

Environmental Writing

ENG 316 (3 credits)

Professor Scott Slovic

Course Description:

Much of this class will be spent reading and discussing stories, essays, and poems. Students will do in-class writing exercises, practice taking field notes, and craft imaginative works to explore their ideas on the environment and their own experiences. We will work toward developing practical approaches to the communication of ideas and information about scientific and environmental issues to both general and specific audiences.

Required Texts:

Anderson, Lorraine, Scott Slovic, and John P. O'Grady. *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Nature and Culture*. Second edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2013. Handouts.

Student Work:

Keep up with short reading assignments for each of our discussions, participate actively in the discussions of readings (which will explore both environmental topics and ideas about writing), and complete both writing exercises and more formal writing assignments. Major assignments: **Session I:** 1) daily field journal; 2) animal description (2 pages); 3) animal-encounter narrative (1 page); animal analysis (1 page); 4) place description (1 page); 5) placed-focused narrative (2 pages); 6) analysis of place (1 page); 7) personal essay on some aspect of "animality" or "place," using description, narration, and exposition, but emphasizing *description* and *narration* (3-4 pages); **Session II:** 8) daily journal of "ideas/reflections"; 9) interview of classmate, instructor, or staff person (2 pages); 10) argumentative statement, using quotations from other texts as supportive "evidence" (2 pages); 11) philosophical analysis (2 pages); 12) Final project: "white paper" or "testimonial" on "wilderness," using quotations from interview(s), examples from other texts, and philosophical analysis (and possibly also descriptive and narrative language) (5-7 pages).

Session I (ten days in early October, Taylor Ranch):

Day 1

Morning discussion: The habit of writing.

Reading: Henry David Thoreau, sample journal entries (handout)

Writing assignment: begin keeping informal field journal, combining observations of the external world with brief reflections on these observations. Maintain this journal for this entire initial session of the course (approximately half a page per day for ten days).

Workshop/debriefing: meet in small groups to talk about initial journal entries and give each other feedback.

Afternoon discussion: Our animal selves.

Reading: Pattiann Rogers, "Knot"; William Carlos Williams, "Smell!"; Annie Dillard, "Living Like Weasels"

Writing exercise: draft a page on human sensory and/or cognitive processes, focusing on your own experience. Attempt to be highly descriptive of personal processes.

Workshop/debriefing: small-group responses to self-descriptions.

Day 2

Morning discussion: Description.

Reading: Barry Lopez, “Apologia”

Writing exercise: spend an hour outside, observing and describing a single animal.

Afternoon discussion: Description

Reading: Josephine Johnson, “The Heart’s Fox”; Elizabeth Bishop, “The Fish”

Workshop/debriefing: small-group responses to animal description.

Day 3

Due: animal description (Assignment 2).

Morning discussion: Narration.

Reading: James Wright, “A Blessing”; David Rothenberg, “Making Music with Birds and Whales”

Afternoon discussion: Storying an encounter.

Writing exercise: draft a sequential narrative of an interaction with another organism based on an experience you’ve had outside today.

Workshop/debriefing: small-group responses to encounter narratives. How does a narrative incorporate description and yet go beyond static description?

Day 4

Due: animal-encounter narrative (Assignment 3).

Morning discussion: Human behavior as animals.

Reading: Kent Nelson, “Irregular Flight”; David Gessner, “Marking My Territory”

Afternoon discussion: How do concepts emerge from story?

Reading: Jack London, “To Build a Fire”; Sarah Orne Jewett, “A White Heron”

Writing exercise: draft a philosophical meditation on some aspect of animal life or human-animal interactions.

Workshop/debriefing: small-group responses to reflective/expository prose.

Day 5

Morning discussion: Exposition.

Reading: Henry Beston, “Autumn, Ocean, and Birds”; Aldo Leopold, “Thinking Like a Mountain”

Afternoon discussion: Conceptualizing animality.

Reading: Henry David Thoreau, “Higher Laws”; Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating”

Day 6

Due: animal analysis/reflection papers (Assignment 4).

Day Off. Probably spend this on a group excursion near Taylor Ranch, perhaps hiking somewhere to get an overview of the landscape.

Day 7

Morning discussion: Experiencing place.

Reading: John Muir, “A Wind-Storm in the Forests”; Ofelia Zepeda, “It Is Going to Rain”; Ellen Meloy, “The Flora and Fauna of Las Vegas”

Afternoon discussion: Describing place.

Reading: Jack Kerouac, “Alone on a Mountaintop”; Pam Houston, “A Blizzard Under Blue Sky”

Writing exercise: draft a detailed physical description of some aspect of the Taylor Ranch area, focusing on a single sensory dimension (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste).

Workshop/debriefing: How do the challenges of describing place differ from those related to animal description?

Day 8

Due: place descriptions (Assignment 5).

Morning discussion: Storying place.

Reading: Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle”; Paolo Bacigalupi, “The Tamarisk Hunter”

Afternoon discussion: Memories, Processes—Conceptualizing Place

Reading: David Mas Masumoto, “Memories of Taste”; Gary Paul Nabhan, “Purging the Canned, Making Room for the Fresh”

Writing exercises: draft a story about some specific experience you’ve had recently at Taylor Ranch (an experience related to an encounter with another animal, some revelation of your own animality, or your deep understanding of what it’s like to be in such a place); also draft a brief reflection on the conceptual implications of this story (a more expository response to your own story).

Workshop/debriefing: Do you have a clear sense of an event happening in these narrative texts? How do the stories unfold over time?

Day 9

Due: place-focused narrative *and* analysis of place (Assignments 6 and 7).

Morning discussion: Weaving together description, narration, and exposition.

Reading: Scott Russell Sanders, “Buckeye”

Afternoon: No readings, no formal discussion. Students will have time to work on personal essay on animality or place. Professor will be available for consultations as students work on papers.

Workshop: Students will meet in small groups to discuss essays-in-progress.

Day 10

Due: personal essay on some aspect of “animality” or “place,” using description, narration, and exposition, but emphasizing *description* and *narration* (Assignment 8).

Also due: daily field journal. I will quickly check these and return them to students before the end of Session I (Assignment 1).

Morning discussion: debriefing about what we’ve covered so far in the class, particularly the focus on descriptive and narrative prose and the introductory work we’ve done on the topic of expository writing. Lay the groundwork for Session II of the class which will begin in about three weeks.

Session II (ten days in early November, McCall Outdoor Science School):

Day 1

Morning discussion: Writing clearly and vividly about abstractions.

Reading: Wallace Stegner, “Wilderness Letter”

Writing assignment: keep a daily journal (for this ten-day session) of reflections, essential concepts and information, and concerns resulting from lessons and experiences during Semester in the Wild.

Afternoon discussion: The concept of an interview.

Reading: Joel Salatin (interview), “Should We Eat Animals?”; Juliet Schor (interview), “Tackling Turbo Consumption: An Interview with Juliet Schor”

Second writing exercise of the day: conduct a brief interview on some aspect of your SITW experience with a classmate, instructor, or staff person.

Workshop/debriefing: How is this second journal-writing process different than the journals you kept at Taylor Ranch? What are the challenges and opportunities of interviewing?

Day 2

Due: interview (Assignment 9).

Morning discussion: Making Claims, Expressing Opinions.

Reading: Terry Tempest Williams, “The Clan of One-Breasted Women”; William J. Lines, “Money”

Afternoon discussion: Authoritative argumentation.

Reading: bell hooks, "Touching the Earth"; David Orr, "Reflections on Water and Oil"

Writing exercise: draft argumentative statement incorporating comments (quotations) from other sources.

Workshop/debriefing: How effectively are supporting materials used to bolster clear, interesting claims?

Day 3

Due: brief arguments (Assignment 10).

Morning discussion: The art of the editorial.

Reading: Derrick Jensen, "Forget Shorter Showers"; Michael Pollan, "Why Bother?"

Afternoon discussion: Clever intertwinings of argument and reflection.

Reading: E.O. Wilson, "Denial and Its Risks"; Joseph Bruchac, "The Circle Is the Way to See"

Workshop: brainstorming for final project topics.

Day 4

Morning discussion: How to write vividly on philosophical/political topics.

Reading: Rick Bass, "Wolf Palette"; Edward Abbey, "Shadows from the Big Woods"; Barbara Kingsolver, "Reconstructing Our Desires"

Afternoon discussion: Writing a speech (or public testimony).

Reading: Rachel Carson, "Of Man and the Stream of Time"; Amory Lovins, "Imagine a World..."; Terry Tempest Williams, "Statement Before the Senate Subcommittee on Forest & Public Lands Management Regarding the Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995, Washington, DC, July 13, 1995" (handout)

Writing exercise: begin drafting a statement of wilderness/environmental policy on a specific aspect of this broad topic, with an eye toward producing a "white paper" or a testimony statement.

Workshop/debriefing: Offer feedback to each other about focus, clarity, and "engaging hooks."

Day 5

Due: statements of philosophical analysis (Assignment 11).

Morning discussion: Art/literature as modes of argumentation.

Reading: B. Traven, "Assembly Line"; W.S. Merwin, "Rain at Night"; Robinson Jeffers, "Passenger Pigeons"

Afternoon discussion: Activism.

Reading: James Hansen, “Activist”; John Francis, “Oil on the Water”

Day 6

Morning workshop: Brainstorming about topics and approaches for final projects.

Afternoon conferences: Individual conferences with each student to discuss general plans and possibly outlines or other drafted materials for final projects.

Day 7

Day Off. Probably spend this on a group excursion near MOSS, perhaps hiking somewhere to near the campus.

Day 8

Morning discussion: Coming back from the wild.

Reading: Wendell Berry, “Stay Home”; William Stafford, “Maybe Alone on My Bike”

Afternoon: writing time.

Day 9

Free day to work on final projects. I will be available to meet with anyone who has questions while working on the paper.

Day 10

Due: final project (Assignment 12).

Also due: daily journal of ideas and reflections (Assignment 8).

Morning discussion/debriefing: Why we write.

Reading: Terry Tempest Williams, “Why I Write” (handout)