CREATIVE NONFICTION I:
A Survey of Narrative Writing Techniques
ENG 370
T/TR 12:15 to 1:30
Willard, Room 201
SPRING 2012
Professor Mary Collins

Office Hours: T/TR 11:00 to 12:00
T/TR 2:00 to 5:00
Willard Hall, Room 329
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COURSE DESCRIPTION
Everything you write in this class will be based on fact, but you will apply writing
techniques normally associated with fiction, such as character development, good
storytelling, and a strong voice, to craft narrative nonfiction. Many students find this
course helps them with their writing in all of their classes, because the skill set required
to handle personal essay and features applies in many fields — law, teaching, counseling
etc. I strongly urge all of you to take the second course in the sequence, ENG 375, CNF2,
which builds on what we learn in this class and allows you to experiment with travel
writing, profile writing, humor and more. The most engaged students should consider
the entire CNF sequence, which closes with ENG 483, an advanced workshop in
narrative nonfiction that’s ideal for anyone who wants to explore a career that requires
advanced writing, thinking and editing skills. My goal: to expose you to an entirely new
way of thinking about writing and to teach you advanced writing techniques you can
use the rest of your life in a wide range of fields.

The Professor: I worked for 20 years in Washington, DC as a freelance writer and
editor, including many years with National Geographic and the Smithsonian. I also
taught part-time for 12 years at Johns Hopkins University’s MA in Writing program,
which is where I first developed this course. My latest book, American Idle: A Journey
Through Our Sedentary Culture, just won the Grand Prize in Nonfiction at the 2010 Indie
Book Awards. You can find out more about me at www.marycollinswriter.net. I came
to CCSU in 2007 to pursue a full-time career as a writing professor.

REQUIRED READING
- Philip Gerard, Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life
- Noah Lukeman, A Dash of Style: Art and Mastery of Punctuation
- Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction, Editor Judith Kitchen,
  W.W. Norton
- Reading Packet and other handouts provided by the instructor
PAPERS

- **Paper One**: On a topic that you choose in the first day of class. **Due Jan. 26**.
- **Paper Two**: After visiting the “Slapstick” New Media exhibit at the New Britain Museum of American Art, write a three-to-four page personal essay on some topic inspired by the field trip. You do NOT have to write about Mike Confi or his video or even anything at the museum in particular, but the angle should be inspired in some way by what you experience or see. **Due Feb. 23**.
- **Paper Three**: This term I am working with my ENG 483 class to produce a magazine for CT Vietnam Veterans to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War. I decided to tie your third paper assignment into that in at least a peripheral way. **Write a four-to-five page essay (first or third person) that somehow touches on war veterans in the state.** Perhaps you have grandparents who served in WWII, or an uncle who served in Vietnam. Perhaps no one has ever served in your family, and you could reflect on that. Remember: this is not a report, but an ESSAY that should include reflection, a narrative flow, and cultural context. **Angle due March 6; Draft due March 13; FINAL paper due: March 15**.
- **Paper Four**: A five-to-six page feature or essay on a person, place or event. Please use as many writing techniques as possible, including interviewing, personal observation skills, in-the-field reporting, emotional depth, voice etc. **Angle due April 5; Draft due April 10; FINAL paper due April 12**.
- **Revision of Fourth Paper**: ALL students must revise their fourth paper. You will receive TWO grades: one for your revision process and another for the overall quality of the paper. Due one week after your paper is discussed in class.
- **Final Exam**: All students will select a paper to revise for the final exam.

I want TWO copies of every paper you submit. All papers must be double-spaced, on white paper, include page numbers and a listing of ANY source you use.

We will workshop all but the first papers so be certain to bring in TWELVE copies of those papers so ALL students can read them.

Creative Nonfiction is called “creative” because it borrows literary tricks from fiction, **but ALL WORK IN MY CLASS IS BASED ON FACT. You may not make things up**.

Each assignment should reflect the author’s skill in various techniques covered up to the assignment deadline. For example, if we studied how to narrow a broad topic down to a narrow angle, then your paper should reflect some understanding of that important step.

Plagiarism: If you borrow material deliberately and try to pass it off as your own, I will fail you for the assignment and possibly the course. I abide by the rules set out in the Student Handbook on the [www.ccsu.edu](http://www.ccsu.edu) website at
In short, do your own work or expect fierce consequences.

**WRITING EXERCISES**

- **Personal Observation**: one-page piece on place or event. Due Feb. 9
- **Voice Exercise**: two-page piece on a place. Due March 1

**OTHER ASSIGNMENTS**

- **Interview and transcript summary**: Feb. 2
- **Gerard Test**: Feb. 14
- **Lukeman Test**: March 29

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**All deadlines are firm.** All students are expected to attend class regularly and on time. I take attendance every day and give you an in-class grade every day. If you expect to miss more than TWO classes all term, please see me after class. Chronic tardiness will impact your final grade. A third absence may result in a full grade reduction or even failure for the course. Ninety percent of the most important work in ENG 370 takes place in small group sessions IN CLASS, so when you miss too many classes, you miss the core of the curriculum.

**GRADING**

I will not grade the first paper (you just earn credit for submitting it) but for the second paper I will break your grade down into two parts: a grade for the techniques under review (honing a good angle and integrating research) and a grade for the overall writing. The techniques grade is the more important of the two grades but be sure to heed my comments on the general overall quality of the paper. For the third and fourth papers, I will weigh the technique and writing grades equally.

An “A” paper reflects not only firm control of the basic writing techniques we cover in class, but also a creative flair that is the hallmark of the best creative nonfiction. Your writing might be exemplary, but if your angle is predictable or flat, it could cost you a full grade on an assignment. Do not neglect the “creative” side of the writing assignments. I want QUALITY, not quantity or perfunctory three-page compositions. Indeed, a paper that might earn you a B in ENG 110 will probably not even get a passing grade in this class.

**Class Participation**: The exercises and your general class participation count for 50 percent of your grade. ENG 370 is a very interactive class and includes a lot of group work; we workshop a lot of papers. Each student will serve as the Lead Reviewer for another student and be graded on his or her ability to offer constructive feedback and lead discussion. Take this role seriously.

**Individual Conferences and Office Hours**

I will meet with each student one-on-one at the mid-term and then again to discuss final revisions on the fourth paper. **These meetings are required.** I am also eager to see you
at other times, of course, and encourage you to take advantage of my office hours (see the top of the syllabus). If you cannot make it during those hours, I am happy to schedule an appointment. If you have any special needs, such as a visual impairment or mobility issues that might impede your ability to report, please see me during the first week of class. I work at home most of the time so you may call me there, but not after 9:00 p.m.
Jan. 19, Thursday: From Topic to Story
Assignment: You will leave class today with two story ideas. Pick one and write a ONE PARAGRAPH summary of the ANGLE and STRUCTURE you plan to use in your first personal essay. Come prepared to discuss your idea with a group.

Jan. 24, Tuesday: Finding an Angle

Jan. 26, Thursday: Distinguishing Primary and Secondary Angles
Reading: Chps. 3&4 Gerard book; Interview Packet
Assignment: Come prepared to conduct an in-class interview. You may bring a tape recorder (on loan for free at the equipment room on the bottom floor of Willard) or simply pen and paper.

January 31, Tuesday: The Art of the Interview
Guest Interview: Dr. Barbara Clark, Mask Project
I will stage a live interview in front of class. Please do not be late.
Reading: Sample Transcript in PACKET. Come prepared to share what you feel is the best story angle in that transcript.
Assignment: Write up a transcript, which does not have to precisely quote every word but MUST include some direct quotations (about 50 percent of the transcript). Read through your own transcript and in ONE PARAGRAPH write down what you feel is the strongest angle to take if you had to write a profile of your interview subject. This is the most important step of the assignment so please do not forget to execute it. Due February 2.

February 2, Thursday: The Art of the Interview, Part II
Reading: “Pain Scale,” Eula Bliss, Seneca Review, Spring 2005 (packet); “Son of Mr. Green Jeans,” Dinty Moore, Short Takes anthology
Assignment: Bring in TWO STARTLING facts (include sources). They do not have to be related to each other. If you rely on the Internet, be CERTAIN TO KNOW THE PURVIEW OF YOUR SOURCE. Be wary of organizations with agendas.

Sample Startling Fact: A 2010 New York Times article summarized the results of a study that found that one in four Americans reports having no close friends, a shift from one in 10 in 1985. This sort of fact makes me think about all sorts of cultural trends in social media, gaming etc. I am looking for facts that generate story.

February 7, Tuesday: Using Creative Research to Power a Story Experimenting with Structure
Reading: “Take in the State Fair,” Garrison Keillor, National Geographic, 2010 (packet)
Assignment: After reading Keillor’s story, write a one-page portrait of a place or event that you visited (not your hometown or where you live now). Try to capture what makes that place or event resonant with you. This exercise should showcase your observational skills and creative thinking. Due February 9. Bring FOUR copies to class.

February 9, Thursday: Workshop Place/Event Portraits Experimenting with Point-of-View
Reading: Chps. 6 to 9, Gerard book.
Assignment: TEST on Gerard, Feb. 14

February 14, Tuesday: Test on Gerard Sorting Material and Experimenting with Structure
Reading: Field Trip Prep: Visit Michael Conti on YouTube at http://wn.com/mikecontiphotos. This young artist’s quirky work roams all over the place from a relatively serious piece about fly fishermen filmed against a soundtrack of Ava Maria to the spoof on the intensity of ice hockey players/outdoorsmen that includes whacking doughnuts onto an icy river with a hockey stick.

February 16, Thursday: FIELD TRIP to Michael Conti Slapstick Exhibit at the New Britain Museum of American Art
**We will meet in the PARKING lot between Willard and Diloreto. I will leave at precisely 12:15.
Assignment: Come prepared to share your ANGLE for the Second Paper. Your paper DOES NOT have to be about Conti or the NBMAA, but should be inspired but what you see and hear on the field trip.

February 21, Tuesday: 12 Reporters, 12 Angles: Processing the Field Trip
Reading: Effective Workshop Packet; Assignment: Second Paper due February 23. BRING 12 copies (enough for all students in the class and two copies for me).
February 23, Thursday: The Art of an Effective Workshop
Assignment: Read papers assigned for workshop discussion.

LEAD REVIEWER ASSIGNMENTS
To keep me from dominating class discussion, I pair students on each assignment (the pairings shift with each new paper). You will serve as LEAD REVIEWERS for each other, which means you show each other ideas, drafts and even final submissions BEFORE you submit your papers to the rest of the class. In class, the lead reviewer is responsible for opening the discussion of his or her assigned author’s paper. Come prepared to point out areas that need work (and to offer suggestions on how to improve) as well as areas where the copy really sings (and why). It is the Lead Reviewer’s job to generate class discussion. The first Lead Reviewer assignment starts with the second paper and will be just a trial run, but with each passing assignment, I will raise my expectations and the Lead Reviewers will increasingly take over the workshop discussion. Do NOT shortchange this aspect of the class. For example, if you are the assigned Lead Reviewer for a student’s paper, and do not show in class without explanation, you could lose a FULL GRADE on your overall class participation grade for the term.

February 28, Tuesday: Crafting a Voice
Workshop Second Papers
Assignment: Read papers assigned for workshop discussion, and “Signs and Wonders,” Rebecca McClanahan, Short Takes anthology. Write a two-page first person piece about a place you have visited. Strive to have the voice of the piece mimic the culture/mood of the place you are describing. Use McClanahan’s short essay on New York City as a guide. Bring FOUR copies to class for group discussion.

March 1, Thursday: Workshop Second Papers
Voice and Pacing
Reading: “Random,” by Scott Ely, Short Takes anthology; Excerpt from The Vietnam War: A Concise International History, Mark Atwood Lawrence (packet)
Assignment: ANGLE for Third Paper due March 6.

March 6, Tuesday: Sustaining a Good Story (even as you incorporate research)
Workshop Third Paper Angles
Historical Context for Vietnam War
March 8, Thursday: REQUIRED One-On-One Conferences
All students must meet with me one-on-one in my office (Willard, Room 329). I will have a sign-up sheet for timeslots.
Assignment: Third paper DRAFTS due March 13 (bring in FOUR copies).

March 13, Tuesday: Leads, Word Choice, and Relevant Detail
Workshop THIRD paper DRAFTS
Assignment: Third Paper due March 15

March 15, Thursday: Playing Around with Point-of View
Reading: Read third papers assigned for workshop discussion. Read the first 111 pages of *A Dash of Style* by Noah Lukeman

March 19 to 23: SPRING BREAK

March 27, Tuesday: Workshop Third Papers
Proper Sourcing and Creative Grammar
Reading: Read third papers assigned for workshop discussion. Complete *A Dash of Style*.

March 29, Thursday: Quiz on Lukeman
Workshop Third Papers
Assignment: Bring in a list of the top three places you look on a monthly basis to keep abreast of cultural trends, politics and national and local news/events. Bring in a copy of ONE publication or website page that you read frequently. Nothing x-rated, please.

EVENT: HOMECOMING FOR CONNECTICUT’s VIETNAM VETERANS, Hartford Armory, March 31, 2012
Americans had a complex reaction to the soldiers who returned home after serving in the Vietnam War. The CT chapter of the Veterans Project, a Library of Congress sponsored program, is hosting a Welcome Home celebration for the Vietnam Veterans in Connecticut (and the 612 families who lost a son in the war) to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the war. My ENG 483 class is required to attend and will be producing a keepsake-quality magazine for all of the veterans at the event. You are not required to attend, but I hope you do. It will help you tie our Veterans paper assignment into the larger events going on in the state.

April 3, Tuesday: Meeting the Needs of Your Target Reader: Knowing Audiences
Assignment: Fourth Paper TOPICS due April 5
April 5, Thursday: Vet Fourth Paper Topics
Matching Stories to Markets

April 10, Tuesday: Workshop Fourth Paper DRAFTS
Ethical Guidelines for CNF Writers
Reading: Revision Packet
Assignment: Fourth Papers due April 12. Bring in 12 copies (enough for everyone in the class and two for me).

April 12, Thursday: The Art of Revision
Assignment: Read papers assigned for workshop discussion.

April 17, Tuesday: Workshop Fourth Papers
Assignment: Read papers assigned for workshop discussion.
***NOTE: The REVISION of your fourth paper is due ONE week after we discuss it in class. So if your paper was discussed today, the revision is due April 24. Bring in TWELVE COPIES, because everyone will read and discuss the rewrite.

April 19, Thursday: Workshop Fourth Papers
Assignment: Read papers assigned for workshop discussion.
NOTE: If we discuss your paper today, the rewrite is due April 26.

April 24, Tuesday: Workshop Fourth Paper Revisions

April 26, Thursday: Workshop Fourth Paper Revisions
Assignment: Identify which paper you want to rewrite for the FINAL. Bring FOUR copies of the original submission to class.

May 1, Tuesday: Workshop Final Exam Papers and Compose a Revision Plan

May 3, Thursday: Overview of CNF Forms Covered in CNF2 (ENG 375)
Feedback on Revisions for Final

Finals: May 7 to 11
For the Final, rewrite a paper that you have already submitted this term. I will grade you on the art of your revision. Strive to show progress in all of the techniques that we have studied, in particular voice, craft at the line level, a strong angle, and creative research. Submit TWO copies.