

Literary Nonfiction: An Introduction

HPS 591/ENG 591/HST 591

T 1-4p , LSE 505

Instructor: Stephen Pyne

Office hours: LSA 220, T 9-11:30a, and by appointment

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Course description

This is a course about writing nonfiction – all kinds of nonfiction, although it will draw most of its examples from historical, environmental, and scientific topics and from narrative styles. It will focus on the art and craft of expression, not on field, journalistic, or archival research to gather data. And it will explore a scale of writing, from the sketch to the essay to the book.

Readings and class discussion

Each class will center on discussion – discussion of common readings, discussion of writing exercises. At the first class students will be assigned to help lead particular discussions of the required reading, notably the books.

There are six required books:

- Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*
- Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*
- Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*
- Joan Didion, *Where I Was From*
- John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*
- Stephen Pyne, *Voice and Vision*

And one optional:

- Stephen Kosslyn, *Elements of Graph Design*

All these books are on reserve at Noble Library.

Additionally, assignments will draw from a slate of shorter readings, available as a *course pack*, for purchase or on reserve at Noble.

Writing assignments

Writing exercises are due on the Sunday (midnight) before the assigned class. Submit them to the digital dropbox in ASU Blackboard. From these I will select a small set (4-5 pieces) on Monday morning and deposit them in the course documents bin for the calendar day of the upcoming class.

Grades

Students are expected to have read the assigned material sufficiently to join a class discussion. A student who attends all sessions and meets all assignments, or all save one, will earn an A. A student who misses either a class or assignment 2-3 times without prior excuse will get a B. Four or five misses will merit a C; five or six, a D. A student who misses more will fail.

Academic dishonesty

In the “Student Academic Integrity Policy” manual, ASU defines “Plagiarism” [as] using another's words, ideas, materials or work without properly acknowledging and documenting the source. Students are responsible for knowing the rules governing the use of another's work or materials and for acknowledging and documenting the source appropriately.” You can find this definition at:

http://www.asu.edu/studentaffairs/studentlife/judicial/academic_integrity.htm#definitions

Academic dishonesty, including inappropriate collaboration, will not be tolerated. There are severe sanctions for cheating, plagiarizing and any other form of dishonesty.

Literary Non-Fiction: A First Draft

Jan 19

Introduction: Packing Prose

Course purposes and mechanics. Introductions. Exercises.

Assignment: Identify the kind of writing you want to do, bring examples, explain features.

Jan 26

Rules of engagement

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 1-4

Wallace Stegner, “On the Writing of History”

Assignment: Write an episode *two* ways, once as non-fiction, and again as fiction (under 400 words each)

Feb 2

Voice and point of view

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 5-6, 15

Bernard DeVoto, *Year of Decision: 1846*; Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*; Tom

Wolfe, “Sorry, but Your Soul Just Died; Louis Menard, *The Metaphysical Club*;

Joan Didion “At the Dam” and Steve Pyne, “Where Australia Sees the Universe.”

Assignment: Write *two* versions of a place, person, or event, each version from a different point of view **or** with a different voice (300 words each)

Feb 9

Designs, foundations, framings

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 7-9

Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*

Feb 16

Character (I)

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 13

John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid*

Assignment: Write a character profile (300-600 words)

Feb 23

Character (II)

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 12

George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings*; David Howarth, *1066*; Joan Didion, "After Henry," "James Pike, American," "7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38"

Assignment: Write a character profile through action, quotations, or symbols (300-600 words)

March 2

Settings and scenes

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 14

John McPhee, *Rising from the Plains*; Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada*;

Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground*

Assignment: Write a description for a setting; this may be physical, social, intellectual, etc. (300-600 words)

March 9

Drama

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 10

Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*

Assignment: Write a description of an event involving conscious or unconscious choice (300-600 words)

March 16

Spring break

March 23

Events and narratives

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 16

Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*

Assignment: write a plot-driven account of an event (300-600 words)

March 30

Figures of speech: metaphors, symbols, informing conceits

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 12, 18

George Orwell, "On Shooting an Elephant" and "Politics and the English Language";

Tom Wolfe, "Two Young Men Who Went West"; Wallace Stegner, "Mormon Trees";

Pyne, "Nataraja"

Assignment: Write about a person, place, idea, or event in which figures of speech are important, even informing (300-600 words)

April 6

Writing about ideas, data, and technique: and Figures not of speech

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 19, 20

John McPhee, "The Gravel Page"; Louis Menard, *The Metaphysical Club*;

Hans Zinsser, *Rats, Lice, and History*

Edward Tufte, *Visual Explanations*, Chap 2 (pp. 27-53) [on reserve]

Stephen Kosslyn, *Elements of Graph Design* (scan) [on reserve]

Assignment: Describe a person, event, or idea in which some technical knowledge is essential to understanding (300-600 words); and describe a person, place, idea, or event using numerical data, either with words a graphical representation (300-600 words). Both assignments may be combined into one sketch.

April 13

Questions of scale

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 21

Joan Didion, *Where I Was From*; Stegner, “And Nothing Shall Hinder or Stay Them...”

Assignment: Write a piece about an incident, idea, person, or place *thrice*, once at 1,000 words, once at 600 words and again at 300.

April 20 – no class

April 27

Editing and rewriting

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 11, 12, 17

Assignment:

- (1) Rewrite a block quote (either use the passage handed out or one of your own choosing); and
 - (2) rewrite a common text (to be handed out the week before) and reduce its length by half.
- NB:** Both passages are included in the course pack.

May 4

Writing life – theory and practice

Read: Pyne, *Voice and Vision*, 22, 23

Assignment: Write anything you wish, but no more than 1000 words. Use this exercise as a means to summarize what you have learned.