

# Introduction to Nonfiction Writing

(online)

Spring Term, 2020

Course: **Intro to Nonfiction Writing**  
Course ID: ARTS  
Meets: 9 weeks, **online**, on Raider Moodle

Instructor: Paul Steinle  
E-mail: [steinlep@sou.edu](mailto:steinlep@sou.edu)  
Phone: 541-941-811

## Description

This workshop provides practical training for individuals seeking to develop their nonfiction writing skills. Workshop materials include selected readings, posted online, that demonstrate key writing skills practiced by award-winning journalists and widely-published nonfiction authors. These professional techniques are intended to enhance your story-telling skills.

Over a 9-week period, participants will practice their writing skills by *completing* (4) separate **500-1,000 word writing exercises** for analysis to be submitted, *one every two weeks*, by midnight *Fridays*, using the key skills taught.

Content is to be based on participants' personal experience, an interview and some observation, using information-gathering and story-telling techniques described in the readings. These techniques are applicable for writing: extended nonfiction stories, memoir, historical articles, magazine-style and book-length nonfiction, and long-form journals/blogs for publication or for the internet.

The instructor will analyze participants' writing, and participants will read each other's writing and share *constructive feedback* about the effectiveness of the content. The instructor will also emphasize standard grammar and effective vocabulary usage.

Overall, you will learn about nonfiction writing by:

- (a.) *Reading* examples of excellent published nonfiction writing and writing guides;
- (b.) *Analyzing* selected, published samples, in online group discussions;
- (c.) *Writing* (4) personal exercises, to be analyzed by the instructor and fellow classmates; and by (d.) *Critiquing* other participants' original writing samples, posted anonymously on Moodle.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES:

OLLI participants who complete this workshop should achieve a greater understanding of the narrative nonfiction writing style and its techniques. They should also achieve greater proficiency in writing, enabling them to meet publication standards for narrative nonfiction, by using these professional, story-telling techniques.

## REQUIRED TEXTS:

-- "**Bird by Bird**," Anne Lamott (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1994) *paperback*; also available as an audio book from Audible/Amazon (*To be read by the end of the term*).

-- (*Required Online Readings, see schedule*) A collection of excerpts have been selected and provided by the instructor and posted online on the class Moodle website.

**RECOMMENDED READING:** (*Some of these books are available in e-book and audio book editions.*)

***Paperback books about the craft of nonfiction writing:***

- “A Writer's Coach: An Editor's Guide to Words That Work,” Jack R. Hart (Pantheon; 2006) *paperback*.
- “Draft #4: John McPhee – On the Writing Process,” John McPhee (Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2017)
- “The Elements of Style (Third Edition),” William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White (Boston: Allyn and Bacon; 1979)
- “On Writing Well: 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition,” William Zinsser (Harper Perennial; 2006) *paperback*.
- “Immersion: A Writer’s Guide to Going Deep,” Ted Conover (University of Chicago Press, 2016) *paperback*.
- “Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction,” Jack Hart (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; 2011)
- “Working,” Robert A. Caro (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 2019)
- “Writing Creative Nonfiction,” Theodore A. Rees Cheney, (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press; 2001)
- “Writing for Story,” Jon Franklin (New York: Plume Books; 1994)
- “Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer,” Roy Peter Clark (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; 2006) *paperback*.

***Recommended book-length narrative nonfiction:***

- “The Boys in the Boat,” Daniel James Brown (Penguin Books; 2013).
- “The Boys on the Bus,” Timothy Crouse (New York: Random House; 1973).
- “In Cold Blood,” Truman Capote (New York: Random House; 1966).
- “Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America’s Illegal Aliens,” Ted Conover (New York: Vintage; 1987).
- “Dispatches,” Michael Herr (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 1978).
- “In the Garden of the Beasts: Love, Terror and an American Family in Hitler’s Berlin,” Erik Larsen (New York: Broadway; 2012).
- “The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College,” Jacques Steinberg (New York; Penguin; 2002).
- “Just Like Us: The True Story of Four Mexican Girls Coming of Age in America” Helen Thorpe (New York: Scribner; 2011)
- “Nickel and Dimed,” Barbara Ehrenreich (New York: Henry Holt; 2001).
- “One Writer’s Beginnings,” Eudora Welty (Cambridge; Harvard U. Press; 1984).
- “The Orchid Thief,” Susan Orleans (New York: Ballantine; 1998).
- “Passage to Juneau: A Sea and its Meanings,” Jonathan Raban (New York: Vintage; 2000).
- “The Right Stuff,” Thomas Wolfe (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux; 1979).
- “Thunder Out of China,” Theodore White & Annalee Jacoby (1946) (*reprinted* Da Capo, 1980)
- “Seabiscuit,” Laura Hillenbrand (New York: Ballantine; 2001).
- “She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement”, Jodi Kantor & Megan Twohey (New York: Penguin Press; 2019)
- “The Soul of a New Machine,” Tracy Kidder (New York: Avon Books; 1981).
- “Unbroken,” Laura Hillenbrand (Fourth Estate; 2010)

**NECESSARY TECHNOLOGY:**

- A computer with MS Word software.
- An active e-mail address.
- Access to the Internet.

## METHODS OF LEARNING:

This entire course will be conducted via **SOU Moodle**: <https://raider.moodle.sou.edu>

The focus of this course is *writing* nonfiction pieces in an interactive workshop setting; *reading* selected nonfiction to identify narrative nonfiction writing techniques; and *analyzing* your writing and your colleagues' writing samples.

Subsequently, this course will have *three main threads*:

- (1.) **Directed self-study** – readings and exercises to augment your nonfiction writing skills, with follow-up, online discussion;
- (2.) **Writing exercises** – story-telling, with emphasis on narrative nonfiction techniques; and
- (3.) **Analysis** – detailed peer and instructor feedback focused on each participant's writing. **This class will also experiment with the use of Zoom to enable scheduled, online discussions about your writing.**

### (A.) **READING ASSIGNMENTS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

---- Please *read* the weekly reading assignments and *answer* the assigned **Discussion Questions**, online.

### (B.) **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:**

---- Each participant will write (4) separate 500–1,000 word writing exercises, each with an assigned focus. Participants' writing samples will be read and discussed among class participants online.

---- (Exercise #1/Week 2) **Color story**: a vivid description of a *place* (e.g., Crater Lake, your home, etc.), a *journey* (e.g., driving Highway 101, etc.), an *event* (e.g., tailgating at a Raiders' football game, etc.), or an *environment* (e.g., Ashland after a snowfall, etc.) (500-1,000 words)

---- (Exercise #2/ Week 4) **Choice**: a **mini-profile** – a brief profile of an individual based on a face-to-face interview. Be certain that you give the reader a clear, detailed description of what your subject looks like (500-1,000 words); ... or a **human interest story** – a nonfiction story, based on face-to-face interviews and observations, about how an event, a trend, a phenomenon or an environment is affecting a group (3 or more) of people. (500-1,000 words)

---- (Exercise #3/Week 6) **Scene-setting Story**: a nonfiction story with *one or more scenes*, based on observation, close listening, and face-to-face interviews, that sums up the effects and/or aftermath of a real event or encounter (a meeting, a cultural event, a dinner party, a vacation interlude, etc.). Include what you saw and heard to communicate what it *means*. Please provide an all-three senses (sight, sound, smell) description of your scene(s) and include that in the story (500-1,000 words).

---- (Exercise #4/Week 8) **Immersion/Experiential Story**: a nonfiction story, written from your *first-person* perspective, which describes an event, an incident, or a phenomenon and explains how this event, activity or a trend, *in which you were engaged*, has affected you and others whom you have observed. (500-1,000 words)

### (C.) **ANALYSIS ASSIGNMENTS: (critiquing colleagues)**

---- To stimulate feedback and learn from peer review, each participant's writing exercise will be posted, anonymously, on our assigned **Raider Moodle website** for the other members of the workshop to read and critique online.

---- **Critiquing Forum:** Each participant will be assigned to critique *at least one* other participant's exercise, online, for each assigned writing exercise, offering *constructive feedback* into a threaded discussion forum. (You are also encouraged to critique as many additional stories as you wish in the forum.) This class will also experiment with the use of *Zoom* to enable scheduled, online discussions among the class participants about the writing exercises (*details will be posted later*).

In addition to these collegial critiques, the instructor will independently critique your work, privately, instructor-to-participant, online.

## **RULES & FORMATS:**

### **1.) Criteria for the short report-writing exercises:**

--- **Factual writing** – The content for your pieces can be derived from memory, personal observation, interviews, and/or research. Your goal is to engage the reader's interest with truthful, attributed (who said what) information.

--- **Clarity** -- Write clearly. Seek to capture some essential truth about the situation you are describing and describe it in a compelling manner. Don't forget to add the *key facts used by professional writers*: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

--- **In media res** – Given the length and frequency of these assignments, it is not necessary for each short assignment to have a beginning, middle, and an end. You may use *in media res* style, dropping the reader *into the middle of things* and finishing before all the key issues are resolved. To demonstrate your writing techniques, you may write a *slice-of-life*: a brief description of an event or part of a larger story you may wish to tell in greater detail at some future time.

If you can say everything you want to say and wrap it up in 500-1,000 words, fine. But don't feel obligated to do that in every piece. This course's goal is to *identify and employ* these nonfiction techniques. For the short exercises, *emphasize your style of expression* rather than summing everything up.

-- **Grammar, punctuation and spelling.** Please copy-edit your submissions to meet professional publication standards.

-- **Format** -- Use **MS Word** with **12-pt. Times New Roman type, double-spaced and left-justified**, in all your original copy.

### **2.) Identification of your work:**

-- Use simplified "slugs" (*titles*) to identify your writing exercises.

-- Indicate the number of the exercise (Exercise #1 = "Ex1," and add your last name; e.g., "Ex1.steinle") and place this "title" in the upper left corner of the first page.,

-- Also, please place your full name in the upper right corner of the first page (*only*) on each of your submissions.

3.) **Email:** Email all writing assignments as **MS Word file documents**, "attached" to an e-mail sent to the instructor: [steinlep@sou.edu](mailto:steinlep@sou.edu). (Please *do not send* PDFs.) Identify your work in the message

subject line, e.g., "Ex2.steinle," so the instructor can differentiate your message from Internet spam.

### **PREPARATION TIME:**

Workshop members should budget a minimum of **4-6 hours each week** to complete the reading, writing, and critiquing assignments for this workshop.

### **Workshop Code:**

#### ***Private and confidential:***

-- To support an honest and frank discussion of the writing for this course, the content of each participant's writing will be held ***private and confidential***. It may only be shared among the participants in this course, and with the instructor, without the writer's permission.

-- Identify all materials from secondary sources. "According to ... (identify any published source, e.g.: "... according to A.O. Scott in the New York Times, Dec. 24, 2019.")"

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**SCHEDULE:** *This schedule is subject to modification to meet the pace of Workshop development.*

**WEEK # 0:** (As soon as possible) – Read prior to first scheduled assignments.

**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #0** (on Moodle) (*Also sent to each student.*)

-- Instructions about how to log into Raider Moodle and engage with this course.

### **READING:**

-- **Course Syllabus:** Print and read the *Syllabus* to grasp the scope of the course (ask the instructor, online, about any relevant course planning questions).

-- "**The Feature Game,**" foreword, Tom Wolfe; *The New Journalism*, Thomas Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, editors (New York: Harper and Row, 1973): pp 3-52.

-- Note: "**Key Nonfiction Techniques,**" prepared and edited by Paul Steinle

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** (*Sample*)

-- **On Moodle:** Answer a *sample* online **Discussion Question** posted in "Assignments" based on the week's assigned online reading.

**WEEK # 1:** April 6-12

**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #1** (on Moodle)

-- The goals of the course, a brief introduction by the instructor, and an overview of the key aspects of the course.

### **READING:**

-- **Syllabus:** Read the *Syllabus* to grasp the scope of the course and ask the instructor any relevant course planning questions.

**Text:**

-- "**Bird by Bird**," Anne Lamott (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1994) *Begin reading and plan to finish reading by final week.*

**Online Reading:**

-- "*A Highway Man Beheaded in Rome*," Charles Dickens; *Pictures from Italy*, pp. 64, 67-70 (*Originally*, The Daily News, London, 1846)

-- Note: "On Writing Well," Chapter 12: "**Writing About a Place**"; William Zinsser (New York, Harper and Row, 1980).

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

-- **On Moodle:** Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in "Assignments" based on the week's assigned reading.

**WRITING** (Due: April 10)

-- **Brief Bio**

Write a brief biography (100-150 words) to identify yourself to the instructor and other class members. Please mention things such as: where you're from, your education, your life/work history, and why you are interested in learning these nonfiction writing skills. **Email your bio to:** [steinlep@sou.edu](mailto:steinlep@sou.edu), label it: "bio.your last name".

**NOTE:**

-- **Writing Exercise #1:** The deadline for the first formal writing assignment is the *end of the second week*: midnight, **Friday, Week 2**. *See week 2 for assignment details.*

-- **Submissions:** All writing assignments will be **emailed directly to the instructor**, as an MS Word attachment, to: [steinlep@sou.edu](mailto:steinlep@sou.edu).

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**WEEK # 2:** (April 13-19)  
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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #2** (on Moodle)

-- Some thoughts about Exercise 1 – *Description* writing – and instructions about how to do assigned critiquing on Moodle.

**READING:**

**Online Reading:**

-- *Sample descriptive writing:* "**Passage to Juneau**," Jonathan Raban (New York, Vintage Departures, 2000) pp. 370-373.

-- *Sample journey writing:* "**One Writer's Beginnings**," Eudora Welty (Cambridge; Harvard U. Press, 1984) pp. 43-46.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

-- **On Moodle:** Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in "Assignments" based on the week's assigned reading.

**WRITING:**

-- **WRITING EXERCISE #1** (*Color Story*)

Write a vivid "color story" – a description of a real, memorable place, setting or event and describe (implicitly or explicitly) how it affected you. Emphasize details, and if you write about a journey,

consider including a *narrative thread* -- events occurring sequentially, usually measured over time (e.g., at 9 a.m. we left Ashland; by 10 a.m. we were in Yreka, California, heading south ... etc.).

Remember, help the reader imagine this setting by providing enough *specific detail* so the reader can experience what it *looks* like, *sounds* like and *smells* like (if relevant). (500-1,000 words)

-- Exercise #1 **DEADLINE:** midnight, **Friday, Week 2.**

**CRITIQUING FORUM:** (Specific critique assignments will appear in bi-weekly “Assignments” online)

– Critique assigned writing -- Exercise #1 (which will be posted by noon, Saturday, Week 2). Critique deadline: **Monday midnight of the following week.**

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**WEEK # 3:** (April 20 - 26)

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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO # 3** (on Moodle)

-- Some thoughts about Exercise 2 – interviews, *profile* writing and *human interest* stories

**READING:**

**Online Reading:**

– “**The Art of the Interview**,” Paul Steinle.

-- “On Writing Well,” Chapter 11: “**The Interview**”; William Zinsser (New York, Harper and Row, 1980).

– *Sample profile:* “**Ben Webster**,” Ira Sadoff, Missouri Review, 1987.

– *Sample profile:* “**Piano Man...**” C.R. Roberts, (Tacoma) News Tribune, Jan. 2013.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

– **On Moodle:** Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in “Assignments” based on the week’s assigned reading.

**WRITING:** *No exercise due this week. Writing Exercise 2 is due in Week 4.*

**Two weeks to complete**

**WRITING EXERCISE #2** (*Mini-profile*) or (*Human Interest story*)

– (*Mini-profile*): Select a person to be interviewed. Interview a friend, a colleague, or whomever you wish (avoid writing about a spouse or another family member; you may feel constrained writing about these people). Write a mini-profile introducing this person to the reader. Describe the subject’s *appearance* as part of your story. Make sure the reader learns about the key aspects of this person’s background, career and life goals. (500-1,000 words) ... (or)

– (*Human interest story; e.g. people doing something interesting.*)

Write a “human interest” report about how one person or more people (2-3 maximum) are engaging with or being affected by an interesting event, a trend or a phenomenon (e.g., global warming; volunteering for OSF; playing fantasy sports; planning for a summer vacation; etc.). Capture a *conversation* in this piece. Explain what the issue is, tell why it is important/interesting, and bring the speakers in your story to life by *describing* how they looked while they spoke, so the reader can visualize them. (500- 1,000 words.)



## ZOOM CRITIQUING FORUM

– **Zoom Critiquing Forum** will be scheduled this week. Details to be added (TBA).

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**WEEK #4:** (April 27 – May 3)

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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #4** (on Moodle)

-- Some thoughts about Writing Exercise #3 – *Human Interest* writing.

### READING:

#### **Online Reading:**

– “**On Writing Well**,” William Zinsser (New York, Harper and Row, 1980):

— Chapter 2 – “**Simplicity**,”

— Chapter 3 – “**Clutter**,”

— Chapter 4 – “**Style**”

— Chapter 13 – “**Bits and Pieces**.”

– *Sample human interest*: “**Mower Power to Him**,” Kelly Benham, St. Petersburg Times (now *Tampa Bay Times*), June 3, 2004.

View: “**Count Our Blessings**,” Anne Lamott, Parade Magazine, 2012.

– View: “**The Girls**,” Ann Hood, Parade Magazine, March 3, 2013.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION:

– **On Moodle**: Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in “Assignments” based on the week’s assigned reading.

### WRITING EXERCISE 2:

– **Submit**: Writing Exercise # 2: Mini profile (or) human interest story (*e.g. people doing something interesting*.)

– **Writing Exercise #2 deadline**: midnight, **Friday, Week 4**.

### CRITIQUING FORUM:

– Critique **Exercise #2** (which will be posted by noon, Saturday). Critique deadline: **Monday midnight**.

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**WEEK #5:** (May 4 - 10)

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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #5** (on Moodle)

– Some thoughts about Writing Exercise 4 – *Writing scenes*.

### READING:

#### **Online Reading:**

– *Sample scene setting*: “**Memory**,” Tracy Kidder; *Literary Journalism*, Norman Sims and Mark Kramer pp. 369-386

– (*Repeated*) “**The Feature Game**,” foreword, Tom Wolfe; *The New Journalism*, Thomas Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, editors (New York: Harper and Row, 1973): pp 3-52.

### DISCUSSION QUESTION:

– **On Moodle**: Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in “Assignments”.



**WRITING EXERCISE: *NO writing assignment is due this week.***

*Preparation -- Two weeks to complete:*

– **Writing Exercise #3** (*Scene-setting story*): Write a story with one or more scenes, based on observation, close listening, and/or face-to-face interviews, that sums up the effects and/or aftermath of a real event or encounter (a meeting, a play or cultural event, a dinner party, a vacation interlude, etc.). Include what you saw and heard and what it means. Please provide an all-three senses (sight, sound, and smell as relevant) description of your scene(s) and include that in the story (500-1,000 words).

**ZOOM CRITIQUING FORUM**

– Zoom Critiquing Forum will be scheduled this week. Details to be added (TBA).

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**WEEK #6:** (May 11 - 17)

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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #6** (on Moodle)

– Some thoughts about Writing Exercise 3 and this course so far.

**READING:**

**Online Reading:**

– "**The Soft Psyche of Josh Logan**"; (excerpts from *The Overreachers*) Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, pp. 65-79.

-- (*Repeated*) Note: "**Key Nonfiction Techniques**," prepared and edited by Paul Steinle.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

– **On Moodle:** Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in "Assignments" based on the week's assigned reading.

**WRITING EXERCISE:**

**Submit** Exercise #3 (*Scene-setting story*).

– **Writing Exercise #3 deadline:** due **Friday, midnight, Week 6.**

**CRITIQUING FORUM:**

– Critique assigned writing -- **Exercise #3** (which will be posted by noon, Saturday). Critique deadline: **Monday midnight.**

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**WEEK #7:** (May 18 - 24)

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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #7** (on Moodle)

–Some thoughts about Exercise 4 – *Immersion* writing.

**READING:**

**Online Reading:**

– *Sample immersion writing:* "**Phoenix to Florida at 25 MPH**," Coyotes: Ted Conover, (New York, Vintage, 1987) Chapter 4, pp. 107-142.

## DISCUSSION QUESTION:

– **On Moodle:** Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in “Assignments” based on the week’s assigned reading.

## WRITING EXERCISE: **No writing assignment is due this week.**

*Preparation -- Two weeks to complete:*

– **Writing Exercise 4 (Immersion/experiential story)** – Describe an important event or incident or activity from the inside out – from your own perspective. Tell us, *in the first person*, about an experience you undertook in which you: (a.) learned something about a new challenge, or success or new environment and (b.) learned something about yourself (e.g., How you reacted to it).

Choose a subject that would be informative to your readers (e.g., what it’s like to skydive; what it’s like to hitchhike to Redding, California; what it’s like to build a Habitat for Humanity home; what it’s like to have an IRS audit; etc.) (500–1,000 words)

## ZOOM CRITIQUING FORUM

– Zoom Critiquing Forum will be scheduled this week. Details to be added (TBA).

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**WEEK #7:** (May 18 - 24)

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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #8** (on Moodle)

-- Some thoughts about your final project and your readership.

## READING

### **Online Reading:**

– “**The Bravest Woman in Seattle**,” Eli Sanders, *The Stranger*, June 15, 2011. *Pulitzer Prize, Feature Writing, 2012*.

## DISCUSSION QUESTION:

– **On Moodle:** Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in “Assignments” based on the week’s assigned reading.

## WRITING EXERCISE:

• **Submit Writing Exercise #4 (Immersion/experiential story)**

– **Exercise #4 deadline:** due **Friday, midnight, Week 7.**

## CRITIQUING FORUM:

– Critique assigned writing -- **Exercise #4** (which will be posted by noon, Saturday). Critique deadline: **Monday midnight.**

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**WEEK #9:** (June 1 -5)

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**INSTRUCTOR VIDEO #9** (on Moodle)

– Some thoughts about Anne Lamott’s “**Bird by Bird**” and wrapping it up.

**VIDEO INTERVIEW:** Ann Lamott

– “How to live a more creative life” Anne Lamott. Anne Lamott talks about writing and creativity.  
<https://www.facebook.com/TED/videos/vb.29092950651/10158810837085652/?type=2&theater>

**READING**

– Text: “**Bird by Bird**,” Anne Lamott (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1994). Complete this text.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:**

– **On Moodle:** Answer the online **Discussion Question** posted in “Assignments” based on the week’s assigned reading by midnight Tuesday, June 2.

**ZOOM CRITIQUING FORUM** – Zoom Critiquing Forum will be scheduled this week. Details to be added (TBA).

**“All’s well that ends well.”** --William Shakespeare, 1623