

ENGWRT0610: Introduction to Journalism and Nonfiction

Course Syllabus

Course Information

Instructor: Peter Hessler

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Office hours: Thursdays, 4:30 PM-5:30 PM, and by appointment

Required Texts

Course readings prepared by instructor

Description

This course will focus on literary nonfiction writing. Our emphasis is not on breaking news or issue-based journalism; instead, we are primarily concerned with creating a sense of place, character, and story. Each student will write three major papers, in three different forms: a Personal Essay, a Profile (a reported story about an individual), and a Feature Story (a reported story about a place, or a community, or an issue). that explores a place, a community, or an issue. All of these assignments will be nonfiction. The second and third papers will require reporting and other research, whereas the first article is from a more personal perspective.

As part of the writing process, we will discuss outlining and editing, and students will peer-review each other's work. For each paper, students will have the opportunity to improve their drafts after receiving feedback from their peers and the instructor.

We will also learn about the challenges and the benefits of doing on-the-ground reporting: talking to people, observing the ways in which individuals and communities interact, and gathering the kind of information that helps us understand a place.

During the fall semester of 2019, each student in this course wrote a personal essay and then developed two independent reporting projects somewhere in the larger community of Chengdu. These projects were the subjects of the second and third major papers.

During the spring semester of 2020, because the coronavirus pandemic prevented students from returning to campus, the assignments had to be adjusted. Each student wrote a personal essay, and then students developed independent reporting projects in their hometowns.

This semester, we will have to be flexible, because it is unclear whether students will be able to leave campus. For the first part of the term, our projects will be strictly on-campus. By the time we get to the second assignment, we will see if it's possible for students to leave campus. If not, we will find other ways to research a profile,

either through an on-campus subject or by using telephone, WeChat, and online research.

In addition to these major assignments, a number of shorter writings will be assigned throughout the term. Some of these assignments will consist of exercises designed to help students develop certain skills—for example, interviewing, or relating a conversation, or describing a landscape. Some of these writings will begin as in-class exercises, and some will be homework. At the end of the term, these writings will be collected as your Portfolio, which represents part of your grade.

So the class will involve a significant amount of writing. If you feel like this will be too demanding, and if your schedule makes it difficult for you to write this much, I understand. But if you decide that you don't want to take the course this semester, please tell me or send me an email. There is a waiting list of other students who have applied for the course, so I need to know if any spots open up.

This course is about writing and reporting, but it is also about reading. And by reading, we mean active reading—not just passively taking in information or reading for pleasure. Hopefully our reading selections will be enjoyable, but our job is also to analyze these pieces. We will think about how the writer researched the subject, how she organized her material, and how she told a story.

In many cases I will describe this process from my own perspective, using excerpts from *River Town* and articles that I have published in *The New Yorker*. I will explain some of the challenges that I faced during the research, my strategies for taking notes, and the decisions that I made in terms of the story's structure and writing.

Schedule

It's important to check Blackboard regularly. I will post readings there, and you will post your writings on Blackboard as well. I will also respond to your papers on Blackboard. If anything is confusing or unclear, please email me. I know that many students use email infrequently nowadays because so much of communication is on WeChat. But please understand that I prefer to use email, because it is easier for me to keep track of communications that way, on my computer rather than on my phone. So please check your email throughout the semester, and use email if you want to communicate with me directly.

It's not possible to give a detailed schedule at this point, because of some of the uncertainties related to the pandemic. But this will be the general plan for the major assignments. I am considering our Week 1 to be the first class—September 10. Week 2 is September 17, Week 3 is September 24, and so on.

Personal Essay of at least 750 words: assigned Week 3, first draft due Week 5, final draft due week 7.

Profile of at least 1,250 words: assigned Week 5, first draft due Week 9, final draft due Week 12.

Feature Story of at least 1,250 words: assigned Week 11, first draft due Week 14, final draft due Week 16 or 17.

Please note that this schedule is likely to be adjusted over the course of the semester. And the nature of the second and third assignments may be adjusted depending on student mobility.

Student Use of Electronic Technology Policy:

Students may use technology in appropriate ways during classes. For some classes I may request you to bring a laptop or tablet.

But out of respect, please turn off cell phones, or keep them on silent, and they should be kept out of sight. It's also important that you do your writing in English. Do not write your papers first in Chinese and then use an online translator to translate it into English. Papers that go through this process have an unnatural, awkward feel, and they will not be accepted. It is of course fine to use translators for words or phrases. But don't over-depend on these tools—your goal is to become more comfortable writing in English.

Students should not post material from the class on social media or other public forums.

Absences

Students are responsible for all assignments, including in-class writing exercises. If you are absent, you should contact the instructor to find out what work was missed. It is your responsibility to make up the work.

If you know that you will be absent, talk to the instructor beforehand in order to find out the work that you will miss while you are away.

Repeated absences will be reflected in the participation component of the grade.

SCUPI Honor Code:

Students in the course must follow the SCUPI Honor Code. This includes:

- must not get help from anyone to do his/her work without the teacher's permission.
- must not get help from any outside sources to do his/her work without the teacher's permission.
- must not copy the words of another and present those words as his/her own work.

Participating in these activities can result in an F. Turning in work that is not your own can result in an F.

Participation:

Active participation is critical to the class. This includes:

- arriving to class on time, and attending class regularly
- bringing class materials
- reading the assignments carefully and thoughtfully
- participating in class discussions
- providing useful comments and suggestions to your fellow students in peer review sessions
- completing all assignments on time

Assignments and Evaluation:

Assignments will be graded on the final versions of the papers.

Essay 1—Personal Essay: 20% of final grade

Essay 2—Profile: 25%

Essay 3—Feature Story: 30%

Portfolio—A collection of shorter in-class and out-of-class assignments: 15%

Participation—10% (This includes peer reviews of other student's papers)

There is a chance that these percentages may be adjusted slightly, depending on other adjustments to the course plan.

I will often use examples of student work in class, to help us learn how to improve papers. And students will often read each other's work as part of the peer-review process. We want this class to be as open as possible, so it is critical to be respectful of each other and each other's work.

If you write something that you would prefer not to share with the class, that is completely fine. Just contact me by email and explain that this is your preference, and I will find a different way for you to submit the paper, and I won't use it as an example in class. Please understand that if you do not make such a request, I will assume that you are not opposed to your writing being used in class.