Techniques of Nonfiction
Wesleyan University — Spring 2015

ENGL 292 02
WYLLYS 113
Fridays, 1:10-4:00pm

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Course Description

In this introduction to the elements of nonfiction, you—everything that composes who you are as an individual—will be your primary subject matter.

In this class, we will look deeply into the face of what it means to be a person in the world. We will walk into the rooms of our memories and heritages, we will question our relationships with temporality and language, and we will dredge up—in order to write through—our most impossible thoughts.

We will divide our time between reading contemporary nonfiction texts, bi-weekly presentations, in-class writing experiments, and intensive workshops of one another’s work in order to craft a cohesive body of nonfiction texts.

Objective: Guided by contemporary nonfiction texts and analytical investigation, students will craft a cohesive body of nonfiction work while developing an engaged daily writing practice.

Some guiding questions: What is nonfiction? What does nonfiction aim to do and what does it ask of us? How do we inhabit language and how does it inhabit us? What is memory and how does it compose us? How can we learn to bring language to the vacancies of our greatest fears and why might we want to do this as human beings?

Class Format: Language, by nature, is about active thinking. In this class, we will think actively together. This is a discussion-based course; it is not a lecture-based course. This means that our class will be guided primarily by the questions, comments, investigations, concerns, and revelations that you bring to our discussions. So please, come prepared, engaged, and ready to ask and think through questions.
Required Texts & Course Layout

Part One: The Poetics of Experience

We open the class by reading David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

Abram, writing through theories of phenomenology, addresses questions about the symbiotic relation between time, space, experience, and the origins of language. He describes our alphabet as “an evolving bodily field,” and explains “language’s primary gift is not to re-present the world around us, but to call ourselves into the vital presence of the world—and into deep and attentive presence with another.”

Thinking through what Abram proposes about language’s role in the world, we will question our own relationship with language while composing a series of nonfiction texts in response to writing prompts energized by Abram’s philosophies as well as nonfiction tactics proposed by Erik Anderson in his book of essays *The Poetics of Trespass*.

BOOKS:
— *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram
— *The Poetics of Trespass* by Erik Anderson

Part Two: Memory & Memoir

Now we will look closely at how we employ language as an intermediary between our pasts, presents, and our readers/futures. Alongside memoirs such as Nathalie Sarraute’s *Childhood*, and Roland Barthes *Roland Barthes*, we will also read selections from psychologist Babette Rothschild’s *The Body Remembers* to have a more complete understanding of how the body remembers and responds—synaptically and syntactically—to events. We will compose memoirs that investigate the reliability of linearity, language, and memory.

*Please note that for this section you will need at least 20 family photos (printed, not digital). Please begin to collect them right away. Consider asking your parents and grandparents to send photos not only of typical scenes (holidays, etc.), but also of unusual events, rooms, houses, streets, forests, etc. Consider acquiring photos from before you were born as well as photos with you as a subject.

BOOKS:
— *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes
— *Childhood* by Nathalie Sarraute
— PDF selections from Babette Rothschild’s *The Body Remembers*

Part Three: Absence & The Lyric Essay

Taking our cues from the etymological roots of the word *essay*—to attempt; to try; a discursive composition—we will close the class by attempting the impossible: looking into the face of death. We will write essays that question the mute spaces within us. We will unearth and write through our greatest fears about absence.

BOOKS:
— *I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time* by Kristin Prevallet
— *Nox* by Anne Carson
Part Four: Book Arts & Your Final Projects

In *Nox*, Anne Carson tells us: “It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.”

In this course, you have all asked yourselves very difficult questions. You have looked into the face of language, the earth we walk upon, memory, your ancestors, your inheritance, and, finally, your own inherent transience. You may not be through with these questions (I hope you are not), but you have “survived” the start of them.

Now you will edit and gather what you’ve seen through language. You will “fashion it into a thing that carries itself.”

BOOKS:
— *Making Handmade Books* by Alisa Golden
— *How to Make Books* by Esther K. Smith

Assignments & Grade Breakdown

1. **Weekly Writer’s Journal Entries** (20% of your final grade):

   Each week you are expected to have composed at least 1-3 full, hand-written pages (more if your handwriting is gigantic) in your journal. These entries should be focused on your research and writing, the books we read and your informed responses to them, as well as your revision processes.

   I want you to experiment with, and pay close attention to, your own acts of reading and writing. The books we read are demanding texts that will, if you read and re-read with care, disorient you, thus helping you to situate your writing practice. These entries are meant to detail your development, your concerns, your intentions as writers, and the questions and revelations that arise during this course. Be honest with yourself. Take risks within your pages.

   Please remember that this class is conversation based; it is rooted in our questions and concerns as writer-thinkers and how we investigate and talk through these concerns. As such, there will be ample time dedicated to constructive conversation focused around the topics outlined in your journals so please come having written and prepared to actively participate in conversation.

   In addition to these entries, you are all expected to arrive to class having performed at least one close reading of a line or paragraph from each book we read. These close readings are meant to further the conversations that we will have during the bi-weekly presentations (see below).

2. **Bi-Weekly Presentations** (20%):

   Each week three or four students will give engaged ten-minute presentations meant to respond to the readings. Students will be expected to speak between eight and ten minutes. I
will stop you at ten minutes, so really think through the timing of your presentation. Missing
the day when you are scheduled to give your presentation is a very bad thing. You will not
have the opportunity to make up your presentation. Be prepared to hand in the lecture
notes, etc. for your presentation to receive credit.

These presentations may, and inevitably will, overlap somewhat with your weekly Writer’s
Journal work. That is, you are permitted to use an edited and typed-up Writer’s Journal entry
as your presentation. Within your presentations, I expect you to offer what knowledge you
gleaned from the week’s reading. Don’t be lazy. Really think about the following: What did
you learn as a writer? What did you learn as a reader? What did you learn about language?
What did you learn about being a human being? What questions do you have? How did your
reading affect your own creative practice and projects?

Presenters should come prepared to answer questions as well as pose questions for class
debate. The number of presentations each student will be responsible for will depend on the
number of students who end up in the class.

3. **Bi-Weekly Creative Work (20%)**:

   Every other week you will hand in about 1-3 pages of creative work.

   These pages will be inspired by in-class writing exercises spurred by the books we read.

   NOTE: If you are scheduled to workshop, _____ copies should be brought in to our next
meeting; if you are not scheduled to workshop, just bring one copy to hand in to me for
critique.

4. **Bi-Weekly Workshops (20%)**:

   Every other week, a selection of you will have your writing workshopped by the class. Each
person will have his or her work workshopped at least 2 times over the course of the
semester.

   Workshops are careful, respectful, and constructive close readings/critiques of one another's
creative work. They are meant to help the writer to re-imagine, revise, and expand sections
of their writing. Everyone is expected to actively participate in this conversation. In this
class, you will learn how to constructively engage a piece of writing and contribute both
macro and micro editing suggestions effectively.

5. **Final Projects (2-parts) (20%)**:

   a. **Final Book Arts Project**:

      A hand-bound book consisting of 10 or more pages of your revised creative work.

      Details: You are each required to design, print, and hand-bind (at least 2 copies) of your
      revised, creative portfolio. This will be explored and discussed in great detail throughout
      the course.

      On the last day of class we will have a gallery of our hand-made books as well as a
      reading.

      (directions continued on next page)
Note: This book must include a 4-8 page statement on your writing practice (outlined below).

b. A Lyric Essay/Writing Statement:

Details: This will be a 4-8-page paper in which you discuss—creatively and critically—the evolution of your reading and writing practices over the semester. This will be either the foreword of afterward of your final book arts project.

You must (at the very least) cite:

1. 2 of the books we’ve read for the course
2. Your own creative works
3. Your Writer’s Journals

Some Things to Consider for your Analysis:
- What three primary things did you observe about your process over the quarter (ground this in examples from your Writer’s Journals and reveal their relevance)?
- What shifted in your thinking about writing and reading? Why?
- What are your future writing/reading intentions, goals, and challenges? And how will you meet them?

Attendance

Attendance at each class meeting is required. An absence will only be excused if negotiated in advance or if it is a medical emergency. If necessary, you will be permitted one unexcused absence; each additional unexcused absence will lower your grade by one full letter. Three absences will result in failure of the course. Note: extra work will be required to make up any class you miss. Because the work we do in this class is participatory, you are expected to attend every class, be on time, and contribute to class discussions by doing the assigned homework. If you are more than 5 minutes late to class or 2 minutes late from break, 3 points will be deducted from your participation grade. If you must miss class, please contact me before the class via email. It is your responsibility to inquire what you missed, to pick up homework, etc. If you are absent and you miss any workshopping, your creative work is considered late.

Late for class/from break = 3 points will be deducted from your participation grade
2 lates = 1 absence (strictly enforced)
1st absence = for medical/family emergencies or religious holidays
2nd absence = lowers your grade one letter (e.g., from A- to B+)
3rd absence = results in failure
Classroom Decorum

- No cell phones in use. If you are texting, you will be marked absent and asked to leave.
- No computers in use.
- We will take a break halfway through each class. Please refrain from leaving the classroom during class discussions and workshops.
- Late work will not be accepted; if you will be missing class, I expect your work to be emailed to me before our class would have met.
- Impolite behavior in the classroom or on a manuscript will not be tolerated. If I find your behavior inappropriate, I will ask you to withdraw from the class. This classroom will be a safe space for people to write. The stories submitted may or may not fit your aesthetic and that is okay. I expect your endnotes and comments to reflect what the writer wants from her story, not what you would do if you were the author.
- Students are expected to have all readings and assignments completed before class. Chronic lack of preparation (which is easy to identify) will lower your grade.

Disability Resources

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible.

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Dean Patey in Disability Resources, located in North College, Room 021, or call 860-685-5581 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations.

Course Schedule  (subject to change)

January 23

In Class:

- We consider how we will make a path through this semester.
- Introduction to Nonfiction Writing & Course Objectives
- We ask: “What is Nonfiction”? What do you think you know about nonfiction? What would you like to know about it?
- Introduce David Abram’s The Spell of the Sensuous. Set up first 3 presentations.
- We ask: “What is experience? And how do we, as human beings, live and document it?”

Homework:
- Purchase a Writer’s Journal that you wish to live with for this semester (and hopefully beyond!)
- Read The Spell of the Sensuous.
- Write one or more entries for The Spell in your Writer’s Journals. Make sure to document every single question that comes up for you while reading.
- In addition to your entries, all of you are expected to perform at least 1 close reading of a line or paragraph from this book. This will be written in your journal as well.
- Start acquiring at least 20 family photographs (consider collecting old letters too)
January 30

In Class:
—Presentations by: Zoe, Alison, Quianyu
—Discussion of *The Spell of the Sensuous*
—Assign Workshop & Presentation Groups
—Outline Reading like a Writer and how to write with sincerity
—Writing Experiment: a series of thinking texts inspired by quotes and questions from our reading.
—On Printing out your work for next class

Homework:
—Complete Writing Experiment. Write 1-3 short nonfiction texts for next class spurred by in-class writing. Bring ___ copies for Macro Workshop.
—OPTIONAL: Read *The Poetics of Trespass* by Erik Anderson, writing entries and performing close readings in your journal as you read. Put this book in conversation with your notes on Abram’s *The Spell*.
—Reminder: you should all be collecting photos and letters! Don’t forget.

February 6

In Class:
—Entire Class Macro-Workshop.
—Begin notes toward Intentions and Goals
—Writing Experiment: Mapping Experience inspired by Erik Anderson’s *The Poetics of Trespass*

Homework:
—Type and print out to hand in to me the answers/responses to the Intentions and Goals questions.
—Complete Anderson-inspired Writing Experiment. Write a 1-3 page nonfiction text spurred by in-class writing experiment. To be handed in to me. Those workshopping should bring in ___ copies.
—Start reading *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes writing entries and performing close readings in your journal as you read.
—Reminder: Do you have your photos? You’ll need them soon.

February 13

In Class:
—Introductions/Intentions/Macro Experience Workshop

Homework:
—Finish *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes writing entries and performing close readings in your journal as you read.
—You should all have 20 family photographs for next class!
February 20

In Class:
—Presentations by:
—Discussion of Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes.
—Writing Experiment

Homework:
—Complete Writing Experiment. Write 10 short memoirs for next class spurred from in-class writing. To be handed in to me. Everyone should bring in 2 copies of their memoirs.
—Start reading Childhood by Nathalie Sarraute writing entries and performing close readings in your journal as you read.
—Start reading selections from The Body Remembers by Babette Rothschild writing entries and performing close readings in your journal as you read.

February 27. — Visiting Teacher / Dr. Vogel in Iceland for conference and reading

In Class:
—Workshop: Letters

Homework:
—Finish Childhood by Nathalie Sarraute and Rothschild selections. Continue to write entries.
—Looking at your notes, edit and expand your first three writing experiments.

March 6

In Class:
—Presentations by:
—Discussion of Childhood by Nathalie Sarraute and Rothschild selections.
—Writing Experiment: Birth Stories. Death Stories.

Homework:
—Complete Writing Experiment. Write a 4 page Birth Memoir and a 4 page Death Memoir for next class spurred from in-class writing. To be handed in to me. Those workshopping should chose to workshop either their birth or death memoir and bring in ____ copies.
—Check in on your edits, darlings. We’re halfway through!
—Begin thinking about/collecting material for your final projects: paper, book making tools, waxed thread, etc.

March 13 No class — Spring Break

March 20 No class — Spring Break

March 27

In Class:
—Workshop:

Homework:
April 3

In Class:
— Presentations by:
— Discussion of *I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time* by Kristin Prevallet
— Writing Experiment: Looking into the face of the past

Homework:
— Complete Writing Experiment. Write 1-3 page lyric essay for next class spurred from in-class writing. To be handed in to me.
— Start reading *Nox* by Anne Carson. Write entries as you read.

April 10

In Class:
— Workshop:

Homework:
— Finish *Nox* by Anne Carson. Write entries as you read.
— Are you up to date with your edits for your final project?
— Begin your final Lyric Essay if you haven’t yet.

April 17

In Class:
— Presentations by:

Homework:
— Make sure all of your creative edits are up-to-date. Bring one copy of all edited creative work that will be included in your final project to our next class.
— Finish a first draft of your final Lyric Essay. Bring 4 copies to class.
— Read *Making Handmade Books* by Alisa Golden and/or *How to Make Books* by Esther K. Smith and begin laying out a draft of your final project. Bring detailed notes and questions toward your final project.

April 24

In Class:
— Workshop?
— Writing Experiment/Workshop related to your Lyric Essays.
— Discussion of final projects

Homework:
— Finish Lyric Essay
— Bring layout and tools for composition of final projects

May 1

In Class:
— Book Arts Studio Time
May 8 — TBD

Final Projects Due OR Book Arts Studio Time

In Class:
— Gallery of final book arts projects
— Reading from essays and final projects

OR

In Class:
— Book Arts Studio Time and we use our final exam period