

# MODEL SYLLABUS : UNDERGRADUATE -FOR-GRADUATE CREDIT COURSE

ENGLISH 480: CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP  
SPACES AND PLACES: WRITING ABOUT THE AMERICAN WEST, WRITING ABOUT HOME

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
SUMMER MINIMESTER 2010  
MAY 18-

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION:

There is something about the landscape of the American West. It is vast and spacious, marked by the seemingly limitless sky, the broad expanse of undeveloped lands, the dramatic uplift of rocks millions of years old, the lavender-hued mountains, the salt flats, the way light changes everything. It is a land of desert and red rock, of pine and lush green valleys, water and no water. It is mythic and modern, a two-lane blacktop road past ruins ancient and contemporary, a million pottery shards, dozens of abandoned motor courts. It is a land with a complex history, the interaction of Native Americans and Spanish conquistadors, Mexican farmers and Anglo settlers, the Old West and the New West, the Atomic West and the West Yet to Come.

In this course, we will go into the American West and we will read authors who have written about the West and their relationship to it, both personally and communally, in fiction, poetry, and essays. We will write about our own experience within landscapes, the landscape of the West, but also the landscapes from which we come, whether the Piney Woods of East Texas, the flatlands of the Upper Midwest, or the urban environs of a city like Houston or its expanding suburbs. We will think about what it means to live in a particular place at a particular time, and we will study how writers look closely at the landscape (or cityscape) and how they write about what they find there: the environment, sure, but also history, the interaction of man with those landscapes. We will consider the way man has attempted to shape the land to his own purposes: whether those purposes be physical, emotional, or spiritual, or economic, political, or environmental.

We will discuss what it means to be from someplace and to go to another place. We will discuss the ways writers make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. We will discuss the ethics of travel writing, the politics of representation: who has the right to write about this place and these people? What grants the traveling writer the authority to speak? We will consider our own relationship as Americans to the history and

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the craft of creative nonfiction in its variety of forms, with an emphasis on writing about spaces and places, particularly the American West;
2. To read and analyze various models of writing about spaces and places (including literary journalism, memoir, personal essay, history, and nature writing), so that students may understand the flexibility of the form and its attendant possibilities;

From *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition*, by Chris Wilson

From *How the Canyon Became Grand*, by Stephen J. Pyne

From *West of Everything* E \ - D Q H 7 R P S M L Q V D @ \$ W % W @ @ 0 X \ (pp. 179-203) X Q H

From *The Contested Plains*, by Elliott West (Part II: The Gold Rush, pp. 97-110).

From *The Modern West: American*



ASSIGNMENT SHEET  
DR. KAUKONEN  
WEST TRIP  
ENGLISH 480W  
CREATIVE NONFICTION

THE NATURE OF CREATIVE NONFICTION :

As Robert Root discusses in the opening chapter of *Nonfiction*, the definition of creative nonfiction remains contested, and the term can be applied to a wide range of personal essay, the memoir, narrative reportage, and expressive critical writing and whose borders with other reality-based genres and forms (such as journalism). It may adopt the narrative techniques of fiction and the lyricism of poetry; it may be written in linear fashion, or it may be structured to resemble a triptych or a mosaic or a collage. The author may stand at the center of the essay or may stand on the fringe. This provides you, in these assignments, a great deal of latitude, which can be both freeing and terrifying. In this assignment sheet, I will provide for you some basic parameters that should help

Your experience of the West on this trip will not take place in isolation; rather, it will be shaped by your past experiences and ideas and desires, in short, by who you are. Some of you may be returning to regions in which you have never before sludged through a snowstorm for the first time. Some of you may have been raised in city landscapes or lost in suburban sprawl; others of you may have been raised in rural farm country. Which means

ASSIGNMENT SHEET  
GROUP PRESENTATIONS  
DRS. KAUKONEN AND CRANE  
WEST TRIP 2010

We both believe that your education is your responsibility, and while it is our responsibility to create an environment conducive to that achievement, it is not our responsibility to merely serve as a conduit of knowledge that passes somehow, magically, from us to you. So while we will lecture and lead discussions, we expect our students to take responsibility for the class and for their own education, both individually and as a group. To this end, we require each student to take the lead on one of the books that we read in our course. The presentations should reflect a deep engagement with the work, should respond critically to the issues raised by the work, and should be done as professionally as possible (even without