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Telling True Stories: Truth and Memory in Creative Nonfiction

Course Description

Is the truth precisely what occurred, or is it in how we recall an event, or a conversation, or an image years later? Should we trust our own memories in storytelling? What about those of other people? How should gaps and haziness in memory be addressed in writing? Does a text’s “truth” affect its power? Is emotional truth equal in value to fact? Do the answers to these questions shift with audience, or the purpose of a piece of writing?

In addition to countless literary scandals surrounding memoirs and creative nonfiction over the past several years, the exploration of what constitutes “the truth” in writing is an essential and fascinating element of not only literary study, but also in examining our world and its stories. In this class we will read a variety of nonfiction texts—from literary journalism and essays to memoirs and book-length creative nonfiction—and we’ll write intensely both about the ideas and arguments of these writers and about our own experiences and research. We will also focus significant time and energy on examining audience, purpose, evidence, revision, and writing for clarity.

Objectives

In order to prepare students for rigorous academic writing projects across the range of disciplines offered at GW, the course strives to develop or extend the following skills:

- Capacity for critical reading and for analytic thinking that examines assumptions and evidence, in both scholarly texts and informed public commentary.
- Ability to explore information resources – through both the traditional library and emerging technological sources – to use them effectively, and to acknowledge them correctly.
- A functional grasp of rhetorical principles: the purpose or genre of each piece of writing, the expectations of various audiences, and the use of formats, evidence, tones, lengths, and levels of formality appropriate to a range of contexts.
- Practice in the writing tasks of framing sound questions or hypotheses, analyzing and synthesizing information that can be brought to bear on the chosen question, preparing and repeatedly revising drafts to achieve clarity and coherence of argument, and citing others’ work with integrity.
- The habit and discipline of careful editing and proofreading to ensure that final drafts are essentially free of errors in grammar, syntax, usage, paragraphing, punctuation, and spelling.

Requirements

25-30 pages of finished writing, developed through pre-draft preparation, drafts, and revisions based on instructor’s advice and classmates’ comments. Each student will complete at least three writing assignments of increasing complexity. Papers will be based on assigned texts and often on additional reading; although instructors will develop assignments that reflect a variety of academic writing projects, one paper will require significant library research. Class attendance is required, with limited excused absences; class participation is essential to performance and affects the final grade. Primary readings are chosen from authentic, effective prose that addresses the course topic and invites students’ responses. A rhetoric handbook, chosen from a small group approved by the Writing Program Committee, will also be employed.

Research Component

Each section of UW20 is assigned a librarian from the Gelman Library System and assessments have shown that students profit from librarians' involvement by gaining the skills and confidence as researchers that will serve them well throughout their college career. As they participate in class sessions throughout the semester, librarians help students develop core information literacy skills, improving their ability to locate, evaluate, and use information as independent, life-long learners. Collaborating with the course instructor, the librarian conducts in-class sessions on various aspects of research, such as topic formulation, search strategy, and the evaluation of sources. In addition, the librarian may meet regularly with students in one-on-one and small group settings, to provide guidance as students work through their research projects.

Required Texts

A Writer's Reference, Seventh Edition by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers

Autobiography of a Face by Lucy Grealy

Zeitoun by Dave Eggers

The Lifespan of a Fact by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal

One additional creative nonfiction work, based on groups below

Course Requirements and Grading

A grade of C- or above in UW20 indicates that the student is prepared to write solid academic essays in later upper-division, writing-intensive courses. Students must pass UW20 with a grade of C- or above in order to receive credit for the course. If a UW20 student is not prepared for the next level of university writing, the instructor will award the student a grade of R (for Repeat.) The R grade is reserved for students who work hard in the course, complete the main course assignments, but will still benefit from additional UW20 writing instruction. The student will not receive credit for the course; however, the R will not factor into the student's GPA. Students who do not complete the course materials, who are consistently absent from class, or who violate other expectations of academic behavior, will be awarded an F.

Major Assignments:

15% Wiki Writing and Responses (online class work)

Our class Wiki is a place for us to congregate, write, and share information online. Most weeks (and sometimes twice a week) you will be given a prompt or question from which to write. Posts will usually be brief (usually between 400-500 words), but should be well thought out, with attention paid to the writing as well as the content. You will also have the Wiki as a resource for feedback from both your peers and your instructor. Further, each week, you'll be commenting on the writing of your classmates (at least two postings, though more are encouraged). These comments might take the form of expanding upon an idea of the writer's, asking a follow question and taking a stab with your own answer, or simply stating what was interesting or relevant about the post to you and why. Peer review (both online and in class) also counts significantly toward your this grade. Your posts and comments will be graded on completeness, appropriateness to the prompt, and critical thinking.

Wiki due dates:

- Wiki posts for Mondays – Thursdays are due by midnight the night prior to the class session listed with a wiki due date. (For instance, if a wiki post is listed for Tuesday, the post must be up by midnight Monday night).
- Wiki posts for our Friday online sessions must be posted by 5 p.m. on Friday.
- Responses and comments must be posted within 48 hours of the due date.

5% CNF Presentations

- Group 1: *The Liar's Club* by Mary Karr
- Group 2: *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs
- Group 3: *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich
- Group 4: *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean
- Group 5: *Truth and Beauty* by Ann Patchett

Write: Each student in the group will write a three-page reflection on the book. Be sure to minimize summary and concentrate on, instead, the ways in which the author addresses (either directly or indirectly) the overarching themes of the course: truth and memory. Due on the day of presentation.

Present: The group as a whole will provide the class with an approximately 15-minute overview of the book. Groups should:

- Summarize the plot and, if necessary, the context of the book
- Examine the writing style
- Explore the author's treatment of truth and memory, using specific passages (we should hear the author's words directly). What choices does the author make regarding what to include and what to leave out? Do you trust the accounts?
- Provide your response/review of the book. Did you enjoy it? Was it effective? Do you agree with the choices the author made in terms of truth and memory, specifically?

Remember, this is not a book report, nor a strict review. You should spend the largest percentage of the presentation time discussing the issues of truth and memory.

10% Critical Analysis

For this essay, you will explore one of the texts we have read so far this semester, and answer the following questions: *How does this author handle issues of memory and/or truth in their text? What is the effect of these choices?* You will form a specific thesis statement, and support this argument with textual evidence and analysis.

35% Research Project

This argument-based research paper will be done in stages through a combination of independent research, in-class workshops, at-home writing, peer review and, finally, revision. The total grade is comprised of three assignments (graded individually):

Proposal	5%
Annotated Bibliography	10%
Research Paper	20%

5% Grammar and Usage Test

15% Personal Narrative and Accompanying Memo

This assignment provides you with a venue to practice writing for exploration, discovery, and reflection, while at the same time practicing writing in the unique genre of the personal essay.

15% Participation

In-class discussions, as well as partner and group work, are crucial as we work as a class to make sense of writing. I expect you to be present, prepared, and engaged every time we meet. If you do not verbally contribute regularly and/or miss class often, this portion of your grade will suffer. In addition, you will periodically write informal responses in class.

The goal of these writings is twofold: First, they serve as crucial writing and critical thinking practice. Second, they are often a jumping off point for our class discussion. A small number of missed writings should not affect your grade, but more than that will definitely have an impact.

Policies

Attendance

Students are expected to be in class. That said, I understand that emergencies, both personal and academic, do come up. If you miss significant class time, your participation grade will suffer. Whenever you miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed from your classmates. Assignments are due on time even if you are absent, but in-class work cannot be made up. (Note that there will be enough in-class work that missing a couple of these should not harm your grade. On the other hand, substantial missed class work definitely adds up.)

Late work

Although extenuating circumstances do occur, as a general rule, late work is not acceptable and will be docked one letter grade for each calendar day after the due date. If you are going to be late with an assignment because of an unavoidable situation, let me know *before the assignment is due* and we can try to work something out. Otherwise, I expect all papers to be handed in at the beginning of the class period on the stated due date.

Academic Integrity and UW20 Plagiarism Policy

We will spend a good amount of time in class discussing how, when, and why to cite sources in your work. If you have questions or are unsure if you should cite something, please ask. The UW20 Policy:

Academic writing builds on the work of others who have written and created before us. Academic writers use and cite the ideas, words, and images of others in order to document grounds for knowledge, illuminate contexts of argument, acknowledge intellectual influences, distinguish our own analytical voices, and encourage further investigation and inquiry. If, on the other hand, we take others' work as our own—using their phrases, images, concepts, or arguments without acknowledgement—we not only hamper these goals but also cross the line into academic dishonesty.

GW's Code of Academic Integrity defines academic dishonesty as "cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one's own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information." My recommended penalty for plagiarism on a first charge is failure of the class.

Disability Statement

Students with documented disabilities are legally entitled to certain accommodations in the classroom. Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss specific needs. Please contact the Disability Support Services office at 202-994-8250 in the Marvin Center, Suite 242, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: <http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/>. I will be happy to work with students and the DSS to arrange fair access and support.

Advisor Contacts

If you are struggling with an individual class, or several classes, your first line of contact is always the professor. Contact the professor to discuss the situation, whether it be a lack of clarity over what's expected, an acknowledgment of an illness or family problem that has kept you from your studies recently, or anything else. Stay in contact with your professor.

If, for whatever reason, you need more assistance than your professor can provide, seek out your academic advisor. Your school or college will have assigned an advisor to you. In cases where serious family or personal emergencies arise that leave you considering withdrawal from one or more classes, your professor or advisor may suggest that you contact your dean's office for help. Below is the contact information for the dean's offices at the different schools:

CCAS: Phillips Hall, 801 22nd St., 107 Floor; 202.994.6210

ESIA: 1957 E St., NW, Suite 302; 202.994.3002

SPHHS: Ross Hall, 2300 Eye St., NW, Suite 202; 202.994.2160

SEAS: Tompkins Hall of Engineering, 725 23rd St., NW, Suite 105; 202.994.6080

GWSB: Duques Hall, NW, Suite 456; 202.994.7027

Writing Center

The Writing Center offers free, one-on-one sessions with tutors who can help with a variety of writing tasks, including writing assignments, research papers, and personal statements. This is another resource available to you by virtue of being a member of the GW community—take advantage of it! Take responsibility for the quality of your work and get all of you can out of the learning experience.

The Writing Center is located in 550 Rome Hall, at 801 22nd St, NW. Appointments are recommended. Visit <http://gwu.edu/~gwriter/> for more information.

Schedule

Notes:

- Assignments and readings are due on the date posted. (Wiki posts are due by the midnight prior.)
- Readings noted here that are not from our course books are linked on the class Wiki's "Readings" page.
- You must have each day's reading with you in class, either printed or on a laptop, unless otherwise noted.
- This syllabus is subject to change as the semester and our class progress.

Week 1

Monday, January 14

Welcome. Today we'll discuss the course syllabus and expectations, as well as begin to define the genre of creative nonfiction.

Wednesday, January 16

Wiki: Log on and poke around to ensure that you can post Friday's assignment and view the syllabus, readings, and essay prompts.

Read:

- "This Old House" by David Sedaris
- "Where do Sentences Come From?" by Verlyn Klinkenborg

Friday, January 18 (online)

Watch: (both on Wiki homepage)

- "Wikis in Plain English"
- "What is Creative About Creative Nonfiction?"

Read:

- "How to Say Nothing in 500 Words" by Paul Roberts
- "'Perhapsing': The Use of Speculation in Creative Nonfiction" by Lisa Knopp

Wiki:

- **Academic assignment:** UW1020 is your chance to explore and improve your writing. Write a reflection on two of your weaknesses as a writer. Do you see your own writing anywhere in Roberts' description of student writers? What will you do over the course of the semester to try to improve in these areas? What would be most helpful for you to learn and practice in this class to overcome these gaps in your writing skills?
- **Creative assignment:** This semester, you're going to become a connoisseur of creative nonfiction, so you'll need to get a sense of what it's like to write it. Examine your Facebook photo (if, by some crazy chance, you are not on Facebook, choose a picture of you or by you that you like), and write a nonfiction (true) scene about it, using fictional techniques (dialogue, perhaps, or heavy description and characterization). The scene can be quite short (around 400 words), but should describe in some way the scene of this photograph.

Week 2

Monday, January 21

What is creative nonfiction? What elements of ethics are relevant in terms of truth and memory?

Read:

- "Our Perfect Summer" by David Sedaris
- "David Sedaris Talks Funny, but is it Real?" by Sarah Lyall
- Both thesis handouts posted on Wiki

Wiki: How does David Sedaris handle issues of truth and/or memory? Is he using perhaps, or not? What is the effect? Are you skeptical of his accuracy? Why or why not?

Wednesday, January 23

No reading due—you should be digging into *Autobiography of a Face*.

Friday, January 25 (online)

Listen: Radiolab's episode on "Memory and Forgetting"

Wiki: Response to Radiolab episode. What was interesting? What do you see relating to our class discussions and readings? To your understanding of your own history and memories?

Week 3

Monday, January 28

Read:

- *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy, Prologue – Chapter 4
- *A Writer's Reference*: Section A ("Academic Writing") and Section MLA-1 ("MLA, Supporting a Thesis")

Wednesday, January 30

Read: *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy, Chapters 5 – Afterward

Wiki: In Ann Patchett's "Afterward," she writes that a reader once asked Lucy Grealy "Were you ever worried that you might get something wrong?" and Lucy replies, "I didn't remember it...I wrote it. I'm a writer." Respond to this statement, specifically referencing elements of Grealy's work.

Friday, February (online)

Listen (and/or read): *This American Life* episodes 454 ("Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory") and 460 ("Retraction")

Wiki: Write a 400-500 word response to these two episodes. Where does Mike Daisey fall on the CNF ethics continuum? Does he cross a line? Why or why not?

Week 4

Monday, February 4

Due: Critical Analysis first paragraph (includes thesis statement)

Wednesday, February 6

Read:

- “The Most Comma Mistakes” by Ben Yagoda in *The New York Times*
- “Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction” by Lynn Z. Bloom, from *College English*, Volume 65, Number 3, January, 2003
- “Authorial Ethics: How Writers Abuse Their Calling” by Robert Hauptman, from the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* - Volume 39, Number 4, July 2008

Wiki: Choose one of the academic articles above (Bloom or Hauptman) and respond to it, raising the questions the article brought up for you in terms of critical analysis of CNF works.

Friday, February 8 (online)

Listen: John Hodgeman’s “Slingshot” essay and Debra Anne Davis’ “Recollecting”

Write: Style Imitation Exercise

Week 5

Monday, February 11

Read:

- “This is Your Life (and How You Tell It)” by Benedict Carey
- “How to Read and Mark Up Texts” by Dr. Eric Downs

Wednesday, February 13

Research Introduction

Read:

- Section R (“Researching”) in *A Writer’s Reference*
- “Logic in Argumentative Writing”

Friday, February 15 (online)

Read: “Is this Title Okay” by Andy Martin

Due: Draft of Critical Analysis for Peer Review

*Be sure to include a title!

Week 6

Monday, February 18 – Presidents’ Day (no classes)

Wednesday, February 20

Due: Critical Analysis Final

Wiki: Reflect on writing the Critical Analysis. What went well? What was challenging? What questions did this assignment raise for you?

Library Session – Meet at Gelman Library, Room 300

Friday, February 22 (online)

Read:

- Sections MLA 2 and 3 (“Citing Sources; Avoiding Plagiarism” and “Integrating Sources”)
- “Lines on Plagiarism...” by Trip Gabriel
- “Plagiarism is not a Big Moral Deal” by Stanley Fish

Activity: Complete online Plagiarism tutorial

(<http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/plagiarismtutorial.php>). Read and, where applicable, complete the online quizzes in all sections from the Table of Contents (sections 1-8). Be sure to enter my email address (jessmcc@gwu.edu) when prompted so that I receive confirmation of your participation.

Week 7

Monday, February 25

Begin conducting database research and arrive (at our regular classroom) with questions

Wednesday, February 27

Library Session – Meet at Gelman Library, Room 300

Friday, March 1 (online)

Read:

- “Good Applicants with Bad Grammar”
- “It’s Not Just Rules; It’s Clear Thinking”

Wiki: Which reading do you agree with more, and why? Should grammar have any bearing on attaining a job? Does it represent thinking, or is it simply an exercise in memorization?

Week 8

Monday, March 4

Open Research Session – Bring laptop

Read:

- “The Facts Behind the Facts” by Philip Gerard
- “The Sentence as Miniature Narrative” by Constance Hale

Wednesday, March 6

In-class workshop on creating a dialogue between sources

Group One Presentation: *The Liar’s Club*

Read: Section MLA-4 (“Documenting Sources”) in *A Writer’s Reference*

Due: Working thesis statement (bring to class)

Friday, March 8 (online)

Due: Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

Read or listen to:

- “Semicolons” on Grammar Girl
- “Sentence Fragments”
- “Run-On Sentences” from Grammar Girl

Week 9

Spring Break – Enjoy!

Week 10

Monday, March 18

Group Two Presentation: *Running with Scissors*

Read: “Swim, Memory” by Megan Nix and “Counterargument” (linked on wiki)

Wiki: For your wiki assignment, consider the opposing view of your argument. Write a one-paragraph statement from this viewpoint, raising the important concerns of this conflicting argument. Note: Bring a printout of this post to class.

Wednesday, March 20

Group Three Presentation: *Nickel and Dimed*

Bring: First draft of research paper for in-class work; also, bring questions

Friday, March 22

Individual Meetings with Professor McCaughey (30 minutes). Be sure to bring a full draft of paper and questions about revisions.

Week 11

Monday, March 25

Group Four Presentation: *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean

Read: *Zeitoun* parts I – III

Wiki: What fictional techniques do you see Eggers employing in *Zeitoun*? To what effect? Provide specific examples.

Wednesday, March 27

Read: *Zeitoun* parts IV – V

Friday, March 29 (online)

Due: Draft of research paper for peer review

Week 12

Monday, April 1

Keep working on revisions!

Wednesday, April 3

Group Five Presentation: *Truth and Beauty*

Editing and Proofreading Workshop

Due: Draft of final paper, revised from Peer Review

Wiki: Write a short, exploratory post about the research process. What tips can you offer your classmates based on your experience so far? What issues/questions are still problematic as you begin to revise?

Friday, April 5 (online)

Read: Any three (at least!) short essays from the latest issue of *Brevity*

Write: Examine one in terms of truth and memory. What choices is the author making? Are these choices effective? Why or why not? Where does this piece fit in the continuum of CNF pieces in terms of credibility?

Week 13

Monday, April 8

Read: Steven Church's

- "Lag Time"
- "I'm Just Getting to the Disturbing Part"

Wednesday, April 10

Due: Final draft of research paper

Read: "The Yellow Test" by Lee Gutkind

Friday, April 12 (online)

Wiki: As we near the end of the semester, you've become an expert of sorts on all things Creative Nonfiction. You've studied the work of other people—in terms of everything from first-person narrative essays to third-person nonfiction novels—and you've now created your own work in the genre. So, now you're qualified to give advice to other writers of creative nonfiction. I want you to imagine you've been given a small space (500-700 words) in a literary magazine to write a column entitled, "How to Write Ethical—and Engaging—Creative Nonfiction." You may take any approach you like, draw on any experiences, readings, or writing work you want. You may want to browse *Brevity's* craft essays for inspiration and thoughts on how to address an audience of writers (craft essays: <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft.htm>).

Week 14

Monday, April 15**Read:**

- “Grammar Lessons” by Michelle Morano
- “The Voice of the Storyteller” by Constance Hale

Listen to: “Hyphens” by Grammar Girl

Wednesday, April 17

Read: *The Lifespan of a Fact* by John D’Agata and Jim Fingal

Friday, April 19 (online)

Due: Draft of Personal Essay for Peer Review

Online Peer Review

Week 15**Monday, April 22**

Keep working on personal essays!

*Be sure to bring *Lifespan of a Fact* back to class today for discussion

Wednesday, April 24

Grammar Test!

Friday, April 26 (online)

Wiki: Consider Steven Church’s decision to dive into related material (his brother’s death) in two very different ways—and two very different essays. For this week’s assignment, you are to take your personal essay and “radically revise” it into a flash essay (think back to *Brevity*). You’ll consider the same overarching ideas or topics as your personal essay, but present this material in a drastically different way. For instance, you might hone in on one little detail of the essay, or change the point of view from which you tell the story, or get a little more philosophical and move out of your storytelling comfort zone. Regardless of how you approach this, you must stay within 500-750 words. Good luck!

Week 16**Monday, April 29**

Truth and Memory Reading Series

Tuesday, April 30

Truth and Memory Reading Series – cont.

Wednesday, May 1 (designated Monday)

Truth and Memory Reading Series – cont.

Due: Final Personal Essay and Accompanying Memo

Last day of class!