San José State University
School of Humanities and Arts
Department of English and Comparative Literature

English 129, Introduction to Career Writing
Section 1, Fall 2012

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Class Days/Time:	MW 10:30-11:45 a.m.
Classroom:	Sweeney Hall 411
Prerequisites:	Upper-division standing

An Introduction to Career Writing: Writing It Real

So you wanna be a writer? No, I don't think you're crazy. I envy you. And in this class I am going to be more than "supportive" of your efforts. I am going to demand the effort. In this class, ultimately, I am going to demand you put it on the line: get it out there.

This term, we will study writers writing, write ourselves (double entendre intended), work as a writing team to produce and publish some writing for our local writing community (the department), and, finally, work at taking our writing beyond this department of readers into the public domain. We are going to get ourselves published—out there.

Our purpose this term is to look at what sort of writing is getting done these days, why and how and where. And to start producing that writing ourselves. We're going to focus on the emerging genre of creative nonfiction because it is a form you are already familiar with--how many personal essays did you write in your freshman comp classes?--and because it is a form that is increasingly popular--salable. (When you said you wanted to be a writer, you meant make a living at it, right? Hunger artists need not apply themselves here: you already have what you need; no one can reach you now.)

Publishers' lists are bursting with □□the new works of creative nonfiction and trade magazines and literary journals are responding to readers' burgeoning interest in creative nonfiction, the authority of fact and true-life experience undergirding all manner of stories.

Carolyn Forche and Philip Gerard, Writing Creative Nonfiction.

So what is creative nonfiction?

This question is the subject of much debate and the subject of our primary conversation this semester. Here, just to get the conversation rolling, is one writer's definition of the genre:

News is plot, event, what happened last night or this afternoon or is in process right now. News breaks fast, somebody writes it up, the gun's barely fired before the world's cued in. Story's a wider map and involves any number of whys, relating to personal history, family background, the times, places, cultural background, the detached perversity of genes. Story makes a stab at explanation, figuring out how such or another wonderful or terrible thing could have happened. News enjoys a brief shelf life, turns stale fast, grows a quick crust. Story addresses complicated possibilities and reasons, therefore lasts longer, maybe forever.

Beverly Lowry, " Not the Killing but Why."

Creative nonficton: not news, but story. It is distinguished from news by its conspicuous human presence; indeed, according to another writer, it gains its validity, its credibility, its value from this human presence:

The traditional trick of literature is to obscure the writer, to express the story through a fabricated narrator describing a fabricated reality. But for me, what I have to say is validated by the fact that I was there, that I witnessed the event. There is, I admit, a certain egoism in what I write, always complaining about the heat or the hunger or the pain I feel, but it is terribly important to have what I write authenticated by its being lived. You could call it, I suppose, personal reportage, because the author is always present. I sometimes call it literature by foot."

Ryszard Kapuscinski, quoted in "The 'New' Literature" by Carolyn Forche.

Writers who write this literature are conspicuously present in the world, and they are there to help us see it in new ways. In fact, they are out there investigating constantly, and this is their link to journalism:

Creative non-fiction writers are in an ideal position to be one-person "truth and reconciliation" commissions, to uncover "the small stories that have gone missing," as one writer put it. Rooted as it is in telling people's stories, creative nonfiction is a particularly well equipped genre to deal with events that have been forgotten or understudied by official histories, and to unearth lives at the margin of bigger events. Seek out these stories. Listen to them critically. Try to learn as much as possible about what it is to live in this fragmented, contradictory, often incomprehensible world. Then write.

Laura Wexler," Saying Good-Bye to 'Once Upon a Time,' or Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction."

Your Role as Writer

Wexler's passage describes aptly the position you will take up in this class: the position of the writer at large uncovering "the small stories that have gone missing." Everything you do, see, hear, smell, touch is a potential subject for thought, introspection, question, answer, puzzlement, and debate--for writing. It is your job to hunt the stories down. And to research them, uncovering first the questions that need asking and then the answers to those questions.

Defining your subject: You're the writer. And that is why, in this class, I will not give you topics to write on, just genres and writing occasions to explore. I won't define what you write, but how. The what is up to you. When you leave class today, you will have sixteen weeks' worth of writing assignments to complete and exactly sixteen weeks in which to complete them. When you leave this class today, you best begin to "seek out [your] stories." I recommend a small notebook or a recorder so that you can record the stories you find, say, in the grocery line this evening. [ELG 3 and 4]

Establishing the conversation: Your subjects will be defined by your own instincts and angles of vision, by your own presence in the world and among your readers. Creative nonfiction, like any other genre, can, in fact, be defined by the peculiar relationship it establishes between reader and writer, reader and world—by the nature of the conversation that it defines among those three texts: reader, writer, world.

Readers come to creative nonfiction with different expectations from those they bring to other genres. At the core of those expectations may be, in a sense, the hope of becoming engaged in a conversation.

Robert L. Root, Jr. and Michael Steinberg, The Fourth Genre.

For every essay you write, I will ask that you define clearly your subject, occasion, audience, purpose--and the particular conversation in which you are engaging your audience as they contemplate your subject. No, really, I will. You will include such a preface to each piece you submit to me for evaluation. [ELG 3, 4, and 5]

Exploring your material fully: Locating subjects and engaging conversations about those subjects is just one element of the writer's job. All the writing you do in this course will require extensive research. You also must explore the subject and the conversation on that subject fully, from as many angles as possible, until you discover its peculiar trajectory of meaning [ELG 4 and 5]:

It's a fascinating enterprise, this business of trying to tell the truth about the world through writing that is at once factual and literary. It calls for a reporter's investigative determination, a photographer's eye for detail, a historian's sense of documentation, a poet's passion for language, a storyteller's feel for narrative arc, a detective's nose for

truth, a travel agent's ability to organize an itinerary, some wise forethought, a little courage to put yourself on the line, a pencil and paper, and a bit of luck.

Carolyn Forche and Philip Gerard, Writing Creative Nonfiction.

Finding the form that will reveal your subject: A writer pursues his subject personally, and, ultimately, it is his person that is revealed; the writer writes himself (ethos) as much as he writes his subject. But a writer's choice of form—of genre, of narrative frame, of theme and sequence—determines as well how much of him and how much of the subject we see. [ELG 1 through 5]

"The bombing, carried out by the Nicaraguan Air Force, resulted in civilian casualties in the town of Esteli, among them families attempting to flee . . .": This was the language of the official report, but Mattison had listened for days to the wounded and dying of Esteli, translating and transcribing their testimony in his private notebooks. He became what we have come to call a "bridge person," who moves between cultures and realities, bearing one language into another, the isolated world of brutal experience in to the preserved and protected world at once distanced and implicated . . . In the "objective language" of the official story there would be no human interlocutor; no living and breathing being would have listened to a mother speak about attempting to rejoin her child's arm to her child's corpse . . .

There is a difference, then, between journalism and the new literature of creative nonfiction. But that genre had not yet recognized itself in its current form, and Mattison kept his nonfiction writings private. He could have written a personal memoir of his experience as a combat photographer, and might have included this dramatic scene, but it would have been presented as an experience in a young photographer's life, framed by a North American's fear and anxiety, his compassion and sensitivity, culminating in speculation about how this incident had been "epiphanic," producing a spark of realization that had transformed his life. The mother attempting to put her child's arm back onto her child's body would have disappeared behind the larger figure of the North American portraying himself as a character in his own--even if interesting--life. Mattison was averse to this.

Carolyn Forche and Philip Gerard, Writing Creative Nonfiction.

Developing your language skills: Like all good writing, good creative nonfiction writing demands that the writer understand the craft of writing well. William Zinsser, the guru of good writing, tells us:

Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to "personalize" the author. It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength.

William Zinsser, On Writing Well.

Craft: word skills; sentence skills, paragraph skills. You need to hone them to an infinitesimally precise edge. Interestingly, that process begins by learning how to read like a writer: Francine Prose will guide us through several passages of contemporary

prose (yes, in my view Chekhov is pretty contemporary) to show us how to develop our craft through our reading.

Another element of craft, often overlooked, is grammar and punctuation—the mechanics of effective writing. Before you start rolling your eyes and conjuring a list of rules, consider the possibility: observing how these elements are used by others; studying practice to develop a sense of the norms and range of these forms, these tools. Now you are looking at a set of conventions you can study and apply to achieve a wide range of effects—now you are looking at grammar and punctuation as a writer. And an adult. Now you have choice, and consequence. [ELG 1, 2, 3, and 5]

Working with other writers: This semester you are fortunate in the opportunity to join a production team of one of the department's two in-house publications: *The Writing Life* (WL) and the *English Department Newsletter* (EDN). As a class we will define the subject and scope of these newsletters; develop, research and write the content; design the layout; select, edit and proofread the final copy. In short, we will participate in the continued, by now traditional, production of our local nonfiction forums, learning as we go how such publications function as local venues for the work of the literary journalist. [ELG 1, 3, 4, and 5]

Your Classroom Tools for Exploring Creative Non-Fiction: Texts, Assignments, Readings

You will have several tools for exploring the form:

Texts. There are several required texts for this class: Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer* and Lynne Truss's book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*; and several collections from the *Best American* series. I will also require you to sign up for a semester-worth of *The Writer's Market* online.

Francine Prose is herself a fiction writer, but what she has to say about fiction is, we will learn, not unrelated to writing effective creative non-*fiction*. We will use her book to lay the groundwork for our analysis and practice of form: words, sentences, paragraphs, narration, character, dialogue, details.

Francine Prose touches on elements of grammar and punctuation occasionally; Lynne Truss devotes her full attention to it—for 204 fabulous little pages—and asks us to do so as well. And we will. Yes, you will. Truss has something really cool to show you: how to make grammar and punctuation a tool of craft. And you're crafty enough to get her. [ELG 1, 2, and 3]

Telling True Stories is a series of very brief essays written by professional journalists as part of the Neiman Institute's series. In it professional writers discuss the story-telling at the core of the "new journalism" that they practice. We will read this brief pieces alongiside the more narrative discussion of reading that Prose offers us.

The *Best American* series is an interesting subject for any writer's scrutiny: an annual look into the mind of an editor. Each volume is one editor's pick of the best of America's magazine writing, or travel writing, or sports writing. (There are many more such categories: science and nature writing, essays, mystery stories, spiritual writing, short stories, and even comic books and blogs and such under the aegis of "non-required writing.") Using the most recent series (2011), we will explore what editors are choosing as the best in the categories of magazine and travel and sports writing. (*The Best American Magazine Writing, The Best American Sports Writing,* and *The Best American Travel Writing.)* [ELG 1 through 5]

The Writer's Market (2012) is an invaluable reference for writers who want to sell their work: it catalogues current periodicals and publishers to provide writers information about how and where to place their words on the marketplace. You will use this resource to gather information about the publishers whose publications we are reading in the anthologies—and to find publications that would be "friendly" to receiving your words.

You should supplement these texts with some texts of your own: a comprehensive handbook of grammar, punctuation and usage; a college-level dictionary (unabridged); and a writer's guide or handbook. No writer's library is complete without at least one of each of these essential reference tools.

Writing Assignments. You will complete four writing assignments: an article for the *English Department Newsletter*, an essay for *The Writing Life*, and two creative-nonfiction essays intended for trade magazines or journals: a profile essay and a feature article.

Travel writing, sports writing; feature articles on topics of public interest; social satire that uses historical narrative as background for social commentary; a historical political travel narrative, a humorous historical sports profile—you choose the kind of writing to be done, the subjects, the audiences, the forums. These assignments are intended to give you the opportunity to explore several of the sub genres of creative nonfiction now practiced and thus to develop an appreciation of the requirements and capacities of each form—and several forums. [ELG: 3 and 4, but also 1, 2 and 5]

To produce four essays in our short time frame, you will need to work on assignments simultaneously. Please study the attached schedule and plan your semester accordingly. It might also help if you could choose a central topic or focus for the three major essays: that way your research can be cumulative, building to the feature article.

Presentations. With each reading assigned, two of you will be assigned to present information for the group as background to our discussion of the piece: one will present information on the author as "career writer"; the other will present information on the publication the piece comes from as "career opportunity." The presentations should be 5 minutes max—though you should imagine what you present as a "jumping off point" for the rest of the class. [ELG 4 and 5]

Readings. The reading in Prose and in Truss is intended to give us topics for discussing the readings in the *Best Am* series: When we're reading Prose on "Sentences" or "Dialogue," for instance, you should be reading the assigned piece from *Best Am* to see how what she says about one author's use of sentences helps you to observe more closely what the author we're reading is DOING—not just saying—with sentences. As you prepare your reading for class discussion, then, you should be "reading like a writer" and looking for ways in which Prose's observations or Truss's commentary have illuminated the piece we're reading—and you should come prepared to discuss your discoveries.

In fact, I am going to ask each of you to bring to class one such observation typed up and ready to submit at the beginning of class. These observations will record for me your reading thoughts and help me to direct class discussion. [ELG 1, 2, 3, and 5]

Workshops. All workshops are mandatory. All the writing you do this term will be workshopped in class. Workshops are listed on the Schedule of Reading and Writing Assignments; workshops are mandatory. Without workshop drafts, I will not accept an essay for evaluation. Did I mention that workshops are mandatory? You should come to the workshops prepared to present your work and to respond critically to the work of your peers. [ELG 1, 3, and 5]

The first three scheduled workshops are small-group workshops. You should bring to each of these workshop sessions three clean, typewritten copies of a complete draft of the essay to be reviewed.

You will notice that our last four class sessions are general workshops—that is, workshops that we will participate in as a class rather than in small groups. Drafts for these workshops are due in advance and you will need to make about 25 copies, one for each of your classmates and one for me. We will read your revised drafts in advance and discuss them in an order yet to be determined. We'll work out the specifics of the schedule when we get there.

Production Teams. You will complete the tasks required of one of the following positions on the production team of *The Writing Life* or *the English and Comparative Literature Newsletter*: Copy Editor, Layout/Design Editors, Graphics Editor, Proofreader, Distributions Editor. These production teams are your opportunity to learn how a publication develops within professional collaborative teams.

Note: Though I have set aside time in class for some production activities and meetings, most of these activities will need to be conducted outside of class time. Please plan your semester accordingly.

The Final Project. Your final project is to get yourself published. You will choose one of your three major essays, find it a home; write it up (query letter or proposal); perfect it, prune it, polish it--and bundle it up for the mail carrier.

You will submit to me, for evaluation, a copy of this bundle; my bundle will include as well the original essay with my comments, and a brief analysis of the publication to

which you are sending your work—its contents, format, forms, style, and an analysis of how your piece is suited to this publication. [ELG 1 through 5]

You will submit this project when we meet for our final exam, and perform a short debriefing ritual.

Other equipment / material requirements

You will need a USB stick and access to a computer to participate in collaborative production work for *The Writing Life* and *the English and Comparative Literarture Newsletter*.

My Professional Policies

I have developed these policies over the last thirty-plus years of teaching composition. They are intended to ensure the smooth operation of the class and to encourage a professional working environment congenial to all.

• Office hours are yours: you paid for them; use them. (Make this YOUR policy.)

• Email is not a substitute for office hours. If you need to discuss a paper in progress or clarify a comment I've made on a draft, you'll need to see me in the office. Email is to be used as a messaging device—to advise me of an absence or request a conference outside of the scheduled office hours.

• I do not accept late work. You are a professional; you meet deadlines. This is your religion.

• I cannot accept papers via e-mail. (I am one. You are many.)

• Please, type all papers single-spaced to conserve paper.

• I reserve the right to publish your work to the class as part of our workshop activities. And you will be expected to publish your work to the class as part of our workshop activities.

• Work completed in class cannot be made up. Workshops and presentations are an essential part of the writer's working experience. ***Your participation in all workshops is mandatory***; I will not accept for evaluation essays that have not been through the workshop process. You must bring to workshops clean, typewritten copy of your completed essay, and you must turn in to me the workshopped drafts as well as the final copy.

Grading Policy: Your Performance, Measured and Labeled for Public Record

Over the next sixteen weeks, you will perform all of the labors just described. If after reading the list, you want to start working out with me on the bike or in the pool, just let me know. Hercules had it easy; you'll need to be at least as big and tough as he.

While I won't measure your VO2 Max or your biceps at the end of the term (unless, of course, you want me to), I will measure your written performance and, in the end, weigh individual performances to determine which academic label to assign your work, as a matter of public record.

Grading Criteria: The following paragraphs sum up my criteria for grading an essay. Essays are assigned letter grades, from A to F.

An "A" is awarded to work that is consistently excellent. The essay is thoroughly researched, and thoughtfully developed and designed to engage a real audience in a carefully crafted and timely conversation on the chosen subject. That subject is treated intelligently, as is the audience, and the language does justice to the complexities of the subject matter, occasion, audience, and purpose of the piece. The piece could clearly find a "home" in the pages of a current periodical: The work is publishable.

A "B" is awarded to work that is consistently above average—and occasionally excellent. While essays may not exhibit the same depth of research or analysis, nor the flawless control of material, audience, or language, the author has thoroughly researched and developed the subject within the contemporary dialogue that defines it, and consistently demonstrates a grasp of the principles of composition that will, with continued revision, produce excellence. That revision complete, the piece will be publishable.

A "C" is awarded to work that is rigorously competent. The author can incorporate research to develop a subject effectively and engagingly. The author, while not yet accomplished in the craft of writing, clearly commands the forms and principles of effective composition—the various forms and genres of the essay; the paragraph and the sentence, their coordination and subordination; the role of audience, purpose and conversation in shaping prose—even as he or she struggles to produce effective writing. The struggle is clear, but so is the vision.

A "D" is awarded to work that shows developing competence. The author has gleaned from research some information on the subject and understands the conversation to be addressed. The author does not clearly command the forms and principles of composition and may have trouble articulating a coherent vision of the subject, though he or she is in command of the mechanics of good writing.

An "F" is awarded to work that demonstrates incompetence. The author founders in researching the subject. The author commands neither the forms and principles of composition, nor the mechanics of good writing.

Relative Weights for Determining the Final Course Grade: The letter grades you earn on individual assignments are translated into numbers to be crunched in order to determine the overall course grade. An F is 0, a D- is 1 and so on . . . . all the way to A+, which is 12. Yes, I do some math here. Trust me. Okay, I promise I'll use a calculator.

Presentations and Reading Commentary	15%
Production Work	10%
Four Formal Writing Assignments	50%
Final Project	25%

Dropping and Adding

Students are responsible for understanding the policies and procedures about add/drop, grade forgiveness, etc. Refer to the current semester's Catalog Policies section at http://info.sjsu.edu/static/catalog/policies.html. Add/drop deadlines can be found on the current academic calendar web page at http://www.sjsu.edu/provost/Academic_Calendars/. The Late Drop Policy is available at http://www.sjsu.edu/aars/policies/latedrops/policy/**.** Students should be aware of the current deadlines and penalties for dropping classes.

Information about the latest changes and news is available at the Advising Hub at http://www.sjsu.edu/advising/.

University Policies

Academic integrity

Your commitment as a student to learning is evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University. The University's Academic Integrity policy, located at http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/S07-2.htm, requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The Student Conduct and Ethical Development website is available at http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/.

Instances of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Cheating on exams or plagiarism (presenting the work of another as your own, or the use of another person's ideas without giving proper credit) will result in a failing grade and sanctions by the University. For this class, all assignments are to be completed by the individual student unless otherwise specified. If you would like to include your assignment or any material you have submitted, or plan to submit for another class, please note that SJSU's Academic Integrity Policy S07-2 requires approval of instructors.

Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need to make special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 at http://www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/directives/PD_1997-03.pdf requires that students with disabilities requesting accommodations must register with the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at http://www.drc.sjsu.edu/ to establish a record of their disability.

Student Technology Resources

Given our production work this term, access to a computer is vital. Computer labs for student use are available in the Academic Success Center at http://www.at.sjsu.edu/asc/ located on the 1st floor of Clark Hall and in the Associated Students Lab on the 2nd floor of the Student Union. Additional computer labs may be available in your department/college. Computers are also available in the Martin Luther King Library.

A wide variety of audio-visual equipment is available for student checkout from Media Services located in IRC 112. These items include DV and HD digital camcorders; digital still cameras; video, slide and overhead projectors; DVD, CD, and audiotape players; sound systems, wireless microphones, projection screens and monitors.

SJSU Writing Center

The SJSU Writing Center is located in Suite 126 in Clark Hall. It is staffed by professional instructors and upper-division or graduate-level writing specialists from each of the seven SJSU colleges. Our writing specialists have met a rigorous GPA requirement, and they are well trained to assist all students at all levels within all disciplines to become better writers. The Writing Center staff can be found at http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/about/staff/.

Course Goals and Student Learning Objectives: An Appendix for the Administrator Reading Over Your Shoulder (Yes, students, that means you can skip this, if you like.)

What You Already Know

The department has defined the following learning goals for the students of the Department of English and Comparative Literature:

In the Department of English and Comparative Literature, students will demonstrate the ability to
1. read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, and/or rhetoric;
2. show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American and World Literature;
3. write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and the nature of the subject;
4. develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively;
5. articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

What You May Have Gleaned Already from This Syllabus

English 129, as I have designed it meets all of the department's goals:

1. It asks students to read closely the writing of others, so closely in fact as to develop their own writing style and repertoire of forms.
2. It asks students to explore the writing in contemporary trade and literary publications as examples of the emerging genre of creative non-fiction (new journalism). It asks students to develop an awareness of this contemporary prose against a backdrop of the literary genres and styles they experience in their other courses in order to develop, by comparison and contrast, an awareness of how this genre uses literary and rhetorical forms common to all literary and rhetorical texts.
3. It asks students to consciously examine the process of honing language through a process of revision and editing that takes into account genre, style, audience, and occasion—with the express purpose of developing a prose style and essay practice that meets standards of professional publishing.
4. It asks students to research subjects and present information to an audience—so that it sells (translation, so completely wins the audience to its subject that they in fact want to invest dollars and cents into the experience of reading the stuff!).
5. It asks students to enter the world of contemporary writing and express subjects so that readers can understand the ways in which their subjects are meaningfully situated in contemporary history and culture.

How I Measure Students' Progress Toward These Goals

I am attaching to the syllabus a Summary of Writing Assignments for the Term (students receive this page, too). I have also detailed in the syllabus the criteria for grading all of these assignments. Each assignment asks students to meet all five goals and the evaluation criteria address all of the five goals the department has outlined for its students.