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 in Philadelphia

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The Shape of the Course

Under One Roof is a twelve-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, read how other writers have told the life of a building, and climb at last to the roof garden to revise one essay and learn exactly how to send it out for publication.

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 note on where that kind of writing is published. 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 – 10)

The building itself becomes a subject: its architects, its 1940 ceramic 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 — and then we read how other writers have told the whole life of a building, from a Lower East Side tenement to a Philadelphia apartment house.

Unit Four: The Roof Garden — Revision and Sending It Out (Sessions 11 – 12)

We climb to the top. Each writer chooses one essay to carry forward, learns to revise it alone, and learns exactly how the world of magazines and journals works — where true stories are published, how to read guidelines, how to write a cover letter, and how to keep going after a rejection. After the course, each writer revises that essay independently and sends it out. At the last session we also talk together about whether a follow-up course on a possible collection about 2601 would interest the group.

The Twelve 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

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…*

Where this can go: Where a place essay can go: *The Sun*'s Readers Write (on a posted topic), *Philadelphia Stories*, and, if the piece is warm, the *Christian Science Monitor*'s Home Forum. Keep this essay: it is the first candidate for the one piece you will revise and send out after the course. And keep every page you write about 2601 in its own folder — if the class decides at the end to consider a follow-up course on a possible collection about the building, those pages are where it would begin.

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…*

Where this can go: Where a personal essay can go: *The Sun*'s essay pages, *Under the Gum Tree*, and *Hippocampus Magazine*. Many residents arrived at 2601 at a turning point — a retirement, a loss, a new city, a new start. A moving-day essay is one of the strongest candidates for the piece you send out.

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.

Where this can go: Where a memoir scene can go: *Narratively*'s The Personals, *Hippocampus*, and — for writers over fifty or sixty — *Passager* and *Persimmon Tree*. 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: Randon Billings Noble (*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.

Where this can go: Where flash can go: *Brevity* (750 words or fewer), *Beautiful Things* (250 or fewer), *Tiny Love Stories* and *Reader's Digest* (100 words), and *Hippocampus*'s flash section. Short forms are the most realistic first submissions. 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.

Where this can go: Where a profile can go: *Broad Street Review* and *Philadelphia Stories* — but a portrait of a neighbor goes out only after that neighbor has read it and signed the consent form. Keep your 2601 portraits in the folder, too.

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.

Where this can go: Where an oral history can go: a local, place-centered outlet such as *Hidden City Philadelphia* (by pitch), and only with the speaker's written approval of the final text. Residents telling the building's story in their own words are the pages that most belong in the 2601 folder.

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.

Where this can go: Where a researched essay about 2601 can go: *Hidden City Philadelphia* (architecture and urban history), *Broad Street Review*, and literary journals such as *River Teeth* and *Fourth Genre*. A braided essay about this building is one of the best pieces this course can produce.

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.

Where this can go: Where writing about art can go: *Broad Street Review*, which covers Philadelphia arts and culture, and the *Christian Science Monitor*'s Home Forum for a gentle, personal piece about a work of art.

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: Brenda Miller (*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?*

Where this can go: Where a hermit crab essay can go: *Brevity*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Under the Gum Tree*. Editors like a borrowed form that is fully earned. Now look back over all nine sessions: which piece do you most want to carry forward?

Session 10. Other Roofs — How Writers Tell the Story of a Building

Genre: The Building Biography

Textbook: Chapter 4, “Gathering the Threads of History”; Chapter 7, “Glorious Facts: Research and the Research Essay”

Reading: Tenement Museum, “97 Orchard Street” — https://www.tenement.org/explore/97-orchard-street/

Reading: Hidden City Philadelphia, “St. James the Greatest” — https://hiddencityphila.org/2012/02/st-james-the-greatest/

Reading: Archiveadelphia, “The Tiles and Tribulations of 2601 Parkway” — https://archiveadelphia.substack.com/p/the-tiles-and-tribulations-of-2601

In class: Choose one year in the life of 2601 — 1939, when it opened; 1940, when the mural went up; or a year you remember. Write the building on one ordinary day of that year: who comes through the lobby, what the elevators sound like, what is new, what is ending. Then list three residents, past or present, whose stories the building would want told first.

Where this can go: Where a building story can go: *Hidden City Philadelphia* (by pitch to its editorial director) and *Broad Street Review*. A building biography of 2601, told by many residents, is exactly the kind of project a follow-up course could take up — if the class decides it wants one. Keep these pages in your 2601 folder.

Session 11. The Roof Garden — Revision and Choosing a Home

Genre: Revision & the Literary Marketplace

Textbook: Chapter 13, “The Writing Process and Revision”; 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

Reading: Under One Roof, “Sending Your Work Out” — publishing.html

Reading: Poets & Writers, “Literary Magazines” guide and database — https://www.pw.org/content/literary_magazines

In class: Take the piece you brought. Write its *true subject* in one sentence at the top of the page. Cut its first paragraph and read what is left. Write a new last sentence — one that looks out, the way the view does from the roof. Finally, describe the essay in one line the way an editor would see it: *a 900-word personal essay about…*

Where this can go: This is the start of the course’s publication project. After Session 12, each writer revises this essay independently and sends it out to well-matched venues. No one is required to submit; everyone will know exactly how.

Session 12. The Mailroom — Sending It Out

Genre: The Submission

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

Reading: Submittable, “How Can I Submit?” — https://submittable.help/en/articles/904856-how-can-i-submit

Reading: *The Sun*, Readers Write — upcoming topics — https://www.thesunmagazine.org/submit/readers-write

Reading: Under One Roof, Sending It Out — the course submission guide — handouts/Under_One_Roof_Sending_It_Out_Submission_Guide_2026-09-27.pdf

In class: Write the cover letter for the first venue on your list, in no more than 120 words: greeting, the essay’s title, genre, and word count, a note if it is a simultaneous submission, a two-line bio, thanks. Then set up your tracking sheet with five rows — one for each venue you chose.

Where this can go: Each writer leaves with one revised essay, five matched venues, a cover letter, a bio, and a tracking sheet. Whether the class continues with a follow-up course on a possible 2601 collection is something we decide together at this session.

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).

Further reading: the handout Further Reading for Writers of Creative Nonfiction lists guides to the craft of nonfiction and memoir, books on the writing process and revision, and anthologies of every kind of essay, each keyed to the sessions it supports.

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 it is shared or submitted anywhere.

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 Publication Project

In Session 10 each writer chooses one essay from the course to carry forward. Sessions 11 and 12 teach revision and the whole submission process: where true stories are published, how to read guidelines, how to format a manuscript, how to write a cover letter and bio, how to use Submittable, how to track submissions, and how to handle rejection and acceptance.

After the course, each writer revises the essay independently (about four weeks) and, if they wish, sends it to well-matched venues. Submitting is never required. The printable guide Sending It Out, and the course page oneroof.silvercurrentpress.com/publishing.html, give the full venue directory, sample cover letters and bios, and a tracking sheet. A second handout, Where to Submit Each Course Essay, lists at least five venues for every essay written in the course, with exactly how to adapt each essay for each venue, the editors, and sample letters.

Before anything is submitted, every living neighbor named or recognizable in the essay must have read it and signed the consent form.

Student Resource PDFs

Use these optional handouts alongside the course. They are available from the syllabus page and the main course menu; click a title below to open its PDF. *The Lives Within the Walls* also has an editable Word edition on the website.

Where to Submit Each Course Essay (PDF)

Further Reading for Writers of Creative Nonfiction (PDF)

The Lives Within the Walls: Reading Buildings, Shaping True Stories (PDF)

A Possible 2601 Collection

This course does not commit anyone to a book. Depending on how the course goes, at the last session we will decide together whether the group would like a follow-up course devoted to writing a collection about 2601, and what exactly that collection would be about. Meanwhile, keep every page you write about the building in its own folder. If the class wishes, the last session closes with a reading, volunteers only.

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