.

Section Leaders: Sara Fetherolf (fetherol@usc.edu)

Tues 1 & 2); Sam Cohen (samantec@usc.edu) Thurs 1 & 2); Austen Rosenfeld (alrosenf@usc.edu) Fri 11 & 12)

“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. . . 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 best essays come from the moment in which people really need to work something out.” —Marilynne Robinson

“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, diaries, scientific, philosophical, and sociological studies. It is usually highly researched, and, 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, in lecture and section.

We will do all we can to make this class a conversation about nonfiction writing—how it works, how its forms have evolved, 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 attentively and thoroughly, to think about it, and to come 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 texts 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. **You are expected to attend lectures and discussion sections; to participate by reading, commenting, and asking questions; and you will of course do a reasonable amount of writing.** Your 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; and do your part to participate in discussion, both in section and in lecture. You will also be encouraged to attend one virtual author's reading, and write a short response paper, which will count as one part of your final exam assignment.*

DISCUSSIONS SECTIONS/LEADERS

There are three TAs for this course: all of whom are advanced PhD candidates in Creative Writing/English. They have chosen a main text for section, so you will be doing your section work based on your TA's selection. Work load will be equivalent across all sections. Each TA will give a craft talk so that you will all meet them and hear more about their work and their perspective on our material.

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.

TRIGGER WARNING: As the poet Lucille Clifton once said in an interview, “You cannot play for safety and make art.” As you know, poetry often confronts very complex issues. Please be aware that you should SKIP any poem and step away from any discussion as needed this semester, in lecture or section, no questions asks. We can’t always give the TW in advance as it’s impossible to know what might trigger someone, but we will try to give a general sense of what’s coming on these issues.

HOT SEAT: This structure will facilitate the atmosphere of a seminar, instead of a large lecture course. At every class meeting beginning week two, one discussion section will be designated as the “hot seat.” 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. We will arrange seating in the lecture hall so that you are sitting with your section, and the hot seat group will always sit front and center. You will be in Hot Seat four times; dates are listed on the schedule below, beginning week two.

LITERARY EVENT: If you attend an approved virtual literary event and write a 500 to 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. Some will be in person and some will be virtual In addition to USC-sponsored events, you can 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) for possibilities. The *LA Times* Festival of Books will be on campus in April, so that will also provide a great opportunity to attend some great talks/readings. Ask your TA for event approval if you have any doubt about whether it will count. Response due to your TA before the last day of class; you should turn it in within a week of the event you attended.

A NOTE ON CONDUCT/PROFESSIONALISM: This is a large lecture course. You are expected to attend lecture and to engage with the material and the conversation. *This is not a ‘drop in’ course; if that’s how you plan to approach it, please withdraw. Poor attendance will have severe consequences on your grade.*

ASSIGNMENTS

Essay one: Short “get to know you” essay (500-750 words; due in section week four): 10%

Essay two (1000-1200 words, due by section, week seven or eight): 20%

Essay three (1200-1500 words, due by section week twelve): 30%

Final Exam (1200-1500 words; take home, due Tuesday, May 10 at 4pm PT electronically to your section leader) 30%

Class Participation and attendance (section & lecture): 10%

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 by the last section meeting.

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* (Shorter 15th Edition), Norton, 2016 (ISBN paperback: 9780393690231; ebook, 9780393441277)

Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (Vintage, 2011): note, we will focus on this book on Thursdays through week ten of the course

Zadie Smith, *Intimations* (Penguin, 2020; ISBN: 9780593297612)

Charles Finch, *What Just Happened: Notes on a Long Year* (Knopf, 2021; ISBN: 9780593319079)

NOTE: you will also buy one book for your section and we will have occasional readings which will be posted on our Blackboard page under “Content.”

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

Part One: The Norton Reader and Isabel Wilkerson

Week One (on Zoom)

T, 1/11: introduction to the class and to “nonfiction” and to our major texts and how things will work

TH, 1/13: Wilkerson, “Note on Process” & “Afterword” (539-547) & part one, pp. 3-15

Week Two

T, 1/18: NORTON, “Home and Family”: Readings: Joan Didion, “On Going Home”; Viet Thanh Nguyen, from “The Displaced”; “get to know you” essay one assigned in section this week; Hot Seat: Austen, Fri 11am

TH, 1/20: Wilkerson, from part 2, “Beginnings,” pp. 18-46; Ida Mae Gladney; Hot Seat: Austen, Fri 12pm

Week Three

T, 1/25: First day of hot seat; NORTON: Jose Antonio Vargas, "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant"; Tara Westover, from *Educated*; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 1pm

TH, 1/27: Wilkerson, part 2, continued, pp. 47-71, "George Swanson Starling";
1/28: P/NP deadline; last drop day; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 2pm

Week Four

T, 2/1 : Norton: Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of the Single Story";
Joey Franklin, "Working at a Wendy's"; Tate Walker, "The (Native) American Dream"; Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 1pm

TH, 2/3: Wilkerson: part two, 72-123, "Robert Pershing Foster"; "get to know you" essay one due to your TA this week; Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 2pm

Week Five

T, 2/8: NORTON: from "Self and Society": Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself"; Roxane Gay, "What Fullness Is"; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 1pm

TH, 2/10: Wilkerson, finish part two, 124-180; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 2pm

Week Six

T, 2/15: NORTON, "Cultural Analysis": Tim Kreider, "The 'Busy' Trap"; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "In the Kitchen"; Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 1pm 2pm

TH, 2/17: TA craft talk: Sara Fetherolf; **discuss essay two in section; last day to withdraw with W**

Week Seven

T, 2/22: TA craft talk: Sam Cohen

TH, 2/24: Wilkerson, part three, "Exodus," pp. 180-222; 2/25: last W day; Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 1pm

Week Eight

T, 3/1: TA craft talk: Austen Rosenfeld; **essay two due this week**

TH, 3/3: Wilkerson, part four, "The Kinder Mistress," pp. 225-302; Hot Seat: Austen, Fri 11am

Week Nine

T, 3/8: NORTON: "Cultural Analysis" continued: Mike Rose, "Blue Collar Brilliance"; Kathy Fish, "Collective Nouns for Humans in the Wild"; Rebecca Solnit, "Bird in a Cage"; last W day; Hot Seat: Austen, Fri 12pm

TH, 3/10: Wilkerson, pp. 302-63; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 1pm

SPRING BREAK: Keep reading Wilkerson

Week Ten

T, 3/22: NORTON: "Education": Lynda Barry, "The Sanctuary of School"; Maya Angelou, "Graduation"; discuss essay three in section; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 2 pm
TH, 3/24: Wilkerson, finish part four, 364-431; Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 1pm

Week Eleven

T, 3/29 NORTON: Stephen King, from *On Writing* (and on Blackboard); Brian Doyle, "Joyas Voladoras"; Alan Lightman, "Our Place in the Universe" (finishing Norton); Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 2pm
TH, 3/31: Wilkerson, part five, "Aftermath," pp. 432-538 (finishing Wilkerson); Hot Seat: Austen, Fri 12pm

Part Two, Case Study: Stories from Covid

Week Twelve

T, 4/5: Zadie Smith, from *Intimations* 1-28; **essay three due in section this week;**
Hot Seat: Austen, 11am
TH, 4/7: Charles Finch, from *What Just Happened: March 11, 2020-April 17*;
Blackboard: Patricia Hampl on memoir; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 2pm

Week Thirteen

T, 4/12: Smith, 29-51; Hot Seat: Sam, Thur 1pm
TH, 4/14: Finch, April 18-May 30, 2020; review of Finch (Blackboard); Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 2pm

Week Fourteen

T, 4/19: Smith, 52-end; discuss final exam assignment in section; Hot Seat: Sara, Tu 1pm
TH, 4/21: Finch, June 1-July 31, 2020; Hot Seat: Austen, Fri 11am
LA TIMES Festival of Books

Week Fifteen

T, 4/26: Finch, August 1-October 31, 2020; literary event response must be in this week; Hot Seat: Austen, Fri 12pm
TH, 4/28: finish Finch; wrap up course; online evaluations

FINAL EXAM due to your section leader by Tuesday, May 10, by 4 pm PT

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. 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

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

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

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

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

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

The Office of Disability Services and Programs Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. dsp.usc.edu

Student Support and Advocacy – (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

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

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

USC Department of Public Safety – UPC: (213) 740-4321 – HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24-hour emergency or to report a crime. Provides overall safety to USC community. dps.usc.edu

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