

Under One Roof

Writing Nonfiction: Essay, Memoir, and the Lives of 2601 — Course Syllabus and Textbook Guide

James Mulhern · Silver Current Press · Taught in person at 2601 Pennsylvania Avenue,
Philadelphia

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The Shape of the Course

Under One Roof is a ten-session, in-person course in writing creative nonfiction for adults. It is built like the building it studies: we enter through the lobby with the place essay, settle into our own rooms with the personal essay and memoir, step into the hallway to write our neighbors, descend into the archive to research the building itself, cross the Parkway to write about art, and climb at last to the roof garden to revise and assemble a collective memoir, *Under One Roof: Lives at 2601*.

Each session pairs one nonfiction genre with short readings linked free online, a chapter of the textbook, handwritten practice in class, discussion, homework, and a possible contribution to the anthology. Sessions run about ninety minutes. There are no grades, and no one is asked to share writing they would rather keep private.

Why 2601? According to the building's association history, 2601 Parkway was designed by Paul Philippe Cret, opened in 1939, and was reported by Architectural Forum to be the third-largest apartment building in the United States under one roof.

Its lobby carries *The History of Shelter*, a tile mural by Frances Serber and Nicholas Marsicano (2601parkway.com/history). The University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives records the building as the work of Cret and Aaron Colish, associated architects, built 1931–1939.

The Four Units

Unit One: The Threshold — Writing Place and Self (Sessions 1 – 3)

We begin where every resident begins: at the door. Three sessions on the place essay, the personal essay, and memoir teach the fundamentals of all nonfiction — the observing eye, the essayist’s “I,” and the double voice of the person who lived it and the person who remembers it.

Unit Two: The Neighbors — Writing Other Lives (Sessions 4 – 6)

From our own rooms we step into the hallway. The lyric essay compresses a life into fragments; the profile renders another person truly; oral history lets residents speak in their own words. Consent, accuracy, and generosity become craft questions, not only ethical ones.

Unit Three: The Building and the City — Research, Art, and Form (Sessions 7 – 9)

The building itself becomes a subject: its architects, its New Deal lobby mural, its neighbors across the Parkway. We practice the researched and braided essay, writing about art, and the “hermit crab” essay that borrows its shell from leases, notices, and maintenance requests.

Unit Four: The Roof Garden — Revision and the Collective Memoir (Session 10)

We climb to the top. Revision as re-seeing, the ethics of publication, and the assembly of our shared anthology, *Under One Roof: Lives at 2601*, closing with a reading for residents.

The Ten Sessions

Session 1. The Lobby — Writing Place

Genre: The Place Essay

Textbook: Chapter 3, “‘Taking Place’: Writing the Physical World”

Reading: Virginia Woolf, Street Haunting: A London Adventure —
[https://www.newberry.org/uploads/files/Street%20Haunting%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.newberry.org/uploads/files/Street%20Haunting%20(1).pdf)

Reading: 2601 Parkway Condominium Association, History of 2601 Parkway —
<https://www.2601parkway.com/history/>

In class: Stand (or sit) for five minutes in one spot in this building — the lobby before the mural, the mailroom, an elevator, a window on your floor. Write a sensory inventory: five sounds, three smells, two textures, one temperature, and one thing no one else would notice. Then write one sentence that begins, This place taught me...

For the anthology: Your place essay is the first possible contribution to our anthology. Keep it; we will return to it in Session 10.

Session 2. Moving Day — The Personal Essay

Genre: The Personal Essay

Textbook: Chapter 8, “The Tradition of the Personal Essay”; Chapter 5, “The Body of Identity”

Reading: Christopher Morley, “Moving,” from Pipefuls (1920) —
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/22699>

Reading: Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928) —
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/73549>

In class: Make a list of ten objects you carried into your apartment on moving day — or wish you had. Circle the one that embarrasses you a little. Write for ten minutes about that object, and let yourself digress wherever it leads. In the last two minutes, write the sentence that begins, But what I was really carrying was...

For the anthology: Many residents arrived at 2601 at a turning point — a retirement, a loss, a new city, a new start. Your moving-day essay may belong in the anthology's first section, Arrivals.

Session 3. Memory's Floor Plan — Memoir and Scene

Genre: Memoir

Textbook: Chapter 1, “The Body of Memory”; Chapter 2, “Writing the Family”

Reading: Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* — opening through the arrival in Philadelphia — <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/148>

In class: Draw the floor plan of a home you lived in before the age of fifteen. Label every room. Mark with an X the place where something happened that you have never forgotten. Now write that scene in the present tense for ten minutes — what you see, hear, smell — as if it is happening now. In the last three minutes, switch to the past tense and the voice of the person you are today.

For the anthology: Consider a companion scene: your first night at 2601. What did the apartment sound like before it was yours?

Session 4. The Elevator — Flash Nonfiction and the Lyric Essay

Genre: Flash Nonfiction & the Lyric Essay

Textbook: Chapter 9, “Innovative Forms: The Wide Variety of Creative Nonfiction”

Reading: Brian Doyle, “Joyas Voladoras” (*The American Scholar*, 2004) — <https://theamericanscholar.org/joyas-volardores/>

Reading: Brevity, “Consider the Platypus: Four Forms—Maybe—of the Lyric Essay” — https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/platypus_lyric/

In class: Thirteen Floors. Write thirteen numbered fragments of one to three sentences each, one for each floor of the building. Each fragment is a single image, fact, overheard line, or memory. Do not explain how they connect. Fragment 13 should arrive at the roof — literally or not.

For the anthology: Flash pieces are the anthology's connective tissue — short windows between longer memoirs. Keep every fragment you like.

Session 5. Across the Hall — The Profile and the Portrait

Genre: The Profile & Literary Journalism

Textbook: Chapter 11, “The Particular Challenges of Creative Nonfiction”

Reading: Gay Talese, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold” (Esquire, April 1966) — <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a638/frank-sinatra-has-a-cold-gay-talese/>

In class: Write a portrait of someone you knew well who has died or whom you have not seen in many years — not a neighbor. Give us three things: one gesture, one sentence they always said, and one object you associate with them. Let the reader infer the rest.

For the anthology: The anthology’s second section, Neighbors, will hold portraits — but only of residents who have read and approved them.

Session 6. Voices of 2601 — Oral History and the Interview

Genre: Oral History & the Interview

Textbook: Chapter 4, “Gathering the Threads of History”

Reading: Library of Congress, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1940 — <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection/>

Reading: WFMT, The Studs Terkel Radio Archive — <https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/>

In class: Paired interviews. With a partner, take turns interviewing for eight minutes each using a single opening question: Tell me about the first place you ever lived that was yours. Ask only follow-up questions that begin with what, how, or tell me more. Take notes by hand. Then write a 150-word monologue in your partner’s voice and read it back to them for corrections.

For the anthology: With permission, oral histories become the heart of Under One Roof: residents telling the building’s story in their own words.

Session 7. The Building’s Biography — The Researched and Braided Essay

Genre: The Researched & Braided Essay

Textbook: Chapter 7, “Glorious Facts: Research and the Research Essay”

Reading: University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives, Aaron Colish Finding Aid — including the 2601 Parkway Apartments —

https://www.design.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Colish_216.pdf

Reading: 2601 Parkway Condominium Association, History of 2601 Parkway — <https://www.2601parkway.com/history/>

Reading: The Brevity Blog, “Braids: A Braided Essay About Braids & Braided Essays” — <https://brevity.wordpress.com/2021/04/26/braided-essays/>

In class: Draw three columns. Label them Me, The Building, and The World. Under each, list five dates or moments — your life, 2601’s history (1939 opening, the lobby mural, the 2020 green roof), and world events. Draw lines where they touch. Then write one page alternating between two columns, a paragraph at a time.

For the anthology: The anthology’s third section, The Building, braids residents’ lives with the story of 2601 itself.

Session 8. Across the Parkway — Writing the Arts

Genre: Ekphrasis & the Critical Essay

Textbook: Chapter 6, “Writing the Arts”

Reading: Rainer Maria Rilke, Auguste Rodin, trans. Jessie Lemont and Hans Trausil — <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45605/45605-h/45605-h.htm>

Reading: Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Rodin Museum — <https://www.philamuseum.org/rodin-museum>

In class: Choose one panel of the lobby mural — or a single work of art you love. Write for five minutes describing only what you can see, no interpretation. Then write for five minutes about what it reminds you of in your own life. Finally, write three sentences that bring the two together.

For the anthology: Essays on the mural and the neighborhood’s art belong to the anthology’s The Building section, beside the braided essays.

Session 9. Notices on the Bulletin Board — The Hermit Crab Essay

Genre: The Hermit Crab & Found-Form Essay

Textbook: Chapter 9, “Innovative Forms”; Chapter 10, “Mixed-Media, Cross-Genre, Hybrid, and Digital Works”

Reading: Nicole Cyrus, “Hairy Credentials” (Brevity) — <https://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/hairy-credentials/>

Reading: Brevity, “The Shared Space Between Reader and Writer” — <https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/the-shared-space/>

In class: Choose a building form: a maintenance request, a lobby notice, a package-delivery slip, a move-in checklist, or a lease clause. Using its exact headings and language, write a piece of memoir inside it. Nature of problem. Location. Date first noticed. Is entry permitted when you are not home?

For the anthology: A hermit crab piece in the shape of a building form can open or close the anthology — a lobby notice announcing the book itself, perhaps.

Session 10. The Roof Garden — Revision and the Collective Memoir

Genre: Revision & the Anthology

Textbook: Chapter 13, “The Writing Process and Revision”; Chapter 14, “The Power of Writing Communities”; Chapter 15, “Publishing Your Creative Nonfiction”

Reading: Michel de Montaigne, “Of Repentance,” trans. Charles Cotton, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt — <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3594>

In class: Take the piece you brought. Write its true subject in one sentence at the top of the page. Then cut its first paragraph and read what is left. Finally, write a new last sentence — one that looks out, the way the view does from the roof.

For the anthology: Under One Roof: Lives at 2601 — four sections (Arrivals, Neighbors, The Building, The View from the Roof), assembled by the class, shared only with every contributor’s consent.

The Textbook

Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*, 3rd ed. McGraw Hill, 2019. 304 pages.

<https://www.mheducation.com/highered/mhp/product/tell-slant-third-edition.html>

Why this book: its Part I, “Unearthing Your Material,” moves through memory, family, place, history, identity, the arts, and research — nearly the path of our sessions. Part II teaches the personal essay and the innovative forms we practice, including the hermit crab essay, a term Brenda Miller coined. Its chapter on the particular challenges of creative nonfiction treats truth and writing about real people, essential for a memoir of neighbors. Each chapter closes with prompts, and the book ends with model essays and chapters on revision, writing communities, and publishing.

Optional second book for memoir: Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

Access: every session’s primary readings are linked free online, so no one is shut out without the textbook. Used copies of the third or second edition work well.

Writing Our Neighbors

Consent first. No living resident is named, quoted, or recognizably described beyond our classroom without written permission.

Their words, their approval. Every person interviewed reads or hears the finished piece first and may ask for changes.

The right to withdraw. Anyone may withdraw their story, or a story about them, before the anthology is shared.

Change names when asked. Pseudonyms are welcome; composite characters must be disclosed.

Accuracy is kindness. Check names, dates, and quotations. When sources disagree, say so.

Handle the past with care. Private matters of former residents stay out of print unless families agree or the facts are a matter of careful public record.

The 2601 Anthology

Four sections: Arrivals (Sessions 1–3), Neighbors (Sessions 4–6), The Building (Sessions 7–9), and The View from the Roof (Session 10). Writers may submit one to three pieces of up to about 2,000 words each, with a signed consent form for every

living person named or quoted. If the class wishes, the course closes with a reading for residents, family, and friends.

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