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# Writing as Exploration

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## Class Information

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- ◆ MC 299/399
- ◆ Tuesdays, Spring 2018
- ◆ 5:00-6:30pm

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## Facilitator Information

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- ◆ Erin Schaefer
- ◆ Office: Bessey 280
- ◆ Office hours:
  - ◆ Thursday 10:00a-12:00p & by appointment
- ◆ Email: [erinschaefer9@gmail.com](mailto:erinschaefer9@gmail.com)

## Course Description

*Writing as Exploration* is the writing and study of creative nonfiction prose that reflects on experience, individual and social. Creative nonfiction is sometimes described as true stories told using the narrative techniques of fiction. This semester, we'll examine various genres of creative nonfiction essays, including especially personal essays, literary journalism, and video essays. We'll read and analyze published nonfiction essays in the aforementioned genres, as models for your own work. We'll also read and discuss blogs, craft essays on writing, and more to further our writing and our understanding of the processes of writing nonfiction. As we read and write in these genres, we'll pay close attention to the cultural, social, and identity aspects of nonfiction and to the elements of form such as dialogue, metaphor, imagery, and scene, which are as important as the thematic concerns & elements.

While creating our essays is a way for us, individually and collectively, to reflect on social, cultural, and personal experiences, we'll also have a deeper motivation for our writing: to interest, entertain, move or persuade readers, to get them to look more closely at or think more deeply about something. That is, our essays function as a way for us as writers to create meaning from experiences for both ourselves and our readers.

Writing requires a lot of practice, so much of the work we do will be just that: practice. We'll practice a variety of invention/brainstorming, storytelling, and essaying techniques to help you create your own writing persona that connects you to histories of nonfiction writers. Through our practice and study, you'll gain a better understanding of yourself as a writer, and insight into your practice as a writer and, hopefully, into your experiences, both individual and social.



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## Course Learning Outcomes

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- Gain a better understanding of yourself as a writer and insight into your practice as a writer.
- Practice nonfiction writing as a way of reflection, inquiry, and meaning-making.
- Engage in reading for the purposes of reflection, analysis, and inquiry.
- Practice discussing the craft of nonfiction writing from diverse contexts.
- Develop a working understanding of contemporary theories and practices of creative nonfiction through reading and writing.
- Create a portfolio of creative nonfiction work that is innovative, relevant, and original.

write in nature on occasion.

## Course Materials

### Required Course Supplies

- A composition notebook for your commonplace journal
- Binder of copies of readings and a notebook & pen/cil for note-taking or a laptop/tablet for readings and note-taking.
- Thin binder or portfolio for your final portfolio
- Internet access
- Printer or MSU e-tokens for printing
- Optional, but highly recommended: tape or a glue stick and a stapler

### Required Course Texts

- *Storycraft*, Jack Hart
- *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Dorothy Allison
- *The Blue Jay's Dance*, Louise Erdrich
- *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg
- *Writer/Designer, 2nd Edition*, Cheryl E Ball, Kristin L. Arola, Jennifer Sheppard
- *Guided Meditation Series 1*, Jon Kabat-Zinn
- Additional texts will be available online or posted on D2L. You are required to have access to print or digital copies of each reading in class every day.

### Mindfulness Component

As part of personal and social reflection, we will practice secular mindfulness. This will include exercises such as body scans and formal mindfulness sitting meditations. Mindfulness is a practice of open awareness of the present moment. It requires deliberate practice, as well as attention to the body and breath. The goal is to foster grounded, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment and all that it holds (memories, thoughts of the future, your body, the environment, and other people). If you have concerns about doing this practice, please do not hesitate to talk with me; your grade will not be negatively impacted. Also, because mindfulness sometimes results in mental and physical shifts, you are welcome to take a break during these exercises (e.g., leave the classroom) for as long as you deem necessary. To support mindful awareness, you will also be assigned to

“I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see, and what it means.”

–Joan Didion

## Required Course Work

### Nonfiction portfolio :: (50%/500 points)

You will write three nonfiction essays as part of a nonfiction portfolio. You'll take three pieces of writing through the processes of invention, arrangement, workshops, revision, style, and delivery, in the course of multiple drafts. Ultimately, for the portfolio, you'll produce about 20-35 pages of polished creative nonfiction and 8-10 pages of reflection on and explanation of your writing practices, decisions, and processes. Here are brief descriptions and due dates for the major assignments.

\* Note: You must complete all major projects in the nonfiction portfolio to receive a passing grade in this course.\*

**Essay 1 Personal essay + companion piece (10% :: 100 points)** The personal essay invites you to engage a personal experience through storytelling, reflection, and analysis. In Essay 1, you'll craft a scene from your experience and work toward meaning-making for yourself and your audience. A companion piece will elaborate on the storytelling techniques you used.

**Essay 2 Literary journalism + companion piece (15% :: 150 points)** Literary journalism blends reporting on a place, event, or topic in real-time with the writer's personal voice and style. In Essay 2, you will work to use observation, research, and attention to detail to craft a piece of literary journalism that is relevant, timely, and accessible. A companion piece will discuss your process behind the scenes.

**Essay 3 Multimodal video essay + companion piece (20% :: 200 points)** Multimodal video essays utilize video with other mediums such as audio, photography, printed text, and magazine cutouts. In Essay 3, you will use video and at least two other mediums to create a compelling piece. A companion piece will discuss your process behind the scenes.

**Portfolio framing piece (5% :: 50 points)** This short work (~1000 words) frames and coheres your portfolio by drawing connections across your essays. It could be an editor's note, introduction, foreword, afterword, or other nonfiction-related genre you deem appropriate.

**Commonplace notebook (15% :: 150 points)** Writing is a practice requiring curiosity, consistency, and the accumulation of notes and potential material. A commonplace notebook is a depository for those notes and materials— quotes, anecdotes, observations, reflections, and other information you come across during your life and education. With that in mind, the primary purposes of your commonplace notebook are: collecting and practicing. Outside of class, you'll use your notebook to write and record things you find interesting. In class, you'll respond to writing prompts and do activities for the purposes of invention/arrangement/revision/style/delivery.

**Writing workshops and critical response letters (20% :: 200 points)** Your peers are your most valuable resource as a writer, and until you publish your writing, your primary audience. We'll hold (approximately six) writing workshops for your essays throughout the semester. You'll learn to listen to feedback and constructive criticism of your writing and practice evaluating and giving oral and written feedback on each other's work with sensitivity, specificity, and skill.

**Participation and daily work (15% :: 150 points)** Because this class is structured as a workshop, your participation is essential. We'll engage in many discussions and collaborative work on writing. Because we're all responsible for ensuring a vibrant discussion, you'll need to come to class each day with necessary course materials, including copies of the day's readings, having completed the reading and writing and prepared to share your thoughts on and analysis of the readings. We'll occasionally do daily assignments, such as reading responses and quizzes. As part of your participation, you'll also attend a 30 minute conference with me at some point in the semester.

## Your Responsibilities

- You are responsible for checking the d2l course for homework assignments/announcements. Only major deadlines will be posted on the d2l calendar tool. The course schedule (found under d2l content), including homework assignments, will contain topics, activities, and homework. *Both the calendar app and the course schedule should be checked regularly.* From time to time, I will also forward learning opportunities and/or assignment clarifications/guidelines through email. It's your responsibility to check these forms of communication regularly.
- You are ultimately responsible for your own learning. If you are struggling with any aspect of the class, come talk with me. If you find that you are not feeling challenged enough, come talk with me. My goal is for you to have a fulfilling learning experience, so I am always happy to meet with students so that we can work together to make this happen.

## Communication

- Please call me either "Erin" or "Ms. Schaefer." My formal title/position is "Teaching Assistant," so please do not call me "Professor." We will talk about expectations for communication etiquette in class (and I will post a PowerPoint on d2l). Whether emailing myself or a classmate, I expect you to use email with care, being mindful that you are talking with another person. I expect you to talk with a classmate to fill you in on the occasions where you need to miss class. A general word of advice: if you've missed a class, never ask if you "missed anything important" (a pet peeve of most instructors). Instead, this communication should look something like this: "My classmate explained that we did such and such yesterday; is there anything else I should know?" This communicates that a) you respect/recognize the importance of the work we do in each class, and b) you've taken the time to fill yourself in before meeting with me.

final grade	total points
4.0	900-1000
3.5	850-899
3.0	800-849
2.5	750-799
2.0	700-749
1.5	650-699
1.0	600-649
0.0	0-599

## course and university policies

**A Note on Sharing Work and Confidentiality:** Because this course is a way of thinking through our experiences and learning and experimenting with how to share them with others through writing, you'll engage in lots of sharing of your work with me and the rest of the class. Please be aware of this as you write, and consider what you do and do not wish to share with your peers. At the same time, remember that this course is about examining personal, social, and cultural experiences and treat your peers and their experiences with respect by not sharing personal experiences that are told or written about within the class with folks outside the class. Treat each peer's essays as confidential documents. No one outside this class gets to read them or know anything about them. If you discuss peers' essays with each other outside class, please do so in a maximally private and respectful way.

**Mandatory Reporting:** Essays, responses, and other materials submitted of this class are generally considered confidential pursuant to the University's student record policies. However, students should be aware that University employees are required to report child abuse/neglect and allegations of sexual assault to the appropriate campus authorities when they become aware of such matters in the course of their employment. Sexual assault survivors are encouraged to meet with the Sexual Assault Program at the MSU Counseling Center for confidential counseling and advocacy services. **\*\* I will not recount the content of your writing for this course without discussing it with you first.\*\***

**Accommodations:** The Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD) can assist persons with disabilities with accommodations for full participation and opportunity. Register with them: 120 Bessey Hall, 517/353-9642 or TTY 517/355-1293. <http://www.rcpd.msu.edu>

**Academic Integrity:** Michigan State University has adopted the following statement about academic policy: The principles of truth and honesty are fundamental to the educational process and the academic integrity of the University; therefore, no student shall: 1.01 claim or submit the academic work of another as one's own. 1.02 procure, provide, accept, or use any materials containing questions or answers to any examination or assignment without proper authorization. 1.03 complete or attempt to complete any assignment or examination for another individual without proper authorization. 1.04 allow any examination or assignment to be completed for oneself, in part or in total, by another without proper authorization. 1.05 alter, tamper with, appropriate, destroy or otherwise interfere with the research, resources, or other academic work of another person. 1.06 fabricate or falsify data or results. Procedures for responding to cases of academic honesty and possible repercussions are outlined in Spartan Life: Student Handbook and Resource Guide (<http://splife.studentlife.msu.edu/>) or through the Office of the University Ombudsperson: (<https://www.msu.edu/~ombud/academic-integrity/index.html>)

All the essays that you turn in must be written specifically for this course. You may not submit any work that was substantially started before the beginning of the semester.

**Attendance:** This course is highly interactive and requires a high level of student engagement and participation. Attendance at and preparation for all class sessions is expected. You may miss one week (2 classes) without impacting your grade. Reserve those absences for the observation of religious holidays not acknowledged by the the university, family events, serious illness, etc. If you miss more than one week of class (2 days), your final grade for the course will be lowered .25 for each additional absence. Missing more than 5 hours of class may result in failure of the entire course. Note: Being late for class or leaving early is considered unprofessional and will count as an absence. If you come to class late, it's your responsibility to check with me after class to ensure I marked you present.

**Late Work:** Major assignments handed in after the class during which they were due will be reduced half a grade per day unless prior arrangements are made with me. Daily work, in-class work, and writing workshop materials (drafts and letters), may not be submitted after the class period they are due (i.e. they receive a zero), unless you've made prior arrangements with me. Essays must be submitted on both of their draft deadlines *and* in the final portfolio.

**Printing and drafts:** For writing workshops, you will be responsible for making enough copies of your essay for you, me, and your writing group members. Your drafts must be single-sided, double-spaced, with one-inch margins all around, and stapled. Use a regular font and reasonable point-size. Your drafts should have your name, course, my name, and the date at the top right side of the first page. Always give your work an appropriate, descriptive title. Your last name and the page number should appear in the upper right corner of every page. A sample "correctly formatted workshop paper" document and "correctly formatted final paper" document will be made available on d2l. Part of the grade you receive on workshop drafts will depend on each document's presentation. By presentation, I mean evidence of care and of empathy for your readers by giving them neat, organized, easy-to-read pages with identifiable information and plenty of space for marginal comments.

### Important Dates:

- February 2nd End of tuition refund period for spring semester courses. No refund after this date.
- February 28th: Last day for withdrawal or dropping courses with no grade reported
- January 23rd: No class.

### University Resources:

- The MSU Writing Center: [www.writing.msu.edu](http://www.writing.msu.edu)
- MSU Library: <http://www.lib.msu.edu>
- University Ombudsman: <http://www.msu.edu/~ombud>
- Counseling Center: <http://www.counseling.msu.edu>
- The Learning Resource Center: <http://www.lrc.msu.edu>