The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense.
—Tom Clancy

Half my life is an act of revision.
—John Irving

What are we doing, here?
In English 323, we have two primary goals: 1) to explore what creative nonfiction is, and 2) to explore how it’s written.

What creative nonfiction is: There’s a lot of interesting discussion among writers about just what this weird genre is—it’s not quite essay-writing in the academic sense, it’s not quite fiction. It’s a little of both, and it’s neither. To explore what creative nonfiction is, we’ll read and discuss some of the major authors in the field, some of the major sub-genres, and some essays about creative nonfiction. We’ll delve into some of the more interesting and difficult questions this genre raises about the differences between fact and fiction, and the differences between writing fiction and writing nonfiction. You as students will help shape some of the subject matter of our discussions—that is, you will help decide some of what we read in this course, and together we’ll follow whatever questions, issues, and interests we develop out of our own conversations. Discussion will form a major component of the course and your final grade. In addition to discussion, you’ll engage in a variety of writing assignments that will further encourage you to explore what creative nonfiction is.

How creative nonfiction is written: The best way to explore how creative nonfiction is written is to try writing it yourself, so when we’re not discussing creative nonfiction, we’ll be writing our own. Specifically, we’ll engage in various writing exercises, journal-writing, and workshops that will help you generate your own creative nonfiction and develop writing strategies to strengthen your creative nonfiction. In this course, the writing process is just as important, if not more important, than what comes out of the process, so we’ll spend considerable time exploring how we and other writers write, in addition to what we write. I’ll ask you to write first drafts in several different sub-genres of creative nonfiction, and later in the course I’ll ask you to choose one draft to develop into a polished piece at the end of the semester. This final draft will be submitted at the course’s end in a portfolio, which will also contain an informal essay about your final draft, and other various writings.

Because this is a 300-level course with prerequisites, I’m going to assume you have more than a passing interest in creative nonfiction. That means this isn’t a blow-off course. We’re going to treat each other like serious writers with some knowledge of literature and the craft of writing, and I’ll expect you to bring that knowledge to bear on what we do in this course.
Cool. What do I need to buy? What do I need to bring to class?
> A journal to be used exclusively for this class.
> A sturdy folder w/ pockets (to serve as your portfolio at the end of the semester).

**How do grades and stuff break down?**

*Major Assignments:*
- Attendance/Participation 300
- 5 Writing assignments 100 (20 pts each)
- Workshop 150
- Final Portfolio 250
- Journal 200

**How do I get all those attendance/participation points?**

1) Show up for class on time: You are allowed three unexcused absences. After that, each unexcused absence will lower your A/P grade by one increment. Example: Four unexcused absences will lower a B- to a C+. Six absences will lower a B- to a C-. Showing up more than ten minutes late will count as 1/3 of an absence. Show up ten minutes late three times and you’ve accrued one unexcused absence.

2) Frequently participate in class activities in a meaningful way: Talk a lot—to me and your peers. Ask questions. Make comments. You don’t have to say brilliant things, just be as thoughtful and engaged as you can. Your passion will rub off on others, and the whole class will benefit.

**What are those “writing assignment” things?**

The writing assignments are a series of five writing exercises assigned once per week in the first few weeks of the semester. They’re creative writing prompts designed to get you writing stuff that may eventually develop into the polished nonfiction piece you’ll submit in your final portfolio. The writing assignments themselves are not formal essays. For each writing assignment, I’ll ask you to write 2-3 pages of a creative nonfiction rough draft in response to the writing prompt, and turn it in. *I won’t grade the writing assignments on the quality of the writing.* My purpose in reading the writing assignments is to serve as a collaborator with you—to offer an extra set of eyes that might see things in your writing that you don’t, raise questions/observations that you haven’t thought of, etc. So long as you’re obviously putting some effort into your writing, and turning it in on time, correctly formatted, you’ll get full points for the writing assignments.
**What’s proper formatting?**

Unless otherwise noted, any assignment you turn in should:

- Be typed and double-spaced
- Use a plain, readable font, like Times New Roman or Arial
- Use 12 point font
- Have one inch margins all around
- In the upper left corner of the first page, have your name, the course name (ENG 323), the title of the assignment (“Writing Assignment 1,” for example), and the date you’re turning it in
- Include page numbers in the upper right corner
- BE STAPLED. Staplers are cheap to buy, easy to borrow. Use it. I swear, I won’t accept your work if you don’t staple it.

**OK, whatever. Now what about the workshop—what’s that?**

At the end of the semester, we’ll hold a series of workshops where you’ll get the chance to share rough drafts of your portfolio piece with the whole class, who will offer useful feedback on how you might further develop it before submitting it for a grade. You’ll earn the 150 workshop points based on your attendance/participation, submitting drafts on time and properly formatted, and writing responses to your peers’ rough drafts. Full details will be provided before the workshops begin.

**And the portfolio?**

The portfolio is the big final project that you’ll spend the semester working toward. It’s so big, in fact, that it requires a separate handout, which you’ll receive toward the end of the semester. Your portfolio will include a polished piece of creative nonfiction you will have been writing all semester, a reflective essay about your nonfiction, and other rough draft materials that you used to write your nonfiction piece. For now you don’t need to worry about it much, except for this important advice:

**HANG ON TO EVERYTHING YOU WRITE IN THIS CLASS, AND SAVE MULTIPLE DRAFTS OF YOUR WORK.**

**What’s the journal?**

Your journal is a space in which to record and reflect on the countless interesting things that happen to you every day (yes, there are countless interesting things that happen to you every day), including the countless interesting things you read in our textbook. Strong writers—fiction writers, nonfiction writers, poets, and every writer in between—learn to use writing as a tool for thinking, not just communicating. Your journal is where you’ll do a lot of the thinking that may contribute to our class discussions and to the more formal writing you do in this class. Although you’ll submit it to me for a grade at the end of the term, you should think of your journal as your space: beyond the requirements described in this handout, you’re totally free to do and say whatever you like in your journal, without worrying if it’s smart, correct, good, dumb, incorrect, or bad.

The journal is worth 200 points of your final grade—100 points for journaling, 100 points for reading responses. I will collect your journal at the end of the term, and possibly at various points throughout the semester. I will only grade your journal on the requirements below; anything else in your journal can help your grade, but not hurt it.
Journaling How-To

At the end of the term, I’ll skim through your journal. You’ll receive 5 points for each journal entry that meets the criteria noted below, up to a maximum of 75 points (15 entries). You’ll receive an additional 0-25 points for the overall level of engagement your entries show. If your entries look more like factual court records than thoughtful explorations, you’ll receive something less than 25 points, and vice versa.

Each journal entry takes up two pages. On the left page, write down observations, descriptions, bits of narration, bits of dialogue (real or imagined), and any other snippets of things you’ve observed in the real world that might eventually find their way into a piece of creative nonfiction. On the right page, reflect on what you just wrote on the left page. I call the right page the “So What? ” page. On the right page, write down what you would say if a close friend read the left page, looked at you, and said, “So what?” In other words, the right page is where you write about the significance of your left-page descriptions, narrations, observations, etc.—why were they so important that you had to write them down? You could also explore how you wrote on the left page—your style, the elements of craft you used, etc., and make insights about yourself as a writer.

There’s no strict length requirement for a journal entry, especially for the left-hand entry. The left-hand entry could be a single, thought-provoking phrase, or a page or more long. The right-hand entry should be at least ½ page long. More important than the length, though, is the thought you put into the right-hand entry. Are you writing down the first thoughts that come to mind in order to fill ½ page, or are you digging deeper, exploring the right-hand page entry, asking questions of its significance, its craft, etc.? There are no subject matter requirements. Write and write about anything you find compelling—the things that catch and hold your attention, and make you think and wonder and remember.

10 reading responses

As the term progresses, write at least ten, 100-word (minimum) responses to any of the creative nonfiction readings from our textbook, assigned or unassigned, not including the readings about creative nonfiction. Respond to anything at all in the readings—what they remind you of, how they make you think/feel, etc. In a strong response, you’ll show evidence of moving beyond “like it/hate it” responses and attempting to engage with the work on a deeper level, like a writer. Specifically, I’m looking for evidence that you’re applying what we discuss in class about elements of craft to the reading you do. We’ll discuss what makes for a strong response in class.

CLEARLY DATE AND TITLE EACH ENTRY!

It may help if you divide your journal into sections right away—reserve a large section for journaling, another for responses, another for class notes, another for exercises, etc. Then date and title each entry. For example, if you write in your journal on February 12, simply title your entry “Journal entry, 2-12.” When responding to a reading, note the title of the piece you’re responding to.