

**NARRATIVE NON-FICTION**  
**(aka the confusing and vague Advanced English Composition)**

RHET 206  
Anne Trubek  
Spring 2008  
Thursdays 1:00-2:50 pm

Office: King 139C  
Phone: x8615  
Office Hours: Tuesdays 4-5:30, Thursdays 3:00-4:00 and by appointment  
email: [anne.trubek@gmail.com](mailto:anne.trubek@gmail.com)

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course will focus on writing non-fiction prose that uses narrative techniques (scenes, characters, action, voice, connection to reader) and experiments with style, voice and tone. We will pay close attention to audience as well. The course will introduce you to the nuts and bolts of magazine writing and understanding markets.

Most class sessions are set aside for discussion of our writing. Hopefully, we will create an atmosphere of rigorous, thoughtful and constructive feedback during these classes. It's up to all of us to make this work.

You will write six short assignments that all have very specific length and audience requirements. Each assignment asks you to demonstrate an understanding of one element of or genre in non-fiction: personal essay, op-ed, observation, scenes, etc. You will submit one of these assignments for publication. You will also keep a weekly blog containing discussions of readings. Your final project is a narrative feature on a topic of and for an audience of your choice.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

-- Portfolio: Six shorter assignments--40 %

*You will receive one grade for all of these (see "Assignments" below). . I do not expect you to revise any assignment other than the one you will submit. The best portfolios will demonstrate an understanding of each assignment, range in tone, style, audience, theme and topic, and the elements of successful narrative non-fiction.*

*You will meet with me for an individual conference between March 6-20. By the time of your conference you should have completed at least three assignments.*

*You will submit all six assignments on April 10.*

--Reading Blog: 25%

*I will discuss your blog during our individual conference and comment upon it when you submit your portfolio.*

*You will be graded upon the breadth and depth of your reading selections and the quality of your critical reading skills, as demonstrated in your blog posts.*

--Final Feature Essay: 25%

*You will write one narrative non-fiction feature of about 4000 words. Open topic. I suggest you decide on a topic early in the semester or develop your feature out of one shorter assignment.*

*Before you begin your feature you must write a three-paragraph proposal and have it approved by me. You may submit this any time you would like, but by April 10 at the latest.*

--Class Participation: 10%

*Class participation will be based primarily upon your oral comments made during class. However, I will also consider written comments you offer your peers on their blog and Blackboard posts.*

## ASSIGNMENTS

### *Portfolio*

You may complete these in any order, but I suggest you do them in the order they are listed below. If you have signed up to have an assignment workshopped, you must complete it the week it appears on the syllabus.

---

#### ***NEWSWEEK'S "MY TURN"***

Write a personal essay.

According to *Newsweek*: The essay should be personal in tone, and about any topic, but not framed as a response to a *Newsweek* story.

Completed Guidelines: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4926088/site/newsweek/>

Examples: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3037915/site/newsweek/>

Audience: general  
Length: 850-900 words

---

### ***NON-BOOK REVIEW***

Observe something.

*The Believer* runs essays on objects and things. These essays have intellectual and analytical substance as well as detailed observations.

Guidelines, paraphrased from an editor: Do not get too personal: it's not a personal essay. Do not choose something really wacky and make the object's oddness be what the piece is about: if you do so your piece will likely lack substance.

Examples: <http://www.believermag.com/nonbookreviews>

Length: 570-600 words

Audience: literary, youngish hip readers (i.e. you?)

---

### ***TALK OF THE TOWN***

A scene.

The front of *The New Yorker* features several vignettes from life in New York. The classic Talk of the Town sketch describes a moment and can take the form of a scene, an anecdote, or a character sketch. For this assignment, you must render a scene.

Imagine Oberlin has a campus (not student) publication called *The Oberlinian* modeled after *The New Yorker*. Write a piece for its "Talk of the Town" section.

Examples: <http://www.newyorker.com/talk/>. Oberlin publications: *Review*, *Grape*, *The Source*

Length: 600 words or so

Audience: Oberlin College students, faculty, staff

---

### ***NEW YORK TIMES OP-ED***

Write an opinion piece for the *New York Times*. **You must draw upon something upon which you have an expertise for the topic.** For example, you might write about why college students fear Hilary, or why the housing market in your hometown is rebounding. Read the articles below before you choose your topic:

Editor comments:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/opinion/01SHIP.html?ex=1201755600&en=4090b896fa580b7f&ei=5070> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/31/opinion/31shiple.html>

Guidelines: <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/help/opedsubmit.html>

Example: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/06/opinion/06mathias.html> and every morning

Length: 650 words or so

Audience: um...*New York Times* reader-types

---

### ***GOOD: STIMULI***

Write a critical essay on a cultural trend.

GOOD magazine's Stimuli are critical essays on trends in literature, music, fashion, art, games, movies, etc.

Choose a trend you have something to say about that you think will interest GOOD's audience.

Examples: <http://www.goodmagazine.com/section/Stimuli>

Length: 1000 words

Audience: "People who give a damn" (and probably between 20-32)

---

### ***YOUR TURN***

Write in the subgenre of your choice for one particular market that accords with that market's guidelines.

For example, if you would like to write about food, you could write an essay for *The Smart Set*. According to their writers' guidelines, they are looking for columns of up to 1500 words on food and culture for "On Dining." Or you may want to write an investigative report for *The Oberlin Review*, and if so you would pitch them and write to their specifications

#### Subgenres

Food

Sports

Travel

History (Oberlin History project info tba)

Profile

Investigative Reporting

Radio

Something else approved by me

---

### ***Submission***

Anytime you are ready and before April 10, submit one of the above. You may submit to the market you wrote for, of course. However, you could also adapt it for another market. Any market is fine as long as it is *new to you* (so if have written for *The Review*, you cannot submit to them).

You should discuss your submission ideas with me *before* you send it, and I am happy to work with you on revisions, final edits and submission details.

Anyone earning both credit and money from this course is welcome to donate a portion of their proceeds to the end-of-semester pizza party...

---

### ***Final Project: Feature***

Write a narrative non-fiction feature. You may choose your market or write without a specific audience in mind.

*If you choose to do significant reporting for this feature (interviewing, etc.) and have not taken Journalism Basics or another journalism course, please talk with me **before** you begin.*

Length: 3500-4500 words

## **COURSE PROCEDURES**

### **Submitting Assignments**

You may complete shorter assignments at your own pace. However, I suggest you complete one a week and in the order we will discuss them. You must have completed three assignments before you meet with me for an individual conference before mid-term, and all six are due April 10.

If your work is scheduled to be workshopped (please excuse the verb) you must complete that week's particular assignment (i.e. we will only workshop personal essays on February 14). These assignments must be posted on Blackboard by Wednesday 5:00 pm

### **Workshops: Being Discussed**

Every student will have his/her writing workshopped twice during the semester.

You will sign up for two different weeks, and you must post your piece to Blackboard by **Wednesday at 5:00 pm** that week.

While your work is being discussed, I ask you not to speak much. Approach the workshop as an opportunity to listen to your peers, to take in praise and criticism. You can always follow up after class to ask more questions or seek advice from classmates. By focusing your energies on listening to comments, you will learn a lot, even if you have to constantly put your hand over your mouth to keep from explaining yourself.

## **Workshops: Discussing**

Come to class with written comments for every student paper posted to Blackboard. You may bring your own laptop, use one of the ones in the classroom, or print hard copies.

During workshops, use your written comments as a guide for our discussion, but do not feel compelled to mention all your thoughts, since you will give your written comments to the author after class ends. Do, however, feel compelled to keep a discussion thread going (comment upon something a classmate has just said rather than introduce a new point). We may not discuss everything about a piece; instead, we may discuss one topic in depth. That's fine. Workshops discussions are not meant to be comprehensive; they are meant to be conversations. Please risk making comments about weaknesses in a piece, because no one will learn much if we simply praise.

At the end of class, give (or send) your written comments to the writer of the piece.

## **Attendance**

If you miss two classes, you will fail/no entry the course.

## **Reading Blogs:**

You are required to set up a blog and will write about readings.

Most courses devote class time to discussing readings and out-of-class time to writing. This class reverses that production/consumption divide: you will choose what to read on your own, with guidance from me (as many classes approach writing); in class we will discuss your work (as many classes approach reading).

You are required to post at least once a week and discuss at least three readings each week. You could post three short posts a week or one long post a week or ... you decide. But you need to discuss three pieces of quality non-fiction and post at least once a week about what you've read. Your posts should coincide with that week's assignment: for example, next week you should post about personal essays you read.

Posts should be critical and incisive. Stay away from like/dislike and hone in on your main analytic points. Tone and voice may be as varied and unique as you would like: I hope you use the blog to play with different writing styles, mimic the tones of those you admire, work on developing a distinct voice of your own, etc.

## **Readings:**

I have set up a reading fodder blog, containing numerous suggestions for where to go to read great non-fiction; it can be accessed on Blackboard and at <http://rhet206.blogspot.com/>

However, not wanting to depart from the time honored tradition of professors ordering books for students, and because I think these are worthy texts for all of us to dip into, I have ordered and put on reserve the following:

American Society of Magazine Editors, The Best American Magazine Writing 2007  
David Foster Wallace and Robert Atwan, The Best American Essays 2007  
William Zinsser, On Writing Well  
Mark Kramer and Wendy McCall Telling True Stories

### SYLLABUS

- FEBRUARY 7:**        **Introduction/Sign Up For Workshops**
- FEBRUARY 14:**    **Personal Essay Workshop**
- FEBRUARY 21:**    **Non-Book Review Workshop**
- FEBRUARY 28:**    **Talk of The Town Workshop**
- MARCH 6:**        **Guest Speakers, Robert Krulwich and Jad Abumrad**  
*Individual Conferences begin: have 3 assignments completed  
before your conference*
- MARCH 13:**       **Op-Ed Workshop**  
*Individual Conferences continue: have 3 assignments completed  
before your conference*
- MARCH 20:**       **Guest Speaker, Michael Dirda**
- \*\*\*\*\* *SPRING BREAK* \*\*\*\*\*
- APRIL 3:**        **Cultural Trend Workshop**
- APRIL 10:**       **Your Turn Workshop**  
*Portfolios due with all 6 assignments completed  
Final Deadline for Feature Proposal  
Final Day to Submit One Short Assignment*
- APRIL 17:**       **Feature Workshop**
- MAY 1:**         **Feature Workshop**
- MAY 7:**         **Feature Workshop**
- MAY 10**         ***Final Projects Due***

