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Dr. Maureen Mathison
Director, University Writing Program
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Maureen:

Thanks for your invitation to develop a course in nonfiction environmental writing.

The demand for environmental nonfiction increases daily. As environmental problems proliferate, individuals, communities, and institutions need to absorb complex information and weigh perspectives--both to address immediate issues and to plan for the future. Students with practice in environmental writing will be better able to participate in such a process. As a result of engaging fully with the research and writing process, these students will think critically and with nuance about environmental issues. They will appreciate and convey complexity in context-relevant terms.

Students with the following interests would benefit from the course:

- environmental humanities
- environmental studies
- English/ecocriticism
- cultural studies
- the natural sciences
- science/environmental journalism
- political science
- environmental history
- environmental ethics
- environmental engineering
- public policy
- rhetoric
- communication

As we discussed, I plan on structuring the course according to three types of environmental writing: creative/ecocritical, natural history/science, and public policy/advocacy. (As it turns out, these categories correspond exactly to the Environmental Studies Program's three student tracks: humanities, science, and public policy.)

Students in this writing course will practice all three types, but will choose an emphasis among them, or perhaps a combination relevant to their needs, for their "major project" for the term. In this way, I can customize the course for each student.

Also, I plan, upon approval of the course, to invite a number of guest-lecturers into the class. Our campus is rich in practitioners and teachers of specific aspects environmental writing. My preliminary list is as follows:

- creative/ecocritical: Terry Tempest Williams (Annie Clark Tanner Fellow); Stephen Tatum (English)
- science-based: Lee Siegel (Marketing and Communications, former science editor for the Salt Lake Tribune); Julia Corbett (Communication). In addition, I'd be honored if you would lecture on science-based research, rhetoric, and writing.
- public policy/advocacy: Keith Bartholomew, JD (Architecture and Planning); Dan McCool (Political Science/Environmental Studies); Tarla Rai Peterson (Communication); Holly V. Campbell, JD (legal researcher/writer)

I've attached a syllabus-in-progress for your consideration. If there's anything more I might provide you at this time, please let me know.

I'm excited at the prospect of a UWP offering in environmental nonfiction--I believe that students as well as the environment itself would be well served by such a course.

My best,

John R. Campbell

Course Overview:

This is a course in the practice of three types of nonfiction environmental writing. (Often enough, as we shall see, these types are linked or fused.)

1) **creative nonfiction and/or ecocriticism.** Known popularly as “nature writing,” creative environmental nonfiction usually chronicles an individual’s experience of specific landscapes as a means of conveying immediacy, emotional resonance, and ideological concepts. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, looks at cultural artifacts from a critical position that emphasizes nature/culture relationships and prioritizes ecological concerns. Both nature writing and ecocriticism value natural history as authority.

2) **natural history/science-based explanatory writing.** This is a research-based genre. Such research may take place “in the field,” in the library, or via interviews with experts--often all three types of research are practiced in a single work. Here the writer is concerned with conveying complex and often technical information in terms accessible to a general audience. In some cases, writers use scientific facts or principles as a basis for social commentary.

3) **public policy and/or advocacy writing.** This type of writing has a quite specific context and purpose. In the environmental area, the purpose is often defined/assigned by a government agency, non-governmental advocacy group, or citizen organization. Public policy writing conveys directions for civic, legal, or governmental action pertaining to the environment; advocacy writing attempts to influence those directions and actions.

During the semester, you will practice these modes in three writing assignments. In addition, you’ll choose an emphasis from the above--or perhaps a combination of these approaches--and apply it to your major project: a longer piece of writing exploring a place, species, environmental issue, or natural dynamic of your choice. In addition, you will present an excerpt from this major project in a seminar format at the end of the term.

Required Texts:

Being In the World: An Environmental Reader for Writers, ed. Terrell Dixon and Scott Slovic

Learning to Listen to the Land, ed. Bill Willers

The Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2004, ed. Steven Pinker

Readings and Writing Assignments

Part One: Nature Writing and Ecocriticism

Week One: Encounters with the Otherness of Nature

handout: David Rains Wallace, "The Nature of Nature Writing"
in Dixon/Slovic: Rachel Carson, "The Marginal World"
Annie Dillard, "Living Like Weasels"
David Quammen, "The Face of a Spider"

Week Two: Sense of Place

in Dixon/Slovic: Edward Abbey, "The Great American Desert"
Wendell Berry, "A Country of Edges"
Terry Tempest Williams, "Yucca"

Week Three: Sensing and Thinking Nature

in Dixon/Slovic: Leslie Marmon Silko, from "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination"
Gary Soto: "Blue"
John Daniel, "The Impoverishment of Sightseeing"

Week Four: "Managing" Nature

in Willers: Wallace Stegner, "The Gift of Wilderness"
Carolyn Merchant, "Restoration and Reunion with Nature"
David Ehrenfeld, "The Conservation Dilemma"

Week Five: Ecocriticism

handouts: Lawrence Buell, from *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*, from "America the Beautiful" & "The Place of Place"
Louise Westling, from *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*
Gary Snyder, from *The Practice of the Wild*, from "Tawny Grammar"

Part Two: Natural History/Science-based Writing

Week Six: Dry Prose, Wet Prose

handouts: John McPhee, from *Basin and Range*
Carl Safina, from *Song of the Blue Ocean*

Week Seven: Design and Evolution: Process Description

Selections from *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2004* (forthcoming, 10/14/04)

handouts: Phillip Ball, from *The Self-Made Tapestry*

Stephen Jay Gould, from *Leonardo's Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms*

Week Eight: Scientific Principles as Rhetorical Means

handout: Edward O. Wilson, from *The Diversity of Life*

in Willers: Paul Shephard, from *Nature and Madness*

in Willers: Anne Ehrlich and Paul Ehrlich, "Population and Development Misunderstood"

Week Nine: Science and Society

Selections from *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2004* (forthcoming, 10/14/04). Possible topics: the psychology of suicide terrorism, the worst news about cloning, etc.

Part Three: Public Policy and Advocacy

Week Ten: Hot Rhetoric, Cool Rhetoric

in Willers: Dave Foreman, from *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*
excerpts from recent publications of: The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Defenders of Wildlife, Audubon, and The Nature Conservancy

Week Eleven: Conveying Legal Information

excerpts from: *The Western Environmental Law Update*
and *National Wildlife Legislative Update*

Legislative Watch [www.nrdc.org/legislation/legwatch.asp]

NOAA [www.noaa.gov] and EPA [www.epa.gov] websites

[a sample bill]

[a sample judicial opinion]

Week Twelve: Grassroots

in Willers: Allan B. Durning, "Grass-Roots Groups are Our Best Hope for Global Prosperity and Ecology"

excerpts from *High Country News*

and local newsletters/publications from grass-roots groups

Weeks Thirteen, Fourteen: student presentations from major projects

Writing Assignment One: Placed Meditations

Model: *Absence and Light: Meditations from the Klamath Marshes*, John R. Campbell, on reserve at the Marriott Library

Assignment: Locate a particular outdoor place, one near enough to campus or your home that you might easily visit it. Choose a place that appeals to you for any reason. Return to that place at least ten times during this semester, inhabiting it for at least a half-hour each time.

Write a series of short meditations about your experience of that place over time. (1--3 typed pages apiece: longer is not necessarily better.)

It's best not to write while actually visiting--best while in place to be attentive, perhaps taking notes, and then drafting your meditations shortly afterwards.

Your meditations may pursue any aspect of the place that you wish, but they must be "grounded" in, and make mention of, the specific physical characteristics of that place. Here are some suggested approaches:

- Write about how the natural and built environments intersect and/or collide in and around your place.
- Document visual aspects of the place that capture your attention: color, quality of light and shadow, scale, contrast, perspective, visual motifs, "scenery," architecture, geological formations, vegetative forms, etc.
- Experience your place through one of the nonvisual senses.
- Explore ways in which the physical specifics of your place might relate to philosophical, aesthetic, political, social, or historical issues.
- Consider your place as an event--or perhaps a series of verbs/events--rather than as a static entity/noun. What is your place doing? How is it shifting? What in your place is ongoing and continuous? What is sporadic and disrupted?
- Consider your place in terms of affinity/difference. What specifically, do you feel affinity with, and why? What, specifically, do you feel "other" from, and why? Or: can you identify any affinities/differences between and among the elements of your place?

Criteria for evaluation: a minimum of ten actual visits; openness to actual place (rather than relying exclusively on preconceptions); attention to detail; precision of description; original insight; depth of analysis/insight; development of ideas; clarity of prose; thematic unity; and grammatical/language-level correctness.

Due: end of term

Writing Assignment Two: Bringing Science Home

Models, on reserve at the Marriott Library:

(science/natural history)

Chaos: Making a New Science, by James Gleick

A Natural History of the Senses, by Diane Ackerman

The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature, by Phillip Ball

The Birds of Heaven: Travels With Cranes, by Peter Matthiessen

(history of science)

Longitude, by Dava Sobel

The Bonehunter's Revenge, by David Rains Wallace

Assignment: For a topic, choose either

1. a scientific principle or area that might have interest to a general, educated reader

(Examples are numerous. They include neotony, cellular organization, brain chemistry, chaos theory, fractals, evolutionary theory, ontogeny, ontology, memes, genetics, genomes, bioregions, symbiosis, probability, species distribution, animal coloration, animal behavior, medical imaging, pharmaceuticals, black holes, dark matter, earth-like planets, etc. etc.)

or

2. an episode from the history of science that you find compelling.

Write a 5-7 page essay that presents the topic in such a way that a general reader will become both informed and involved. Focus on aspects of your topic that are particularly fascinating and/or relevant to some non-scientific area--for example, gene technology has relevance in the area of

ethics; species distribution in the area of environmental preservation; chaos theory in the area of visual art, etc.

Criteria for evaluation: quality and thoroughness of research; ability to “translate” technical information into language accessible to a general audience; ability to connect scientific knowledge to social, political, aesthetic, or personal concerns; demonstrated vital interest for the topic; original insight; depth of analysis/insight; development of ideas; clarity of prose; thematic unity; and grammatical/language-level correctness.

Writing Assignment Three: Advocacy and Public Action

Models:

Comments on government regulations from the public record (on reserve, Marriott Library)

Assignment: Log on to <http://www.regulations.gov>

This is “your one-stop guide to comment on federal regulations.” Search by topic, agency, or keyword, among the many proposed government regulations currently open for public comment. Locate one that interests you, read it thoroughly, and draft a 3-5 pp. comment to submit to the appropriate agency. (Addresses, electronic and post office, are supplied on the website.) Some research into the issue at hand will inform your commentary, and appropriate rhetorical strategies will shape it. Your goal is to persuade regulators to act in the public interest according to your priorities.

Submit the comments to the government agency by the posted deadline. Also submit a copy of your comments to me, along with the text of the regulation itself.

Criteria for evaluation: actual submission of comments to the government agency by posted deadlines; quality and thoroughness of research; ability to argue for the public interest (rather than for merely personal concerns); use of effective rhetorical strategies, given your purpose and audience; ability to communicate values and priorities within a bureaucratic context; focus; organization of ideas; depth of analysis/insight; development of ideas; clarity of prose; and grammatical/language-level correctness.

draft syllabus, 9/23/04, Campbell