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Syllabus, 12-Week Online Course

Narrative Nonfiction Writing

with Award-Winning Author and Yale Professor

Janine di Giovanni

Guggenheim Fellow

Recipient, American Academy of Arts and Letters

Highest Prize for Nonfiction

**--Classes meet online once a week, live with Ms. Di Giovanni. See particular class schedule for your group.**

**--You will be receiving the login instructions by email a few days prior to class. No special equipment is needed. You will be using the audio built into your computer, or a headset if you are in a noisy environment.**

**--Printed lectures are posted to writers every week prior to the class.**

**--Assignments are due each week 24 hours prior to our live classroom time, or by private arrangement with instructor.**

**I will be sending you a list of suggested reading each week, for discussions of structure, plot, and other ingredients of narrative. Also see below, which we will discuss in class.**

<https://www.amazon.com/Ghosts-Daylight-Love-War-Redemption/dp/140882051X>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/opinion/sunday/love-and-war.html>

<https://granta.com/the-book-of-the-dead/>

**Week 1**

Lecture 1:

Introduction and Overview: Getting to the Essence. How to construct a long-format narrative for a manuscript or book proposal. How to take the seed of your idea and expanding it to a proposal or essay. Our opening session will help you start to lay the foundation for the creation of your best possible book.

Assignment 1. Share what you hope to gain from this course and any other

background info you’d like to provide about yourself and your project. Write a one-paragraph blurb about your book, similar to what might appear under the title on the NY Times bestseller list. Why should editors and agents be eager to read your book?

**Week 2**

Lecture 2: Enticing Your Audience: Before we get to the creative part, for nonfiction authors, “Overview” and “Competition” concerns are key when drafting the first rough version of your book outline and the first draft of your manuscript. This is particularly important for nonfiction authors, but also a concern for novelists who would like their books to sell while also being a wonderful literary experience.

In Week 2, we will also begin to discuss the building blocks of narrative, including: place/setting, character, theme, dialogue, temporal frame (time envelope), belief systems, point of view, and how to transform inert information into dynamic “scenes.”

Assignment 2: Draft an Overview that clearly but broadly states what your book will cover, its sources (which for nonfiction writers may include original interviews, first-person observations, other references) and an evaluation of what makes your book unique versus other titles on the market.

**Week 3**

Lecture 3: Interviewing techniques. Those of you writing non-fiction will need to interview primary sources for your book. Those of you writing memoir will equally need these skills. We’ll begin with the basics of how to conduct an interview; then branch out into delicate and sensitive topics: how to talk to those who have experienced or witnessed sexual abuse, trauma, violence?

Assignment 3: TBA in class--a practice exercise using interview techniques we discuss in class.

**Week 4**

Lecture 4: The Role of Research, Interviews, Reference Material, and Personal Experience: Methodology for Fleshing Out Your Chapters—for Fiction and Nonfiction Authors.

Assignment 4: Make a bullet list, organized by chapter, of all information you’ve collected thus far, and information you still need to gather, including: people you’d like to interview, existing research reports from experts and organizations, places you need to visit, or, in the case of memoirs, a list of scenes you need to explore or resources to enhance your historical accounts of real places.

**Week 5**

Lecture 5: The Role of Character: Good Characters and Bad

Assignment 5: Review your work so far and determine if your story has a list of characters who are essential to the story. Make a list of key and minor characters. Remember, a “place” can also play the role of a “character.” That is, if you are writing a book about New York, New York itself can become a character in the book. Or, perhaps the protagonist of the book is you, and you are writing a travel piece about New Orleans and its journey to becoming whole again. New Orleans, the city, can likewise become a “character.” Once you’ve made your character list, after each character, write a brief phrase that describes that character’s driving goal in the book. What does each character want? If you have been having trouble making your book more active, you will learn about how action-driven characters can make all the difference in the world.

**Week 6**

Lecture 6: The Plot Outline

Assignment 6: Create a plot outline for your book, no matter the genre. Your previous, rough chapter outline will provide some raw material for this. You will merge your plot outline with your character outline and, slowly but surely, create a matrix for building the most dramatic nonfiction book.

**Week 7**

Lecture 7: Creating a Production Schedule, Writing A Thousand Words A Day, and Other Antidotes to Writer’s Block – with Guest Speakers, published successful authors who share how they sit down and write.

Assignment 7: Based on what you’ve identified thus far as your remaining research tasks, and sketchy areas identified during the creation of your plot and character outlines, create a schedule for completing your remaining research. Next, with whatever raw material you’ve already gathered for your early chapters, do your best to write 1,000 words a day from this point forward, no matter how rough. Submit a 4,000-word very rough draft of the first portion of your book.

**Week 8**

Lecture 8: Honing Your Unique Voice

Assignment 8: Push forward with a draft of your next 4,000 words, revising with the goal of going out on a limb: experiment with your most powerful voice. We’ll also be looking at powerful voices of modern writers to see what we can learn: Truman Capote, John Hersey, Isak Dinesen, Oliver Sacks.

**Week 9**

Lecture 9: Reality Check: The Evolution of Ideas

It is not uncommon for your book to change shape as you get more deeply into it. This is a wonderful opportunity for revelation, versus a deal-breaking problem. You’ll see why.

Assignment 9: What obstacles are you encountering in your writing? Class members will submit a revised 8,000-word draft of their work thus far, and identify their needs and goals at this point.

**Week 10**

Lecture 10: The Art of Suspense

Assignment 10: Believe it or not, works of nonfiction and fiction alike have opportunities for suspense. Revisit your draft thus far with a more polished 12,000-word version, paying particular attention to chapter openings and closings, climax points, background sections, and the flow of the story. Some of this will overlap with earlier lectures, but the name of the game when creating a book is continual fine-tuning. Your goal is to create a real page-turner, using the structural guidelines presented in this week’s lecture and building upon what we’ve learned in earlier lectures.

**Week 11**

Lecture 11: Collaboration Agreements, Photo Opportunities, Permissions, “Fair Use,” and other Author Concerns. Working with Photographers.

Assignment 11: Identify whether your book requires the use of photographs or other materials for which permissions are required, or if access to unique material will be possible only via a potential collaborator. Other special-content-related questions should be submitted at this time. Your 16,000-word draft should also be ready.

**Week 12**

Lecture 12: Agents, Editors, and Query letters, Tips and Questions

Assignment 12: Write a query letter – we’ll troubleshoot what works and what doesn’t. Submit your 22,000-word draft if you’re ready (you WILL be if you’ve done your homework), pose final questions.

A full length manuscript normally will be between 80,000 – 90,000 words for a 300-page book. We will also discuss publishers’ expectations, non-standard book formats, and the market for short fiction and nonfiction.