

The University of Vermont
College of Education and Social Services

EDFS 309: Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN)

Dr. Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray

Wednesdays, 5:10 – 8:10pm, Living and Learning Center A-building Room: A161

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GENERAL COURSE INFORMATION

Classroom Environment: Please turn off cell phones OR place them on silent (vibrate mode can still be heard). Should you need to have your phone on vibrate or ring during class please announce this to the group at the beginning of class. No texting in class. No laptops abuse in class. Also please let us know if you have any life-threatening allergies, such as peanut allergies.

Documented Disability: If you have a documented disability and wish to discuss academic accommodations, please contact Robert and Sydnee as soon as possible.

Academic Integrity: All students are required to be familiar with and adhere to the Code of Academic Integrity. The code can be accessed at <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmppg/ppg/student/acadintegrity.pdf>. If you have specific questions as they relate to this course, please let us know.

Religious Holidays: If you anticipate needing to miss a course meeting due to religious observance, then we ask that you submit those dates to Robert and Sydnee no later than the end of second full week of classes (by September 14th, 2012). Faculty must permit students who miss class for the purpose of religious observance to make up any missed assignments.

Illnesses: It is estimated that at least 40% of the population will contract a cold or flu during the course of the academic year. Thus we implore you to **stay home** if you have cold or flu symptoms or you are feeling sick. Campus health officials urge you to stay home or in your residence hall room to avoid making others sick. You should remain at home or in your residence hall room, except to get medical care or for other necessities, until your fever has been gone for at least 24 hours.



Dear SPN Students,

Our lives, our cultures are made up of many overlapping stories and experiences. If we listen to the media we may hear all the negative stories being pushed on us and may begin to believe that these everything is bad. Everything. The New York Times reports August 28th, 2012: “Churning Storm Nears Hurricane Strength” “Court Rules Israel Wasn’t at Fault in US Activist’s Death” “Afghan Beheadings Could Singal Confusion in Taliban Ranks”. But as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian states, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” So, SPN friend and student, we ask you in this course to do perhaps what could be the most courageous act – we ask you to write. To write your own story. And not just one. We ask you to write as many stories as you can muster. And we, your instructors, are here, to teach, guide, and to support you in your individual writing endeavors. We are here to give you the freedom to wrench the stories from your gut and your intellect, and to encourage you to grow into an understanding that your stories are important both for you and for others. We will help you the best we can, while maintaining that ultimately it is all up to you to start, sustain, and finish your writing project.

How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.
~Henry David Thoreau

If, at this time before our course begins, you know that you will be so busy living life that you have no time to sit down to do the readings or do a lot of writing, then you will have to ask yourself a question: is this the semester when I should be “standing up to live” rather than “sitting down to write?” If your answer is yes, then please consider putting off taking this course until the fall of 2013. To be a good writer requires that in addition to living, you also need to do much sitting. Richard Rhodes, the winner of two Pulitzer Prizes for his books, says that the most important part of the anatomy for a writer is not the hand, head, heart, or eyes...it is the butt. Without putting “butt to chair” on a regular basis, writing will not get done. Butt to chair is the basic posture for all writers. So, if you think that your activities for this upcoming semester are likely to take away all your time for writing/reading, then please drop the course. We will not ask you any questions or hold anything against you. In fact, we will respect and admire you for your good sense, honesty, and self-insight. We are sure that Henry David Thoreau would be proud of you too, if what he says above is any indication.

And, so, if you decide to stay with us this semester (and we sincerely hope you do), here is what we will be expecting of you:

- Work on a specific writing project (comps, thesis, dissertation, proposal, book, blog, article, chapter, memoir, set of writings, etc)
- Compose an official writing contract, due the 4th class meeting (September 19th). This is the contract for which we will hold you accountable and offer our support when needed.
- Perform all the reading in a self-reflective, practical-application manner. You will be responsible to find the real-world applications in the readings for your own writing. You will share some of these insights each and every week both in the large and small groups.

- Write a minimum 10,000-word manuscript due by the end of the term (no exceptions allowed). We will see your manuscript in thirds (see Important Calendar Information section). Please do not ask about page length (this syllabus, for example, is about 4,100 words), because, as you know, you can make your manuscripts any length you wish, depending on font size and type, spacing, title pages, and other “padding” variables, etc. Publishers, in case you might be interested, are concerned only about word count, as are we.
- Learn how to reference and document in Chicago Style—*not* APA. Chicago uses superscripts, embedded literature reviews, (annotated) endnotes (not footnotes), and eliminates lengthy explications of methodology in the document. Chicago Style is most fitting for SPN writing.
 - <http://library.uvm.edu/guides/citation/chicago.php>
 - <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>
- Edit your own papers for typos, misspellings, grammatical errors, etc. This is your responsibility to make sure your editing is as meticulous as possible. We are not editors. We will comment on the quality of your S, P, and N in your content, as well as on your manuscript formatting and structuring. If you ask, we will give you the names of past, gifted SPN students who are also excellent editors, if you decide you need them. They charge an hourly rate.
- You will write, and then you will write some more—every single week, both in and out of class. Brief written reflections will be required each week on an assigned topic. In this course, there will be no waiting until the last weekend of the semester (or of the month) to slap something together, the way we have all learned to do in academia. (Each of us usually justifies this last-minute, panicky, adrenaline-driven surge by saying something like “I work best under pressure with strict deadlines.” Unfortunately, this might be why we have thousands of disillusioned ABTs [All But the Thesis] and ABDs [All But the Dissertation] who have dropped out of graduate programs all over the country and working in jobs they dislike.) We will schedule longer SPN writing-project check-ins every third week or so. You will also do in-class free-writes, depending on the SPN thematic focus each week.
- Share your writing each week with the rest of us—both in small groups and/or in the large group as well. If you are shy about sharing your writing publicly, then perhaps we can help you to do this. We will always ask for volunteers in the big group—but when none are forthcoming, we reserve the right to call on people.
- Attend as many classes as possible! Weekly attendance is crucial! This is the best way for us to get to know you and for you to know us and one another; as well as to learn how to do excellent SPN writing projects. We just ask you to let us know if you will be unable to attend a class session.
- You will realize that if the course is working well or poorly, then it is because the students *and* instructors, you *and* we, are working well or poorly. We are all in this together, and we have freely chosen to be here in this non-required course; thus, as a group, we share equal responsibility for our successes, as well as our failures.
- At the end of the term, assign yourself a grade that will be calculated as 50% of your final grade. We will assign the other 50% of the final grade. We will be looking for consistent weekly attendance; starting, sustaining, and finishing in your semester-long writing output; and a willingness to be actively involved in class each and every week. (It won't

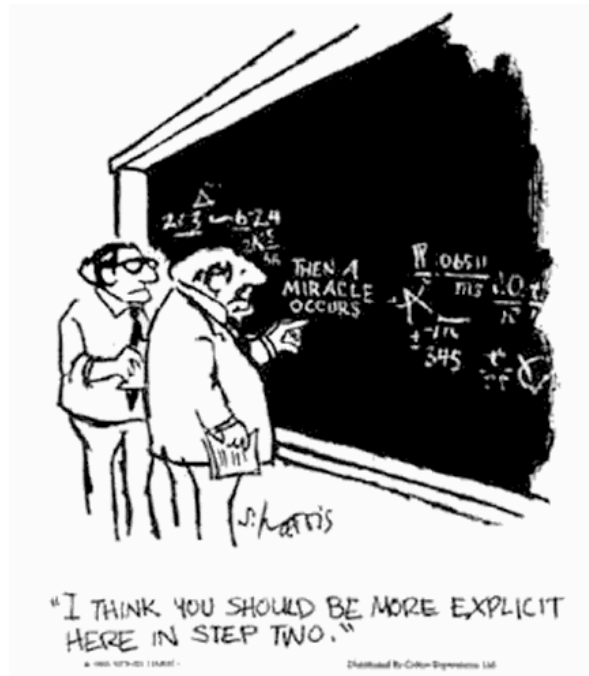
hurt for you to be enthusiastic each week.)

- Hopefully, you will choose to have some fun, share some ideas, open up a bit, and work hard to create a writing community built on trust, mutual assistance, generosity, and lots of humility.

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I invite you to imagine the act of writing less as a special talent and more as a purposeful craft. Think of writing as carpentry, and think of the techniques I offer you as tools—not rules. With practice you will devise your own tools; you will become handy with these tools over time; they will become part of your process, natural and automatic! ~Roy Peter Clark

In the spirit of Clark's epigraphs, here is a collection of tools (not rules) that will serve to introduce you to the craft of SPN writing. As the semester goes on, and you practice the craft of writing every chance you get, you will add your own SPN tools and enlarge your own toolbox. In so doing, you will help us to enlarge our own sets of tools as well. We thank you in advance for this gift.

What is Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN)?

- First and foremost, it is not everyone's preference to write or to read, nor should it be. It is a commonplace in the humanities but a stranger in professional schools as well as in the social sciences and sciences.
- It is but one tool in the scholar's toolbox, functional for some, dysfunctional or nonfunctional for others.
- It tells a good story and/or many good stories.
- It features a clear point of view, an organizing theme, and/or a coherent argument.
- It starts with the "I" and proceeds outward to the "you" and the "they." The author's distinct and honest voice is key. The author's ideas are only as strong as the voice that delivers them. By the same token, absent the ideas, the personal voice can sometimes be seen as self-indulgent or overly confessional.
- It uses personal stories to deliver the message.
- It strives for an ideal mix of particularity and generalizability, concreteness and abstractness, practice and theory. SPN writing has four major components: it starts with the identification of key themes; then it connects these themes to the writer's personal stories in order to exemplify and explicate the points being made; then it draws on relevant, pre-existing research and scholarship in order to ground and enrich the personal narrative; and, finally, it ends up with universalizable ideas and applications that connect with all readers in some way. Sha and Robert calls these four SPN components in order pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search.
- It does not present the author as some omniscient, 3rd person authority. The author's voice is personal, clear, fallible, and honest. It is also humble and open-ended.
- It generously cites other authors' works and ideas. We call these references "proof-texts."
- It shows some passion. It is not a detached, "objective" examination of a topic. It is a thoughtful, first-person attempt to make a point or teach a lesson by drawing on the author's own life experiences to provide context.
- It tries to help the reader to see the world a little differently, from the author's personal point of view.
- It is editorially and technically meticulous.
- It is more an exercise in creative writing than it is writing to fit a particular research formula, rubric, or template.
- It takes personal risks.
- It begins with the self-confidence that the author has a personal story worth telling and a point worth making.

- It always keeps front and center the interests of the audience who will read the work. Why would the reader want to spend time reading the author's words? So what?
- It understands the difference between "academic rigor" and "rigor mortis."

What Are Some SPN Writing Questions for Each of Us To Keep in Mind As We Write?

- Where is the "me" in all of this, and why is the "me" important?
- Who exactly is my audience? Have I made this clear from the start?
- What are some questions I'm asking about myself, my content?
- How am I trying to hook/grab my reader's attention?
- What are some central research/scholarship sources that I am drawing from?
- What are my central constructs (themes); points I'm trying to make?
- Am I attempting to develop an argument, make a statement, advocate for something?
- What is the story (or stories) I'm attempting to narrate, and what functions do they serve?
- Where exactly is my own voice in my writing? How do I know when I've found it?
- Where in my manuscript can I develop my ideas further?
- Where can I delete, as unnecessary, some of my text?
- Have I told my truth(s) as honestly as I possibly can?
- Does my SPN have a narrative arc? Does it have a beginning, a middle, and an end? An intro, characters, a plot, a problem, a climax, a resolution?
- Have I summarized, and made clear, my universals (versals)? Have I answered the question "so what?" What are the implications of my writing for others, especially professionals?
- Have I tried to answer the question "now what?" Where do we go from here?
- Have I included relevant scholarship throughout?
- Have I used section headings? Am I using proof-texts and epigraphs?
- Have I correctly used the Chicago Referencing Format?
- Have I kept my paragraphs (and, at times, my sentences) relatively brief? Or better still, have I experimented with different lengths (short and long) at different times, in order to break up the monotony of "same-size" writing?
- Have I meticulously edited my manuscript? And, if I'm not a good editor, have I let someone who is perform this important work for me?
- Do I keep near my computer a good book on English language usage such as *The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style*? Or John Ayto's *Dictionary of Word Origins*? Or *Webster's New World College Dictionary*? (Most online dictionaries and usage guides are too truncated, and twitter-like, to be of much real help to serious writers.)
- Have I worked hard to rid my manuscript of dead prose, numbing jargon, show-off technical ("tenure") terms, irrelevant scholarly references, self-disclosures that represent nothing more than exhibitionism for its own sake, and, most of all, pedestrian, pinched, or clichéd ideas?
- Have I tried to write from my heart and gut as much as from my trained writer's intellect?
- Have I trusted my judgment of what writing style is best for me? On the other hand, have I also taken the time to learn the grammatical and syntactical basics of good writing?
- Have I worked hard to get rid of my bothersome, distracting "usage glitches?" Have I tried to master the *craft* of writing as well as the *art* of writing?

The best writing partner is the one who listens, and encourages, and affirms, and only afterwards talks about what works and what doesn't. A good writing partner feels no moral or aesthetic compulsion to rip your writing to shreds. When you are having a bad day of writing you don't need a lot of advice. You just need a little love. If your critic is too strident or adamant, ditch the sucker. Look around, take your time, and you will find that person who can fill you up when you are empty.
~Anne Lamott

Here are some friendly recommendations from your instructors regarding how we can give one another respectful and useful feedback on our writing. We promise not to rip your writing to shreds. Please return the favor. If we fail to follow through, ditch us. We will understand.

How Do We Give One Another Feedback on Our Writing?

- Whenever you choose to share your writing with the rest of us, all feedback should begin with *specific* requests by you, the writer, telling us what you need from us. We, the feedbackers, will not presume to tell you what you don't need to hear from us. Is there anything more useless, and presumptuous, than advice not solicited?
- Each one of us deserves to be shown the utmost respect for what we write. We're all trying damned hard to put personal and scholarly ideas to paper in an effective way. Here is our bias: most, but not all, negative and positive reactions to someone's writing are aesthetic. As far as we are concerned, aesthetics are primarily a matter of personal taste. In other words, most standards are relative and made up. David Hume said *de gustibus, non disputandum est* (*matters of taste are not to be disputed*). It might help if you find a way to give both positive and negative feedback that starts with something like this: "It's only my taste speaking here, but..." No aesthetic high grounds here.
- "Give feedback to others as you would have others give feedback to you." This sounds like a kind feedback strategy, right? But, as George Bernard Shaw once noted: what if some of us are masochists—gluttons for punishment, and, therefore, we expect others to enjoy cruelty as much as we do when others are cruel to us? In contrast, we prefer a reworked version of the *Golden Rule* that we call the *Platinum Rule*: give feedback to others in the ways they want to hear it, not necessarily in the way you might want to hear it. We call this the *Platinum Rule* because it puts the needs of the other first, and doesn't presume that our needs are identical with the other's needs. Does the Platinum Rule necessarily preclude constructive response? Of course not. It is just a reminder that the best feedback starts with positives rather than negatives. If the writer solicits critical feedback only, find a way to give it that is a blend of commendation and advice. We don't care how tough a writer is: the feedback the writer remembers most comes out of a context of *what works* more than *what doesn't*.
- Our favorite metaphor for compassionate conversation in a writing seminar is this: it's akin to a barn-raising rather than a boxing match. We're not here this semester to score points at others' expense. If this is your goal, count us out. The best way for you to score points in our eyes, if this is what's important to you (and we hope it isn't your primary motivator) is to *make the writer look good*. This takes ingenuity, generosity, empathy, kindness, a keen sense of mutual aid, and a shared work ethic. These skills, by the way, are exactly what's needed for a good, old-fashioned, New England barn-raising.
- Before you leap to conclusions about strengths and weaknesses whenever you hear a reading, first ask these questions: What is the author trying to say? Where is it coming from? Why does it matter to the author? Who is the author speaking to? What is the author saying to me,

personally? What is the author saying that might be relevant to a larger audience beyond the author and me? What do I especially like about what I hear? What doesn't work for me? Notice the question that we placed last? It's there for a reason.

What Are Technical SPN Points To Keep In Mind As We Listen to One Another's Writings?

- What idea, value, theme, or truth stood out for you as you listened to the author read? How did the author make this happen? These are called *constructs* or *structs*.
- Was the theme/construct/through line clear? Consistent? Identifiable? If so, how so?
- Was the author's personal point of view clearly rendered? How so?
- To what extent was the author's personal story effective in conveying the value, idea, theme, or truth? Are there any ways that you think the author's S, P, and N, might come together even more effectively?
- Can you identify some effective *hooks* in the author's writing that caught, and kept, your attention?
- At this particular point in the author's manuscript, were you able to identify some helpful background information/knowledge, *proof-texts*, *epigraphs*, *lit embeds*? Do you have any suggestions for adding some relevant scholarship?
- Could you find any *universalizability* in the author's writing? Can you suggest additional *universals*?
- What did you think was most controversial (if anything) in the author's writing?
- Where do you think questions might be raised by other readers?
- What do you think was most convincing in the author's writing? What in the writing might actually change readers' minds, or at least, get them to take notice?



*Whatever you can do, Or dream you can do, Begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.
Begin it now. Now! ~Goethe*

*So why do we write? We write so that when we look back and see the moment when we were totally clear,
completely brilliant and astoundingly wise, there is proof—proof right there on the god-damned page.
And we can read our words and say “I actually wrote that!” And if we did it once—we can do it again.
~Nancy Slonim Aronie*

Required Readings in Alphabetical Order

Anne Lamott, “Bird by Bird: Some Instructions for Writing and Life”

Christina Baldwin, “Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story”

Robert J. Nash, “Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative”

Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley, “Me-Search and Re-search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts”

Robert J. Nash and Sydnee Viray, “Our Stories Matter: Liberating Marginalized Voices using Scholarly Personal Narrative”

Roy P. Clark, “Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer”

We will assign relevant readings, and very brief writing assignments, throughout the course and at strategic intervals—one week before they are due. These reading assignments will emerge organically during the semester.

Strongly recommended reading but not required:

- Vivian Gornick, “The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative”
- Bill Roorbach, “Writing Life Stories: How To Make Memories into Memoirs, Ideas into Essays, and Life into Literature”
- Sark, “Juicy Pens, Thirsty Paper: Gifting the World with Your Words and Stories, and Creating the Time and Energy to Actually Do it”
- Mary Pipher, “Writing to Change the World”

Important Calendar Information

September 19: Writing Contract due

September 26: Writing project check-in

October 31: Writing project check-in

November 21: No Class due to UVM Thanksgiving Recess
(November 19-23, 2012)

November 28: Writing project check in

December 5: Last Day of Class. Class potluck and Special Presentation.

December 12: Final Narrative Self-Evaluation and Major Writing Project (10,000+ words) due via electronic attachments. No final grades can be submitted without both of these attachments.

**Our Preliminary Gift to You
—Some Inspiring Writing Maxims—**

Every writer I know has trouble writing. *~Joseph Heller, satirical novelist, short story writer, and playwright. Author of Catch-22*

You write to communicate to the hearts and minds of others what's burning inside you. And you edit to let the fire show through the smoke. *~Arthur Polotnik, editor*

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. *~Maya Angelou, American author and poet. Author of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*

Personal narrative writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events. *~William Zinsser, American writer, editor, literary critic. Author of On Writing Well.*

Deliver me from writers who say the way they live doesn't matter. I'm not sure a bad person can write a good book. If art doesn't make us better, then what on earth is it for. *~Alice Walker, American author, poet, and activist. Author of Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Color Purple.*

And, so, dear SPN writers-to-be, we come to the *end* of our letter-syllabus to you, here at the *beginning* of our course together. We promise (to the best of our ability) to be here for you throughout the semester. Just email us when and if you might need us for one thing or another. Remember that we are here to help you to become the best writers you can be during this course. And we will be writing, right along with you ☺

Sincerely,
Robert J. Nash & Sydnee Viray