

English 2208: Advanced Composition

Literary Nonfiction & Prose Style

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The great enemy of clarity is insincerity.
When there is a gap between one's real and
ones declared aims, one turns as it were
Instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms...
~ George Orwell

**Any word you have to hunt for in a
thesaurus is the wrong word. There are
no exceptions to this rule.**
~ Stephen King

**Having imagination, it takes you an hour to
write a paragraph that, if you were unimaginative
would take you only a minute.**
~Franklin P. Adams, *Half a Loaf*, 1927

Nothing overwhelms us so much as pure truth,
nothing is more exotic than the world around us,
nothing is more fantastic than reality.
~ Egon Erwin Kish

Course Objectives

- Produce clear, graceful, insightful prose whether the topic is an object, place, or person.
- Develop a style that supports quality travel writing, nature writing, music reviewing, restaurant reviewing, feature writing, literary journalism, and memoir.
- Develop strategies for developing and arranging ideas in literary nonfiction.
- Improve stylistic control, develop a wider stylistic repertoire, and mature as an editor.
- Gain awareness of creative processes and develop a fuller identity as a writer.
- Learn about literary nonfiction and become more aware of prose style and prose stylists.
- Understand relationships between style and ideas about audience, purpose, truth, and language.
- Identify stylistic features in published writing and explain the consequences of those features.

Required Texts:

Conde Naste, *Book of Unforgettable Journeys: Great Writers on Great Places*

Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*

John McPhee, *Oranges*

Thomas & Turner, *Clear & Simple as the Truth*

Packet of readings purchased from English Department secretary (2nd floor Hill Hall)

Overview:

This semester, as we work to develop an eye for detail and a taste for getting to the core of a subject, we will write what some call “the literature of fact.” Also called literary nonfiction and literary journalism, this form of expression includes writing about nature, art, architecture, music, theater, and food; profiles of places and people; travel writing and restaurant reviewing; and memoir and essay. We cannot practice each of those in a single semester, but we can practice creative strategies that support you in them all.

If you want to develop a style that lets you engage real, non-academic audiences on subjects of interest, you are in the right course. When I grade your final portfolio, I will assess whether your work merits attention by a real person, perhaps a person reading a newsletter, or a museum catalogue, a Wikipedia, or

a feature story in a local newspaper. If such a person would not see your writing as well-crafted and engaging, you have not met your goal. To get there, you should push yourself always to raise your game. For my part, I offer you ample time to draft and to revise, extensive feedback to help you understand your strengths and weaknesses, informal grading so that you can take risks early in the semester, and the freedom to choose topics and identify the proper length of most papers. I have made these choices strategically, not to make the course easy but to let you achieve excellence. If the course seems easy, that means you are not working hard enough.

Because the course is advanced composition, it assumes that you have a strong writing repertoire that supports you in developing papers for college courses, that you know how to locate source materials useful to developing ideas, that you produce standard edited English, and that you are ready to engage off-campus audiences composed of educated, highly literate adults. We devote little time to grammar and mechanics. If I see errors in your papers, I will circle one or two problems and briefly note the nature of the problem. Briefly. That is it. Such notations signal that you should “study up” outside of class, independently or with a tutor. If you try to understand my notes but cannot, please ask me for clarification. I am happy to explain my comments or, if you have struggled to understand some rule of usage, to help you learn it. If the problems still appear at the end of the term, they will seriously lower the grade on your final portfolio. The task of finding your errors and making improvements belongs to you.

So, what is the literature of fact? Is it different from news reporting? News journalists begin with a traditional “lead,” and they try to cover the facts as quickly and objectively as possible. They expect readers to be rushed, and they write for people with approximately an eighth-grade education. Literary journalists, essayists, and feature writers have time to delve into detail, they tend to pursue more color, and they employ a more varied and more fluid sentence structure. We find their work in stories featured in the *Style*, *Arts*, or *Travel* sections of any major paper, and we see such pieces in in-flight magazines and local newspapers. We even see such writing in the *Business* section, when writers profile entrepreneurs or business leaders. The topic need not be glamorous; newsletters and local newspapers thrive on profiles of local haunts, local businesses, and local heroes. If the writer brings a level of absorption and interest, nearly anything can be a story. The Baltimore City Paper once ran a feature story about the Baltimore lacrosse haircut, a preppy remix of the mullet known as the Balti. The Outlook section of the Washington Post featured a story about DC nightclubs jilting the District’s Go-go ands. Writers of such pieces take the time to develop characters and settings, eschewing the just-the-facts attitude of the news reporter.

If you are familiar with literary nonfiction, perhaps you admire a writer with a quirky prose style – someone like Hunter S. Thompson or David Foster Wallace or Virginia Woolf. (I admire them, too!) We ordinary mortals must focus first on excellent writers whose styles are somewhat less ... outlandish. These are writers like John McPhee, Joseph Mitchell, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, and the writers collected in the *Conde Nast Book of Unforgettable Journeys*. We need strong basics before taking more personal detours. The basics include keen insight; detail and image; clarity and and grace.

To practice those basics, we will study a style some scholars call the “classic style.” Most people just call it “good prose,” but there are actually many different kinds of good prose, most of them not “classic.” Most students have had few opportunities to write in a style akin to the classic style, because American education emphasizes academic and argumentative prose. Those styles are useful for certain purposes, but not very relaxing for a reader. Still, you have probably tried to produce what we will call the “classic style” on occasion – perhaps when you wanted to sound particularly insightful and mature. This semester, we will study the style, understand its ways of seeing the world, and imitate its components.

So, what is “classic” about classic style?

Let's first think about the word 'classic.' We do not mean 'classical,' like classical music or a 'classically trained actor,' both of which are a little bit fussy. After all, a classically trained actor is best trained to perform Shakespeare. No, by classic style, we mean something akin to the idea of "classic" in phrases like "classic cars" and "classic rock," or in the notion of Normal Rockwell as an "American classic." The phrase generally indicates a thing we see as timeless, exactly right, perhaps somewhat streamlined, graceful without ostentation. In golf, we would think of Augusta National. In fashion, Brooks Brothers, L.L. Bean, or Ralph Lauren ... and definitely not Prada. In handbags, Coach. There is refinement here, but no fuss.

We find classic prose style in a magazine like *The New Yorker*, where prose is excellent without being showy. It's just ... good style. We hear the tones of classic style in voice-overs on the Nature Channel and the History Channel. The speaker sounds knowledgeable in a relaxed way, clear and precise without being overly technical. Projecting an ethos of knowledge and sophistication, the speaker sets aside any worries about "proving" his point, leaving the audience at ease.

Like those doing the voice-overs for the History Channel, writers use the classic style to present interesting observations to intelligent general readers, people who just happen to want to know about interesting things. For such a rhetorical situation, classic style seems like the natural way to convey ideas – which is why some people see the classic style as just 'good style.' The style looks easy, but it is hard to produce. Why? To be both relaxed and graceful while sounding knowledgeable and authoritative ... requires a cool head and a steady hand. When you are writing, sometimes you will lose your balance. Perhaps this happens when you wander into a particularly complex idea or an area where you lack knowledge. The trick is to recognize where you wobbled, learn from it, and start again ... like balancing on a bicycle. For some of you, the trick is to follow the adage people use when climbing ladders and walking on tightropes: Don't look down.

A word to those who quickly master the "classic" style: *One or two students usually find the classic style a natural fit. It comes quickly or even immediately. Such students should set **ambitious** personal goals for the semester – just as a naturally talented artist or musician or athlete would do in a photography course, in jazz band, or in a sport. Use this semester as an opportunity to explore creative processes and to discover just how high you can fly ... not how long you can coast. Think of it this way: What respect do you feel toward someone on the track team who is naturally quick but never tries to run faster, train harder, lead others, win more? Toward an artist who is decent at figure drawing on day one, but never tries to push for excellence? It is not my job to make the course harder for everyone else just because you find the style easy. Rather, it is your job to set big goals and to pursue them.*

Assignment Types and Grading Methods

There are five main categories of evaluation/assignment in this course:

1. **Individual papers.** Graded on an informal scale that permits you to experiment and improve.
2. **Portfolio.** Due at the end of the semester and graded on a rigorous scale.
3. **Take-home test,** at the end of the semester.
4. **Participation, homework, and workshops.**
5. **Writer's Notebook** due by midterm, graded not on quality but on the percentage you complete.

1. Five Individual Papers, Aggregated -- 25%

- Most papers earn a "check." Worth 4 out of 5 points, the "check" indicates that you submitted, on time, work that is "acceptable" or "good." Some papers earn a "check-plus." Worth 5 of 5 points, the "check-plus" indicates that you submitted, on time, work that is "very good" or "excellent."

- Earning 5 checks leads to a B-/C+ for the aggregation score (80% of the points). To earn a B grade for this portion of the class, you must earn some check-plus scores.
- Lower scores:
 - Papers that are low-quality or non-conforming earn a check-minus, which carries 2, 1, or Zero points, depending on the situation. Lateness can also earn you a Zero.
 - Papers that use source materials in a non-permitted way will receive a Zero for the assignment. Such students may also face an Honor Board hearing. There are special – and very strict – policies for how I will penalize unfair use of source material in this class; you should familiarize yourself with them. (*see* Course Policies).

2. Portfolio – 50%

KEEP YOUR RETURNED PAPERS! In your final portfolio, collect all graded papers (yes, the ones with my comments), and present fresh copies of the four (or more) pieces on which you want to be graded. The portfolio must contain:

- At least ten pages of writing, preferably more.
- One piece of substantial length (5+ pages) or two pieces at 3+ pages (i.e., not just barely 3 pages).
- Prior drafts/versions of **all** papers.
- Only work that you have previously submitted to me, unless you get my prior written consent.

Grading for the Portfolio is rigorous. The “A” is reserved for work that is nearly or actually publishable. That is, I can readily imagine real readers (and not just your buddies or your mom) thinking the work was smart/interesting/stylish if they ran across it in a newsletter or newspaper, campus website, in-flight magazine, or other similar venue. Papers that earned a check-plus will not necessarily earn a B+ or A on the portfolio. Making revisions – or at least making edits – is highly recommended. Remember, if the course seems easy, push yourself harder.

3. Take-Home Test – 10%

At the end of the semester, you will complete a take-home test in which you analyze a prose style. Here, we consider again how styles emerge from a writer’s relationship with her audience; her assumptions about her need to argue, to explain, to entertain; her beliefs about what writing is for and whether ordinary language is up to the task; and her philosophy about the relationship of words and ideas. You will also be asked to revise a passage and/or answer short questions about writing. You will want to pay special attention to our in-class work analyzing style, because you will rely on those experiences to help you tackle the test. **Once I distribute the test, discuss it with no one other than me. It is forbidden even to ask another student about the deadline. Questions? See me!**

4. Participation, Homework & Workshops (5%)

Regular preparation and participation are requisites of taking this course. You need to engage the work actively, practicing various techniques and answering questions, if you are going to learn the material. All students must prepare for, attend, and participate actively in draft workshops.

5. The Writer's Notebook – 10%

The Writer’s Notebook is like a sketchpad filled with words, not a dear-diary journal. Take it into the world with you, write in different places, and use your writing to help you develop your skills as a “noticer” of particularities, peculiarities, and patterns. You might even use your notebook as an archive of

topics, notes, drawings, and photos of places, people, and things about which you might write. There are two components of the Notebook:

Original entries. Write short drafts on objects, art, music, food, animals, buildings, towns, places, and people, whether familiar or famous. The Notebook is a starting point for papers and/or additional to papers. Very early short drafts of longer papers can count, but do not offer up whole, finished papers as if they were part of your Notebook. Aim for 20 sentences of new writing per week (think of this as three short attempts or two longer ones). Every two weeks, type them up and send them to me via email.

Longhand copies. For the first five weeks of the semester, each week you should copy out verbatim and in **longhand** (no typing!) an 8-10 sentence passage of excellent prose. Hand it in to me in class.

Grading: Those who produce 120 sentences of classic prose and five longhand entries will earn 100%. Those just shy will earn 90%. Those at the 100-sentence mark, or who miss one of the longhand copies, will earn 80%. Lower scores are scaled accordingly. Though I grade by counting *sentences*, the best approach is to write three to four new “entries” per week, to help you practice regularly. To write well, you need to write a lot of things you are willing to throw in the trashcan. Some stuff is just practice.

What is this longhand copying assignment? This assignment will probably feel like a real chore, but copying out the writing exposes you to the rhythms of a style and familiarize you with new syntax and punctuation. So, yes, I want you to hand-write 10 sentences from a published source, verbatim. Choose a passage that has **a style you want to emulate**. I suggest something in the classic style, because copying it out will help you get comfortable with the way I want you to write. **At the start of the entry, note the author, title, and source.**

What to copy? You can select passages from Annie Dillard, John McPhee, the Conde Nast travel book, and items that appear in the course packet. Or you can explore the *New Yorker* (www.newyorker.com), the arts/entertainment/books sections of the New York Times, or those same sections of the Washington Post. The websites of National Geographic and Smithsonian Magazine feature some excellent writing, or in Hoover Library find one of these exceptional prose stylists: John Hersey (*Hiroshima*); John Muir (*Yosemite, Travels in Alaska*); Ian Frazier (*The Great Plains*); Joseph Mitchell (*Up in the Old Hotel*); Verlyn Klinkenborg (*The Rural Life*); or Joan Didion (*Slouching Toward Bethlehem*).

Course Policies

1. Attendance is crucial. The talking, thinking, and analysis you undertake *during* class is part of the semester’s work. Therefore, if you miss class, you are not doing crucial work for the class. Your participation grade will suffer, and I reserve the right to lower your overall grade for failure to attend. *Specific numbers:* I do not hold the first **three** absences against you when I assign grades, unless your misses include draft days. (Missing draft workshops = really bad idea.) The fourth absence costs significant points. The fifth costs a full grade. At six or more absences, you might fail the class.

Illness, etc. The three aforementioned absences are not really free skips. They intend to cover illnesses of the non-hospital variety, doctor’s or dentist’s appointments, car trouble, general malaise, job interviews, mental health days, and funerals for anyone other than member of the family. I will treat an absence as “excused” only in an extreme case, such as medical emergency, prolonged illness, or death in the family, and I may require you to provide *significant* documentation.

Lateness can constitute absence. If you are 20 minutes late, you will be marked absent, and any paper due that day is officially late. However, it is still worth attending class, even when you have a “lateness

absence,” because you can still participate, show you were prepared, limit the material you miss, and discourage me from making a note that you skipped a draft workshop.

2. No late papers. Papers are due at the beginning of class and become “late” 20 minutes into class. After that moment, I will not accept your paper, no matter the excuse, including illness. Your paper was to be drafted *before* the due date, so it is due even if you are sick or have a family emergency. The paper should be healthy enough to attend class. Send it by e-mail or have a friend deliver it.

EXCEPTION: One Free Extension!!!

On the paper due date, inform me in writing that you are taking your extension. You do not need to explain your reasons. The extension gives you an *additional class period* to submit the paper.

3. No rewrites or re-grades. I invite you to revise for the final portfolio. You can start as soon as you finish a paper or receive my feedback, and I may be willing to read your new draft, but I do not regrade.

4. Participation and draft workshops. I will deduct points where a student is consistently unprepared, misses significant class time, misses more than one draft workshop, or attends workshop without a real draft. **For draft workshops, bring multiple copies – typically three (3) – of a substantial draft.**

5. Documented disabilities. I happily accommodate students with *documented* disabilities. If you have a disability but have not registered with Student Academic Support Services, please do so immediately.

6. Academic integrity. McDaniel students are bound by an honor code that prohibits representation of another writer’s work as their own, so if I find that you have violated this code, I will refer you to the Honor Board. The honor code prohibits students from submitting someone else’s work as their own, submitting or copying someone else’s homework, representing published work as their own, or otherwise using words from a source without giving clear, fair attribution. If you have any confusion about how to handle crediting source material, **YOU HAVE AN AFFIRMATIVE DUTY TO ASK ME.**

You will need to conduct research for this course. Some of it is first-hand (site visits, interviews), but some of it will come from published sources. For instance, you will very likely need cultural, historical, and biographical information on certain subjects. When you collect such information, maintain a running list of sources consulted. You will, at the very least, need to list these at the end of your paper(s). In many cases, that will be your only method of citation, though if you borrow exactly language from a source, you must cite the source at that precise point in your paper.

Even though literary journalism and classic style are not heavily “citational” – that is, we don’t expect to see footnotes – that does not license you to steal material, or even cool phrases and sentences, from other writers. **The whole point of this course is for you to produce awesome phrases on your own!** If you do find a phrase you want to use, you must find a way to give credit. If you conduct online or book research to learn more about some topic, jot down the name of the source and supply it with the paper. Better to supply an explanatory note indicating what you read and what you borrowed.

FINALLY: AVOID WIKIPEDIA!

Reading a Wiki will affect – or, rather, INFECT – your writing. Writers have trouble resisting the Wiki after they read it, so no matter how much we might enjoy Wikipedia, avoid it for this course.

SCHEDULE

Subject to adjustment at my discretion.

Weeks 1 & 2 (T 1/25 – R 2/3): Becoming a noticer: The poetry of everyday things

* Read McPhee's *Oranges* (Ch. 1).

* Start making entries in your Writer's Notebook. Carry it about it with you so that you can write in different places. Write at different times of the day and in particular lighting/moods (with music? without? tea? just after waking or before bed?). Do this to find out what best supports your literary nonfiction voice. Use a pen, a pencil, your computer. Write on full pages or napkins. Learn about your own creative process. That's part of the work of the course.

First Assignment: Write 2-3 pages on an object or thing, such as a food, beverage, plant, animal, or disease; a weapon or martial art; an instrument or musical composition (song, album); an art object (painting, sculpture, photograph); or any other item or concept (Roth IRA; KSA's; IEP's, Bunraku Puppets and Noh theater) you find curious or peculiar. Better to write about specifics or species (Bichons or Velveeta) instead of genus (dogs or cheese). *Research is permitted, but it does not substitute for your own authentic thinking.* Not only should you avoid Wikipedia, you might imagine yourself writing an entry for it – or an entry for a field guide, travel book, or museum placard. Before and while you write, practice looking closely and being willing to arrive at fresh insight about the nature of the thing you are studying. Stylistically, favor detail and insight. Tell us what the thing is; if it has greatness, say so, but do not write a sales piece.

Draft Workshop: R 2/3 **BRING THREE COPIES OF YOUR DRAFT**
Due Date: T 2/8

Weeks 3 & 4 (T 2/8 – R 2/14): Writing about places (Part I)

We will consider the *idea* of place to help explore possibilities for the writing. Readings will be assigned from your course packet. Also, we will explore *Clear & Simple* and the concept of classic style.

Site visits: As we write about places, you will make two site visits. Weather permitting, choose one indoors and one outdoors location to observe. Do not work simply from memory: Go to the place, stay there for at least an hour, take notes, observe people in the place, and perhaps talk to them. Start early, but submit prior to Spring Break.

Second Assignment: Write about a place you know well or about a place you visited for this class. You can write a landscape or cityscape, a take on your region or hometown, a profile of a local pub, or a riff on a genre of place (e.g., tattoo parlors, dive bars). Place is both deep and broad, and a creative thinker finds many ways to engage it. Paper length depends on your subject matter, but begin pushing for longer work.

Draft Workshop: R 2/17 **BRING THREE COPIES OF YOUR DRAFT**
Due Date: T 2/22

Weeks 5, 6 & 7 (T 2/22 – R 3/10): Writing about places (Part II)

Third Assignment: We will read travel writers to identify more options for writing about places. Though you are not required to write a travel story, strongly consider it. Study the organizational options for travel writing. Strive for five pages or longer.

Draft Workshop: W 2/13 **BRING THREE COPIES OF YOUR DRAFT**
Due Date: R 3/10 (deadline prior to Spring Break)

Weeks 8 & 9 (T 3/22 – M 11/): Profiles

Freelance writers for magazines and newspapers – whether local or national – often make a living writing profiles. Browse the profiles in the course packet, and read Julian Rubinstien’s profile “The Chosen One” (Orlando ‘El Duque’ Hernandez) and McPhee’s profile of Ben Hill Griffin, in *Oranges* (“Orange Baron”).

Fourth Assignment: Profile a person, famous or not. Aim for something you could publish, of significant length (4-6 pages). Consider adopting methods of New Journalists like McPhee and Rubinstein. Expect to conduct research and/or interviews.

Draft Workshop: R 3/31
Due Date: T 4/5

Weeks 10, 11 & 12 (T 4/5 – R 4/21): Memoir

To identify approaches for writing, we will read selections from Annie Dillard, *American Childhood*. Time permitting, we will also examine two essays on the craft (Hampl, Steinberg, both in packet). Stories are expected to be upwards of 5 pages.

Fourth Assignment: Memoir

Draft Workshop: TBD – I will arrange to meet with you in small draft-circles.
Due Date: R 4/21*

*** On this date we begin a discussion of the final exam.**

Weeks 13 & 14 (T 4/26 – R 5/5): Wrapping up

Review of concepts for take-home test.
Discussion of final portfolio.

- Take-home test is **DUE** by the **last day of classes** (Friday, May 6th).
- Portfolios are **DUE** by the date **last day of final exams** (Friday, May 13th).

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