



**RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
The Pre-College Experience Program**

**Nonfiction Narrative Writing
Summer 2010 Course Syllabus 3 Credit Option**

Course Information

Class Meeting Day(s): Mon-Fri., July 5-23, 2010

College Web Address: www.ramapo.edu

College Closings/Special Announcements Phone No.: (201) 236-2902

Instructor Information

Instructor: Dr. Peter Scheckner, Professor of Literature

School of American and International Studies

201 684 7566 (office phone)

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Course Description

Nonfiction narrative writing (NFW) can be described as literary journalism, literary nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, or narrative journalism. Almost always you, the writer, are a part if not the central part of this piece of writing. Whatever NFW is, it is not an academic piece of writing, not scholarship, not a research paper, though it may indeed involve research on your part. It is creative, although it is factual. In a successful piece of NFW, the writer and the writer's reactions are clearly and interestingly portrayed in some fashion. However creative you are, and should be, the story you write has to ring true. Do not lie! If you have not yourself experienced it, it hasn't happened and should not appear in your work. Another way of putting all this may be: Put the reader where you are or have been. Become a storyteller.

Memoir (personal history) is a subgenre of creative nonfiction. Such writing uses imaginative, fictional devices—like dialogue, a narrative (telling a story), theme, conflict, setting, tone, characterization, voice, point of view, and so on—to tell a nonfiction (that is, true or “real”) story. In a sense, the working out of the similarities and distinctions between fiction and nonfiction writing is a basic part of what this course is all about. Definitions and examples of creative nonfiction writing will be a major part of this course.

Having said this, of course the heart of this course is your immersion in writing. This will be a workshop course, little lecturing, much writing and peer-group critiquing based on the criteria I am offering you.

Course Objectives

If you want to get serious about your writing, this course is a great place to begin. We will be concentrating on personal essays, memoir, and literary journalism. Through a variety of exercises, writing assignments, reading assignments—and through participating in the workshop aspect of the course, as an editor/critic and as a recipient of writing suggestions—your writing is bound to improve. Keep in mind that the purpose of this class is to give you the structure to work creatively on your writing and be productive. How much your writing ultimately blossoms will depend on the time and commitment you put into the course.

Required Texts

The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction by Dinty Moore (2007 Pearson Longman)

Winding Roads Exercises in Writing Creative Nonfiction by Diane Thiel (2008 Pearson Longman)

Course Responsibilities

You will be responsible for writing three (3) creative nonfiction papers of no fewer than five (5) pages each. In addition you will keep a writer's journal—details to follow. For each student paper all students will write a detailed critique on the paper based on the criteria I am providing below.

Classes will consist of the following regime: go over assigned readings from *The Truth of the Matter* and from *Winding Roads*. Critique these readings. Class discussion/critiques of two student papers per class. Occasionally I will ask you to bring in articles you have found on-line or from hardcopy journals—examples of NFNW you like. Tell us why you like them.

Please Note: An integral and very important part of this class will be field trips to museums, shows or other landmarks.

You should most certainly consider incorporating these trips into your three papers, creating a narrative around these experiences if you can.

The Writer's Journal

This term you will keep a notebook (or, if you prefer, use your computer) to jot down your observations, ideas, dialogue, descriptions, research you may wish to do to bolster your writing, thoughts about writing—like how hard or easy it may be; what makes it easier or harder—issues that arise in school or at your job, summaries about how students critique your work (what they are saying each week), and a continuous conversation with yourself about your writing, your school career, and possibly your outside work (your employment). Take notes when you do a workshop on your writing or on other people's writings. Note what works in these writings. What does not? What are you liking? What do you dislike about the writings you see? Be sure to read pages 7-8 in *Winding Roads*.

Your journal, which I may ask you see periodically, is worth 10 percent of your final grade.

Suggestion: when you read the nonfiction works in *The Truth of the Matter* or in *Winding Roads*, note in your journal what especially you like; what you find compelling; what bores you and why. What are you learning about NFNW? What makes this or that essay successful?

Make certain you maintain this journal, because I will collect it from time to time and it will be graded.

Class Policies and Expectations

Samples of assignments will be shared in class, and you must provide the class with photocopies for all when your work is being discussed. Classroom participation is essential, and that includes on-time arrival, regular attendance, verbal participation, and steady progress in your writing.

Electronic Forms of Communication In accordance with College policy, I will use your Ramapo College email address (@ramapo.edu) to communicate with you about all course-related matters.

Students with Disabilities If you need course adaptation or accommodations because of a documented disability, please make an appointment. My office is in B 138.

Submissions Guidelines for your three (3) writings

These papers will of course be typed, double spaced, etc., and e-mailed or brought to class with copies for all members and for the instructor (me). They should be no fewer than five pages.

All weekly submissions should be e-mailed to the class in advance, using a class e-mail list I will provide. Your manuscripts should be double spaced, using one inch margins, use 12 pt. type, Times New Roman, nothing fancy, and have an original title. If you are able, get Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (latest edition, please), or Bryan Garner's *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style*. At the very least you do not want to get the basic wrong—things like formatting, usage, diction, or mechanics.

If time permits and if you wish—and only if you wish—you may submit revisions of your works to me for a potentially higher grade. This grade is not, of course, guaranteed. Still, it is a good idea to consider rewrites.

Percentage and breakdown of work

Written critiques of papers	30%
Journal	10%
Three written assignments	60%

Grading criteria: In most respects this is not much different from your other classes. It is very hard to evaluate the creative part of NFNW, though most people would probably agree as to what constitutes true creativity as opposed to something hackneyed, cliché-ridden, trite, boring, dull, bland, lackluster, and so on. Here is a rubric I use for expository or college composition writing:

The Superior Paper (A/A-)

Thesis: Easily identifiable, plausible, novel, sophisticated, insightful, crystal clear.

Structure: Evident, understandable, appropriate for thesis. Excellent transitions from point to point.

Paragraphs support solid topic sentences.

Use of evidence: Primary source information used to buttress every point with at least one example.

Examples support mini-thesis and fit within paragraph. Excellent integration of quoted material into sentences.

Analysis: Author clearly relates evidence to "mini-thesis" (topic sentence); analysis is fresh and exciting, posing new ways to think of the material.

Logic and argumentation: All ideas in the paper flow logically; the argument is identifiable, reasonable, and sound. Author anticipates and successfully defuses counter-arguments; makes novel connections to outside material (from other parts of the class, or other classes) that illuminate thesis. Conclusion emerges logically and clearly from main arguments

Mechanics: Sentence structure, grammar, and diction excellent; correct use of punctuation and citation style (footnotes/endnotes used when needed and maintain Chicago/Turabian format, see: www.zotero.org for useful software to assist); minimal to no spelling errors; absolutely no run-on sentences or comma splices (when two independent clauses are joined by a comma with no conjunction, e.g. It is nearly half past five, we cannot reach town before dark.).