



UNIVERSITY OF
KING'S
COLLEGE • HALIFAX

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Nonfiction

COURSE OUTLINE: JOUR6100.03: Writing Craft I

Fall Term 2019

Cohort Director:

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Overview:¹

Writing Craft I combines an intense summer residency at the University of King's College with a series of written assignments completed during the fall semester. Officially, the course runs from July 31–December 3, 2019.

In advance of the summer residency, students will read assigned texts and readings, and complete related assignments.

During the residency, students will attend daily lectures, workshops, and panels offered by faculty, mentors, and guest lecturers on topics related to the craft of creative nonfiction, its history and various sub-genres, its ongoing professional, craft and ethical debates. Students will also receive instruction in how to prepare a professional nonfiction book proposal and develop their author platform.

Also during the residency, students will work with faculty and mentors to develop, refine, and critically evaluate their own ideas for book projects before finalizing—in concert with mentors and faculty—the book project they intend to undertake during the program.

Students will choose a topic for a 3,000-word research paper on an historical, ethical, or professional issue related to creative nonfiction. During the fall semester,

¹ You'll find the most up-to-date information about MFA courses and related news on the [Class of 2021 Bulletin Board](#).

students will present their papers online, and respond to papers from other students.

Students will also submit a research plan outlining how they plan to research their project, who they will interview, and what documentary sources they will consult.

Finally, students will also read and critique two books related to their book project.

Relationship to Other Classes:

JOUR 6100.03 is the entry point for the entire program, providing students with an understanding of the creative nonfiction genre they will carry forward into their mentorships, residencies, and projects.

The lectures on creative nonfiction as well as the sessions on preparing a book proposal and developing an author platform will help prepare students for the issues to be developed in Publishing Residency I.

Learning Outcomes:

At the end of Writing Craft I, students will have achieved the following learning outcomes:

- Developed a literacy about creative nonfiction writing as a distinct literary genre with its own history, ethics, craft, and professional issues.
- Developed an understanding of what it takes to turn a book idea into a book proposal.
- Learned how to devise a book research and writing plan.
- Enhanced their nonfiction writing skills through workshopping their own and other students' writing

Assignment Due Dates

August 1	Writer-in-Residence /Editor-in-Residence assignments
August 30	One-Page Written Pitch and Book Report Choices
September 27	Work Plan
October 18	Book Report #1
November 8	Research Paper
November 12	Responses to Research Papers
December 3	Book Report #2

Marking

Writer-in-Residence assignment	P/F
Editor-in-Residence assignment	P/F
Residency participation	15%
One-page written pitch	10%
Book Reports (2 x 10%)	20%
Research Essay	40%
Work Plan assignment	15%

A. Pre-residency Assignments

TBA. Details will be provided separately.

B. Post-residency Assignments:

- **One-page (350-word maximum) pitch**, building on the book pitch presented during the residency.
- **3,000-word Research Essay²**
Students will write a 3,000-word research paper on an historical, ethical or professional issue related to creative nonfiction. (I'll send out an email with faculty- and mentor-suggested topics, from which you can choose. Or you can suggest your own topic, which must be approved in advance.) This is not an academic essay assignment. It's an opportunity for you to think more deeply about broader issues in creative nonfiction. I'm looking for a thoughtful, well-sourced, well-crafted and carefully argued personal narrative of 3,000 words, more or less. Think, and make me think. Remember, it's also a writing assignment. Make me want to read it. (You don't need to do academic footnoting but if your sources aren't apparent from the text and context, make sure they're flagged in endnotes or some other way.)
You will also read and comment on at least 5 other posted research papers.
- **Work Plan Assignment**

You will submit a Work Plan (no more than 1,500 words in narrative format or with bullet lists) outlining what you believe you will need to do in order to write your book and, to the extent possible at this early stage, how you will go about accomplishing your work plan.

The goal of this assignment — really a brainstorming exercise — is to get you thinking about what you will need to do to make your book idea a reality, not

² We'll distribute examples of Research papers as well as Work Plans in September.

just in this semester but over the course of your MFA program and perhaps beyond.

Start with this alliterative shorthand: people, places, papers. Who will you need to interview? What places will you need to visit and/or research? What books, newspapers, online resources, photos and documents will you need to consult and where/how might you find them?

Or begin with a few simple topics: what to read? what to find out?

Start making lists. Cast your net wide and far.

Say you're writing a memoir about a time in your childhood when you were in Budapest. (Why not?) It might help to know:

- Budapest's history, including but not limited to the time frame you'll be writing about. Such context can often provide depth and colour for your specific story. Are there books you should read? Academic theses you should consult? Archives you should visit?
- The larger issues animating Budapest at the time. Newspapers, many available through online databases, are great for that. And who knows what serendipity you will discover?
- The geography of the neighbourhood in which you lived during the time of your memoir. You may need to track down the city's mapping department to get a map of the city from those years so you don't discover your characters playing soccer on a street that didn't yet exist.
- Are there scenes you will want to write about events that happened on specific days — your birthday, for example. What was the weather like that day? What else was happening that day?

Some of the events in your memoir involved your Aunt Anna, and your best friend Hanna. Make a list of all the people from your childhood you believe could expand, illuminate, confirm, or question your own memories. You need to track them down, interview them if you can, but also ask them if they have diaries, letters, photograph albums. Such artifacts can be priceless to an author.

I sense the need for a site visit! There is no substitute for being there. But when? Do you want to have done all your book research before you talk to Anna and Hannah? Or do you want to use that face-to-face interview to help direct your other research? There is no right answer, but it helps to think through these issues in advance and begin to make at least a tentative timeline of when you want to do what.

But let's say that your memoir isn't just about the beauties of Budapest when you were a child. What memoir would be? There's a trauma involved. There often is. Has this particular kind of trauma been studied, written about? Are there experts you might need to consult? Academic studies, other memoirs you should read?

The lists grow and multiply and morph.

The reality, of course, is that much of this work will not end up in your book. Some of your first thinking about what you need to do may not even survive your initial brainstorm. The larger purpose of all this wide-ranging poking and prodding is to make those connections, to uncover threads and gems that might otherwise slip through the cracks.

Every project will be different. A work plan for a memoir will not be the same as one for an investigative project, or an historical narrative. Unlike book proposals, for example, which tend to follow a particular format, there is no accepted structure for a work plan. Most writers probably wouldn't even think of what they do by that name. To-do lists, napkin notes, brainstorming, mind-mapping, thinking...

So what are we asking you to do — and why?

We simply want you to sit down and think about your book project and identify — at this moment in time — some of the specifics it will take to get it done. And then write them down.

You may choose to make lists, such as:

- Chapter-by-Chapter To-Do Lists
- Story Arcs/Themes
- Research Topics
- Information Gaps I Know About
- Interviews
- Books
- Documents
- Online/Database Research
- Site Visits,
- Project Timelines
- Etc.

Or you may prefer to outline your plans in narrative fashion.

You'll submit the completed assignment to your cohort director — that's me — and to your mentor.

What happens then? Well, for starters, I will mark the assignment. That's the official part. But I'll also do my best to offer specific suggestions and have-you-considered-this ideas that may help moving forward.

Although the assignment is just a snapshot in time, you and/or your mentor may choose (or not) to make it a living document, revising and refining it as your project evolves and changes.

- **Book Reports**

Students will read and critique two books related to the subject of their book project. These can be books you're using as research on the topic of your project, or books that might be similar in theme or style to yours that you're reading to get a handle on what else is out there. Read them and tell me — in no more than 500 words each— what you've learned from them that will be helpful to your work on your major project.

Suggestions:

- Don't "read" books you've already read. It's a waste of this opportunity.

Marking Rubrics

Work Plan Assignment (15%)

You will submit a Work Plan (no more than 1,500 words in narrative format or with bullet lists) outlining what you believe you will need to do in order to write your book and, to the extent possible at this early stage, how you will go about accomplishing your work plan.

Criteria	Exceptional "A"	Acceptable B	Failure <B-
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Content (70)	Demonstrates an exceptional understanding of what constitutes a clear, concise and practical work plan by submitting a bulleted list or narrative that indicates precisely how the student intends find material needed to produce their project. The material shows that the student as cast a wide net and come up with intriguing important questions to answer and ways to answer them.	Demonstrates an adequate understanding of what constitutes a practical work plan by submitting a plan that indicates how the student intends to research and organize the project.	Demonstrates an inadequate understanding of what constitutes a clear, concise and practical work plan by submitting a plan that doesn't indicate how the student will organize and research the project.
Writing style (15)	The writing is compelling. It hooks the reader and sustains interest throughout.	The writing is generally engaging, but has some dry spots. In general, it is focused and keeps the reader's attention.	The writing has little personality. The reader quickly loses interest and stops reading.
Grammar, Spelling, Writing Mechanics (15)	The writing is free or almost free of errors. Follows <i>Chicago Manual of Style</i> .	There are occasional errors, but they don't represent a major distraction or obscure meaning. Style mostly consistent.	There are so many errors that meaning is obscured. The reader is confused and stops reading.

3,000-word Research Paper and 5, 300-word Responses (Total: 40 per cent):

Students will write a 3,000-word research paper on an historical, ethical or professional issue related to creative nonfiction. Both the paper itself and the responses will be evaluated on the following criteria:

Criteria	Exceptional A	Acceptable B	Failure <B-
Purpose (10)	The writer's central goal or argument is clearly stated and readily apparent to the reader.	The writing has a clear goal or argument, but may sometimes digress from it.	The purpose or argument is generally unclear.

Content (40)	Balanced presentation of relevant and legitimate information that clearly supports a central purpose or argument and shows a thoughtful, in-depth analysis of a significant topic. Reader gains important insights.	Information provides reasonable support for a central purpose or argument and displays evidence of a basic analysis of a significant topic. Reader gains some insights.	Central purpose or argument is not clearly identified. Analysis is vague or not evident. Reader is confused or may be misinformed.
Use of References (10)	Compelling evidence from professionally legitimate sources supports claims. Attribution is clear and fairly represented.	Professionally legitimate sources are generally present and attribution is, for the most part, clear and fairly represented.	Few sources, incomplete or unclear attribution.
Organization (10)	The ideas are arranged logically to support the purpose or argument. They flow smoothly from one to another and are clearly linked to each other. The reader can follow the line of reasoning.	The ideas are arranged logically to support the central purpose or argument. They are usually clearly linked to each other. The reader can—mostly—follow the line of reasoning.	The writing is not logically organized. Frequently, ideas fail to make sense together. The reader cannot identify a line of reasoning and loses interest.
Writing style (20)	The writing is compelling. It hooks the reader and sustains interest throughout.	The writing is generally engaging, but has some dry spots. In general, it is focused and keeps the	The writing has little personality. The reader quickly loses interest and stops reading.
Grammar, Spelling, Writing Mechanics (10)	The writing is free or almost free of errors. Follows <i>Chicago Manual of Style</i> .	There are occasional errors, but they don't represent a major distraction or obscure meaning. Style inconsistent.	There are so many errors that meaning is obscured. The reader is confused and stops reading.

Book Reports (10 per cent each):

Students will read and critique two books related to the subject of their book project. Essentially what this assignment is asking you to do is to select two books relevant to your project. These can be books you're using as research on the topic of your project, or books that might be similar in theme or style to yours that you're reading to get a handle on what else is out there. Read them and tell me — in no more than 500 words each— what you've learned from them that will be helpful to your work on your major project.

Criteria	Exceptional "A"	Acceptable B	Failure <B-
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Book Description (10)	Provides the reader with a succinct summary of the book's contents, approach, and style that includes information on its marketplace success.	Provides the reader with a useful summary of the book's contents, approach, and style but fails to offer information on its marketplace success.	Fails to provide the reader with a useful summary of the book or information on its marketplace success.
Author Biography (10)	Provides the reader with a concise, relevant-to-the-book's topic biography that demonstrates the student has consulted with numerous sources.	Provides the reader with a concise, relevant author biography.	Fails to provide the reader with a concise, relevant author biography.
Analysis (50)	Provides the reader with a clear analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the book being reported on, a cogent comparison of the book's strengths, weaknesses, themes, and approach with the student's own book project, and a sense of how this information will influence the student's own book project.	Provides the reader with a clear analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the book being reported on, but the comparison of the book's strengths, weaknesses, themes, and approach with the student's own book project is lacking.	Fails to provide the reader with a clear analysis of the book or a comparison of the book with the student's own book project.
Writing Style (30)	The writing is compelling. It hooks the reader and sustains interest throughout.	The writing is generally engaging, but has some dry spots. In general, it is focused and keeps the reader's attention.	The writing has little personality. The reader quickly loses interest and stops reading.

5. Residency Participation (15 per cent)

The Summer Residency is a unique opportunity for students to engage intensively with faculty, mentors, guest presenters and each other about the art and craft of creative nonfiction.

We recognize individuals engage in different ways: asking questions or questioning assumptions during presentations, participating in organized events like micro-readings, having one-to-one discussions with guests at the end of their events,

discussing a point over beer during social gatherings, emailing to follow up on an issue that was raised ...

We also recognize participation includes other aspects of interaction: showing up on time, focusing on presentations rather than social media feeds, etc.

We assume you know and understand all this, so your participation mark starts at A-. That's the benchmark. Those whose participation goes above and beyond will earn extra points, those who don't live up to expectations will see their mark reduced.

If we notice anyone slipping below the benchmark during the first week, we'll point it out privately so the student has a chance to rectify — or respond — before the end of the residency. If you have concerns about participation, please don't hesitate to discuss them with me.

Course Texts

- Hart, Jack. *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 2011.
- Rabiner, Susan and Fortunato, Alfred. *Thinking Like Your Editor*. Norton. New York, 2003.
- Levine, Mark L. *Negotiating a Book Contract*. Asphodel Press, 2009.
([Available as a PDF or electronically](#))
- Friedman, Jane. *The Business of Being a Writer*. University of Chicago Press, 2018

Suggested Texts

- Rein, Jody and Larsen, Michael. *How to Write a Book Proposal*. New York: Writer's Digest Books, 2017.
- May, Lori A. *The Write Crowd: Literary Citizenship and the Writing Life*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- Gutkind, Lee. *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality*. New York: Wiley, 1997.
- Kidder, Tracy, and Richard Todd. *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2013.
- Kramer, Mark and Wendy Call. *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*. New York: Plume, 2007.

Grammar and Style: Proper usage and grammar are an expectation for all written work in this course. Although this course is offered through the School of Journalism, the publishing content is intended primarily for book content. As a result, we will follow the *Chicago Manual of Style* for all written work.

Official Stuff

Academic Performance

The course uses the following grading scale:

A+	90-100
A	85-89
A-	80-84
B+	77-79
B	73-76
B-	70-72
F	<70

Students must achieve a minimum grade of B- in all classes. Disputes over academic performance and assessment will be dealt with according to the Academic Regulations of the School of Journalism and the Dalhousie University Faculty of Graduate Studies. For more information, see the King's calendar and the Dalhousie University Graduate Calendar.

Appeals

Disputes over academic performance and assessment will be dealt with according to the Academic Regulations of the School of Journalism. Students may appeal decisions of the Journalism Studies Committee to the Faculty of Graduate Studies. For more information, see the University of King's College Calendar and the Dalhousie University Graduate Calendar.

Ethical Conduct

All students are expected to familiarize themselves with the School's Handbook of Professional Practice <kingsjournalism.com/handbook> and abide by its ethical standards.

Safety

To do journalism well, you must sometimes be uncomfortable. You should never be unsafe. All students are expected to read the School's [safety guidelines](http://kingsjournalism.com/handbook/#safety) <kingsjournalism.com/handbook/#safety>. If you run into trouble or if you feel a situation might put your or others' personal safety at risk, bail out and call your instructor right away.

Inclusive Behaviour

King's prides itself on inclusiveness and respect for others. Our classrooms and newsrooms are public spaces in which racist, sexist, homophobic or intolerant comments or humour will not be tolerated. Do not screen such videos, images or web pages on school equipment or in school facilities. Offensive behaviour is not just disrespectful to your colleagues and to your profession; it may constitute harassment under the King's Code of Conduct. For more information, find the Yellow Book at <policies.ukings.ca/>.

Academic Integrity

Violations of academic integrity at the graduate level are taken seriously. The punishment for plagiarism or other forms of academic integrity can range from receiving a zero on the assignment, to failing the course, being suspended or expelled from the university. If you have any doubt about proper citation for an academic paper or proper attribution in a piece of journalism, contact your instructor or the Writing Centre at Dalhousie University. For more information, consult the section on Intellectual Honesty on p. 23 of Dalhousie's Graduate Studies Calendar <academiccalendar.dal.ca/> (Find "PDF Versions" at the top of that page.)

Accommodation

Students may request accommodation as a result of barriers experienced related to disability, religious obligation, or any characteristic protected under Canadian human rights legislation.

Students who require academic accommodation for either classroom participation or the writing of tests and exams should make their request to the Advising and Access Services Center (AASC) prior to or at the outset of the regular academic year. Please visit www.dal.ca/access for more information and to obtain the Request for Accommodation form.

A note taker may be required as part of a student's accommodation. There is an honorarium of \$75/course/term (with some exceptions). If you are interested, please contact AASC at 494-2836 for more information or send an email to notetaking@dal.ca.