Writing Nonfiction on Social Change
WRTNG-UG 1303
Gallatin School, NYU
Spring 2014
194 Mercer, Rm 303
M 03:30 PM-6:10 PM

Course Description:
In this course, we’ll examine nonfiction from times of conflict and crisis to help us write essays and critiques in which we witness, report, advocate, question, and/or desire change in our own era. To provide inspiration, we’ll read essays on 9/11 and its aftermath, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and other issues. We'll read works by authors such as John D’Agata, Edwidge Danticat, Arundhati Roy, Carolyn Forche, Ryszard Kapuscinski, and Lawrence Weschler, to study their use of formal tools such as narration, observation, analysis, reflection, and argument in exploring avenues of change in the world around them. How do writers bring a personal voice to writing a political essay? And how do reporters balance opinion and research to show the need for change? These questions are considered as you write 1) an essay centered on an issue that you care about, and 2) a report that you write from observation about a social or political movement. Finally, writing an argument or advocacy piece on a public debate allows you to incorporate many of the the lessons from the semester. Revision is part of our process, guided by peer reviews.

Objectives:
① To become more adept as a critical reader of literary works of nonfiction, especially in identifying the success of an author to present information subjectively and objectively.
② To experiment with craft techniques of creative nonfiction in an effort to challenge yourself as a writer.
③ To creatively research topics of importance through interview, the internet, the library and other means to effectively inform your writing.

Course Materials:
- A standard notebook (8 1/2 x 11" pages) to write in during class sessions and/or a laptop
- A folder to keep all class handouts, exercises, drafts and graded assignments
- A recording device of your choice: digital recorder, mp3 player, your computer w/Audacity or GarageBand, a recording app on your phone such as Voice Memo.
- Microphone
- Headphones or earbuds

Required books: Available at the NYU bookstore and Shakespeare & Co.

Note: The rest of our course readings will be brief excerpts, posted on our NYU Classes site.

Major Assignments:
- Personal Essay: 6-7 pages
- Reportage: 6-7 pages
- Argument/Advocacy: 6-7 pages
More information about these assignments will be given closer to when they are due. Before you turn in an assignment for a final grade, a draft of it will be workshopped in class. You will then revise it based on the comments you receive; turn in your first draft (with comments) and the revised draft by the following session for a grade. Assignments that have not been workshopped will be deducted by one letter grade (e.g. a B assignment will receive a C). Late assignments will also be penalized, whether first or revised drafts, by 1/3 a letter grade for each day late. If you're absent (for a good reason) on the day an assignment is due, you can email me the assignment, but you must print out a hard copy and turn it in at the next class session, as well as your workshopped first draft, in order to get full credit. I won't accept an assignment more than a week late from the final due date.

Revision: Assignments can be revised after you receive a grade, provided that they are submitted in a timely manner. I will average together the first grade and the grade after revision.

Page length: In order to not limit creativity, your writing can go under or over the suggested limit by a page or two. But you should produce at least 20 new pages of workshopped and revised writing during the semester. You can link these assignments thematically to create one long exploration into your history or a community's history (so that subsequent pieces are dependent on previous ones for content), or you can treat them as separate, stand alone pieces.

Supplemental assignments:

**Nine Reader Responses: one to two pages (300-600 words), typed and posted online**
Write a response to every set of readings, in answer to questions that I pose on NYU Classes under our Discussion Forum. Post these anytime during the week, until the deadline of one hour before our class meeting, or you won't receive credit. I will read these but won't comment unless you ask me to do so within the response. They'll help you to work through your ideas about the content of the readings and the elements of writing and to engage in our class discussion. Print them out and bring to class for your notes if you don't carry a laptop to class.

**Two Research Exercises: (300-600 words), hand-written or typed double-spaced**
You'll need to do some research for your assignments and these exercises will give you some guidelines, structure and opportunities for advice and feedback from the class. The first will be for your Reportage piece – either an interview or a visit to a protest, community meeting or other gathering, and the second will involve scholarly research to inform your Argument/Advocacy piece. You will turn in a brief, one-page report on each. I'll hand out guidelines for each one, and I will ask you to report your findings in class.

**Seven Writing Exercises: one to two pages (300-600 words), hand-written or typed double-spaced**
On the weeks when you don't have drafts of writing assignments or research exercises due, you will turn in a passage of experimental writing. You can develop these pages on your own, or they can be derived from the writing exercises that you will do in class, to help work your way through your assignments. I've also listed extra writing prompts in the syllabus if you find you're blocked. You get to choose the one passage of writing you would like to turn in. The exercises are meant to help you regularly develop writing for the assignments; I will read them and comment briefly to advise you on what/how to develop.

**Peer reviews:**
These are the written comments you give to your peers on their writing during workshops. The number will be determined by our workshop arrangements.
Supplemental assignments are meant to help you develop your writing for the major assignments. They won't be graded, but you will receive a point of credit for each. The more you do, the better grade you will receive for them as a whole. I may assign additional ones over the course of the semester, as well as extra credit assignments. I won't accept these supplemental assignments more than a week late. You can email writing and interview exercises to me if you explain the unavoidable circumstances that prevented their timely completion, but you won't receive credit until you turn in a hard copy to my office mailbox or at the following class session.

**Participation:** Contributions to class discussions, comments during peer workshops, and reading aloud of writing exercises are very important to this course. First of all, I'm really curious to learn what you're thinking. Besides, speaking in class makes you a more active learner, and your discoveries and questions help other students with their interviews, research and writing. Your discussion also helps me understand your progress through the material, so that I can shape the course to your benefit. Verbal feedback during workshop sessions helps you to become a better editor of your own writing.

**Attendance:** You are expected to attend every class. Missing more than two classes will affect your grade, as will habitual lateness. Arriving late or leaving early for more than ten minutes, on two occasions, will count as an absence. If you miss more than four classes, you'll fail the course. There are exceptions, of course, for sickness and family emergencies, so please inform me of any circumstances that prevent you from coming to class. If you can, let me know ahead of time if you know you will be late or absent.

**Etiquette:** Turn off noisy electronic devices before you arrive to class and put them away so as not to get distracted from the real human beings interacting directly with you. You can use a laptop or tablet during class to read texts, write, take notes, or look up information, but don't let your attention stray outside our frame of discussion and from our common tasks.

**Academic Integrity Policy:** As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website: [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html](http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html).

**Incomplete policy:** A grade of Incomplete will be granted in this course only if you have already completed the vast majority of the work for the semester. If you find yourself at the end of the semester unable to finish the work for this course because of unexpected and unforeseeable circumstances, such as health problems or a family emergency, you must fill out a form called [Request for a Grade of Incomplete](http://example.com) and bring it to me by our last class meeting.

**Final Grade Breakdown:**
- Personal Essay: 25%
- Reportage: 25%
- Argument/Advocacy: 25%
- Writing Exercises, Research Exercises and Reading Responses: 15%
- Participation: 10%
Schedule: Subject to change with our progress as a class. Please contact me if you're absent or miss part of a class session to find out what you missed and to confirm assignments. **In-class** activities planned for each date are listed. Homework (HW) is listed under the date it is due. The questions for Reader Responses will be posted on Blackboard.

1. January 27
   **In-class:** Introductions and overview of course. Brief readings and excerpts by Audre Lorde and Diane Garcia. Discuss testimony: breaking silence, bearing witness; celebrating/questioning/analyzing resistance; and advocating/arguing, accompanying. Exercise on personal and political motivations for writing/showing v. telling.

2. February 3
   **HW due:**
   Reader Response: “Professions for Women” by Virginia Woolf, “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin, “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” by Jose Vargas and “Black Swans” by Lauren Slater.
   **Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: how do you fit into history?
   **In-class:** What is a personal essay? Discussion and exercise on the use of literary tactics like showing vs. telling, metaphor, voice, etc. in breaking silence and bearing witness.
   **Handout:** Personal Essay Assignment

3. February 10
   **HW due:**
   Reader Response: *Brother, I'm Dying* by Edwidge Danticat
   **Writing exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: The first news story that made you angry.
   **In-class:** Discussion and exercises on objectivity vs. subjectivity in personal/political memoir.

February 17 – no class: President's Day

4. February 24
   **HW due:**
   **First draft of Personal Essay**
   **In-class:** Workshop of Personal Essay.
   Brief readings and discussion: “Accompaniment as Policy” by Paul Farmer and “Terreno” by Zachary Knapp

5. March 3
   **HW due:**
   **Final Draft of Personal Essay:** Turn in with peer comments on first draft.
   **Writing exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: A brief report on a community you've belonged to: why? When did your involvement or interest start, and how?
   **In-class:** Literary journalism of Tea, Wallace, Yang and Bliss. Discussion and exercise on writing as both an observer and a member of a community. Collection of Final Draft of Personal Essay. Discuss Handout: Interview/Observational Exercise. Handout: Reportage Assignment. Interview tips and activities.
6. March 10
HW due:
**Reader Response:** “The Armies of the Night” by Norman Mailer, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” by Hunter S. Thompson, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” by Joan Didion, and chapter 1 of *Random Family* by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

**Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: Become a camera: record only what you see for one hour.

**In-class:** What can we learn from New Journalism and Immersion Journalism? Exercise on observation/subjective reporting. Mid-term Evaluation: Stop, Keep, Start.

March 17 – no class: Spring Break

7. March 24
HW due:
**Reader Response:** “Notes from a Bystander” by Said Sayrafiezadeh, “Beat Poets, Not Beat Poets” by Robert Hass, “Scenes from Occupied America” by n+1 and “All the Angry People” by George Packer.

**Interview/Observational Exercise:** Interview an individual or visit a community you would like to write about.

**Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: Think of a time that you listened a long time to someone else, and never got a chance to speak: what would you have said? **Note:** Turn in either Interview/Observational Exercise OR a Writing Exercise, depending on your progress.

**In-class:** Discussion and exercise on informing vs. observing vs. analyzing. Discuss results of Interview/Observational Exercise.

8. March 31
HW due:
**First draft of Reportage Assignment**

**In-class:** Workshop of Reportage Assignment

Handouts: Scholarly Research Exercise and Argument/Advocacy Assignment. Discussion of Field Trip to Interference Archive on 4/7.

9. April 7
HW due:
**Final Draft of Reportage Assignment:** Turn in with peer comments on first draft.

Field Trip: Interference Archive: [http://interferencearchive.org/](http://interferencearchive.org/)

10. April 14

**Writing exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: what do logos, pathos and ethos mean to you, for the issue you care most about?

**In-class:** Discussion and exercise on making an argument on what you have experienced or observed.
11. April 21
HW due:
**Reader Response:** *About a Mountain* by John D'Agata
**Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt: A list: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How?
**Scholarly Research Exercise:** Conduct research to inform your argument/advocacy
Note: Turn in either Writing OR Scholarly Research exercises, depending on your progress
    **In class:** Discussion and exercise on the range of types of research in observation and argument. Brief reports on Scholarly Research Exercise

12. April 28
HW due:
**Reader Response:** Susan Sontag, Michael Shuman, Wanda Coleman, Elaine Scarry and Noam Chomsky on 9/11
**Writing Exercise:** Develop one of the exercises from class. Extra prompt:
**Scholarly Research Exercise:** Conduct research to inform your argument/advocacy
Note: Turn in either Writing OR Scholarly Research exercises, depending on your progress
    **In-class:** Discussion and exercise on rhetoric: counterargument, critique, proposal. Brief reports on Scholarly Research.

13. May 5
**First Draft of Argument/Advocacy**
    **In-class:** Workshop of Argument/Advocacy Assignment.

14. May 12
HW due:
**Final Draft of Argument/Advocacy:** Turn in with peer comments on first draft.
    **In-class:** Collection of Argument/Advocacy. Presentation of one assignment from the semester. Discussion of Adrienne Rich's, “Arts of the Possible”.