Instructor: Lee Gutkind
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Required Textbooks:


GENERAL COURSE DESCRIPTION

How to write true stories that inform, compel and inspire is the challenge and the mission of this workshop led by pioneer and leading figure in the field, Lee Gutkind, the “Godfather” behind the creative nonfiction/true story genre (*Vanity Fair*) and the co-founder of the *Think Write Publish* programs, supported by the National Science Foundation and the John Templeton Foundation.

In this workshop, Gutkind will proceed, step-by-step, through the entire writing true stories process, from finding the story, to recreating scenes and building a scene-by-scene structure that is informative and compelling to read. Participants will learn how to read with a writer’s eye and recognize structural patterns through Gutkind’s “yellow test.” Literary techniques like dialogue, flash descriptions, inner point of view, and the art of imbedding information in story will be explained, illustrated and practiced.

This course will help students and professionals re-envision and transform information into compelling nonfiction narrative so that readers are both educated and entertained. For memoirists, *Writing True Stories That Matter* will help writers find a balance between personal stories and the historic and informational elements that the best memoirs demand.
Writing True Stories That Matter requires a long form narrative essay or book chapter of approximately 5,000 words as a final product. Two revisions will be expected. There will be assigned readings.

Lee Gutkind is Distinguished Writer in Residence at ASU’s Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes and a professor in the School for the Future of Innovation in Society and in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication.

The course schedule is designed for busy individuals with high intensity leading to high productivity. The class meets approximately once a month usually on three consecutive days: Thursday evenings (6:30 – 9:30pm), Friday afternoons (2:00 – 5:00pm) and Saturdays (9:00am – 1:00pm), from January 14-16, February 4-6, February 18-20, March 17-19, April 21-23.

GENERAL COURSE PLAN OF ACTION

Please Note: While I will attempt to adhere to this outline from beginning to end, there may well be detours based on the flow of the class and the ideas generated during discussion, as well as the opportunity to welcome and learn from available guest writers, editors, etc.

JANUARY 14-16

I will provide details about the course, answer any questions about the requirements and outline the general plan of action.

Students will discuss reasons for wanting to take the course and introduce, generally, what they want to write about—their narrative subjects—the way in which they will research, what they think they want to communicate, the inherent story frame, etc.

While this seems like a pro-forma aspect of any course, the discussion of each individual’s ideas and expertise and intention is essential. We need to understand what you do in order to help you make the transition from the expert, if that is how you are approaching your subject, to the general audience. It is easy to preach to the choir, but embracing the entire congregation is another matter. Understanding the challenges other experts face in sharing their research through narrative will help
each writer isolate, comprehend and solve their own challenges and problems.

Understanding the balancing of style and substance is crucial, especially for memoirists. While you have a personal story to tell, you also have the responsibility of making the experience beneficial for the reader. How will your audience be informed? What will they learn?

No matter what your project might be and how anxious you are to be heard, the reader, bottom line, is why you are writing. You want to make a point, communicate creative and helpful ideas, and make a lasting impact.

Writing process will also be discussed—the importance of a regular schedule.

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I will present a long, intensive, seemingly never-ending, hopefully-not-too-boring, overview of the creative nonfiction genre, background, history, etc. and, most importantly, of the craft—how to do what it is we will be doing for the entire semester. We will learn how to look at our work through a writer’s eye, considering and examining everything we need to know about the structure/architecture of the creative nonfiction form.

At the end of this conversation/discussion/presentation, you should know, at least to a certain extent, how to approach your work, what to think about when you begin writing, and most importantly, what to look for when you assess your first drafts.

Note: Two books have been assigned, one that I have written and one that I have edited. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction From Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between* should be your bible to the craft. Everything we will discuss in the class—and much more—is outlined in this text, with many essays deconstructed to help you see how pieces are put together. We will read most of the essays in the *True Stories Well Told: From the First Twenty Years of Creative Nonfiction Magazine* anthology and discuss them together. There may be time to read and discuss one or more of the essays during this first week of classes.

We may also have time, the final day, for further discussion of your writing topic.

**Assignment** for the next weekend: A two page—500-750 words—abstract of what you will be writing. That includes: Your subject and theoretical focus, who you will
be interviewing or “hanging around” with, what sort of research you will be conducting, what your overall story is going to be, or, if you don’t know it then, how you will find it, why the subject is important and what the reader will learn in the end. I totally understand that you may not be able to tell me everything at this stage of the game, but write what you can—enough for us to discuss in class. We will help you define your mission.

Note: The abstract means that you will be committing to this idea—this will be your term project. So take the time between classes to make certain that there’s a story here to tell, that sources/access are available to you, that you have the time and the resources to do this work—essentially, that it is doable. At this point, you are on your way—no turning back.

Since the entire class will be reading and discussing these abstracts (please be ready on Thursday!), you will have to send them in advance—no later than Sunday, January 31 by 11:59 p.m. A Dropbox will be established for the class so that you all will have easy access to this work.

Note: Conceivably, some students will have already launched a writing project—one that they hope to continue in this class. The abstract will include that information—and signify your next step. Conceivably also, the class might review some of this “past” work, based on available time.

FEBRUARY 4-6

We will first discuss—in depth—the abstracts—and make certain that every student has a plan for continuing. We will discuss the readings from both books. There will be a writing assignment—at least one scene, perhaps two, a combination of style and substance, which may be part of your larger piece. (No less than 500 or more than 1,000 words.) A one-page report of the work you have done to date and what must be done next in order to complete your first draft. **Due in the Dropbox February 14, by 11:59 p.m.**

FEBRUARY 18-20

Workshop-Discussion of the above. Getting ready for your first draft—due in the Dropbox **March 13 by 11:59 p.m.**
MARCH 17-19

First draft of entire 5,000-word assignment work-shopped-discussed. By “first draft,” I mean the best you can do—not something rough that you have thrown together to meet the deadline. Your interviewing, research, hanging out, should be complete and you should have already written “rough” drafts on your own. This is important. I want you to do your best—and then let the class workshop and evaluate so that you can do better, take it further, push the creative envelope. It may well be that you have done such a great job, that there’s nothing else to do but sit back on your laurels and pontificate to the rest of us. That would be good—but alas, unlikely.

**Final Draft due April 17 by 11:59 p.m.**

APRIL 21-23

Final complete compelling and brilliant drafts discussed. Celebration continues into the late night.

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*A few endnotes:*

If the subject hasn’t come up before (but it always does—again and again)—we will discuss the general legal, moral, ethical challenges and quandaries that come to mind when fact is transformed into narrative. (Please note: The word “transform” doesn’t mean “make up.”)

Also, aspects of the publishing world will be presented and discussed—literary agents, university presses, small presses, journals, trade presses and magazines. Earning a living.

Although I travel a lot, please do not assume that I am unavailable to meet and talk with you about your work. We can meet in person, talk on the telephone or Skype—whatever works. E-mail me and we will set something up. Trouble reaching me? Unlikely, but please contact Rosalie Fisher if you have questions or any difficulty. I will be happy to respond to you quickly and service your accounts as efficiently and graciously as possible. I want you to do well and be pleased with the help I can offer you.

Students should plan in advance, so classes are not missed. If something comes up—
and things do from time to time—notify me immediately.

For those students worried about evaluation, the final grade will be determined by the quality of the final product—could it be published in a first-rate popular magazine or journal and does it fulfill the contract (meaning the abstract) that was entered into between professor and student?

For the readings in True Stories Well Told, you will be asked to choose an essay and lead the discussion for that particular reading. That means read the work (and read about the work) carefully enough to be able to pick it apart, so to speak—to look at it with a writer’s eye, going beyond the reading experience—and then formulate questions that will allow the class to see beyond the words to its impact, ideas and even its literary or political/social failures.

I will evaluate each writing assignment—with some commentary and notes. While students will not be required to write notes/evaluations/ideas in follow-up for fellow students, this would be a helpful courtesy to all.

*Note the following links to review:

ASU’s Code of Conduct: https://eoss.asu.edu/dos/srr/codeofconduct

Disability Resource Center: https://eoss.asu.edu/drc

Sexual Violence Awareness and Title IX: https://sexualviolenceprevention.asu.edu