

Green Ink: How to Write about Nature in The Forest City

Course Outline

Description:

Nature writing is an ancient literary form that was revived by the environmental movement of the 1960s. Now, with the climate and environment frequently in the headlines, writing about nature has taken on a new urgency. This course recognizes there is a heightened public awareness about the impact of human behavior on the natural environment as well as a desire to understand the importance of nature to our physical and mental wellbeing. Green Ink allows participants to deepen their creative relationship with the natural world of London, the Forest City. This course will renew your sense of place in nature through personal experiences, inspired readings, wanderings, and wonderings.

To hone your writing skills you will observe nature up close and explore the importance of capturing sights, smells, tastes, sounds and experiences. We will review the history of the Canadian wilderness in literature. Participants will also be invited to take part in a choice of optional field trips from wildlife rehab and bird research centres to local woods, ponds and spots along the Thames River where we will take a tour and then work (weather permitting) on an open-air writing exercise. You could also choose to work on a personally important eco-system such as your own balcony or backyard.

Classes will consist of discussions, in-class readings and a wide variety of writing exercises. You will also keep a reader/writer journal as you engage in nature and in readings on the environment and natural world.

Course Goals:

This course gives you hands-on experience in nature writing through the use of journal entries that follow the **ALERT** process:

ASK questions,

LISTEN for answers

EXPLORE to understand

REFLECT on what you learn

TRANSFORM your discoveries into written work that will endure.

Course Objectives: At the completion of this course, the student will be able to:

- Understand the genre of nature-writing, and its literary, historical and environmental contexts. The emphasis will be on Canadian content but examples from the U.S and overseas will also be discussed
- Explore and deepen our understanding of and relationship with nature through in-the-

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- field experiences.
- Learn to become attentive to the role of nature in our lives.
 - Understand the importance of nature in fiction.
 - Discuss how to find the people with a story to tell to “humanize” a scientific story and paint a more colourful, memorable picture in print.
 - Review the basics of a good piece of writing: snappy lead, confident tone, strong structure that ends with a punch.
 - Discuss story structure with a Beginning, Middle and End.
 - Learn how to write in the active voice and avoid jargon.
 - Find potential non-profit and media outlets for nature writing and learn how to query.
 - Develop the ability to give and receive feedback in a supportive environment.

This hands-on class includes optional field trips to London sites. Through written exercises and individual feedback, the course will teach students how to turn their personal experiences and observations into vivid, descriptive prose. The course will examine some classic examples of the nature writing genre.

Who Should Attend

Nature-lovers, environmentalists, local food activists and gardeners, birders and other outdoor enthusiasts with an interest in writing about their experiences and observations; anyone who wants to explore a closer creative relationship with nature. Both novice and experienced writers are welcome. Both fiction and non-fiction writers are welcome. This course counts towards the certificate in Creative Writing.

Attendance Requirements:

Students can only miss one class in order to receive a “complete” for this course unless you have prior approval from the Instructor. Completion reports can be downloaded through my WCS. Class size is limited to 15 students.

Code of Student Conduct

The purpose of the Code of Student Conduct is to define the general standard of conduct expected of students registered at Western University, provide examples of behaviour that constitutes a breach of this standard of conduct, provide examples of sanctions that may be imposed, and set out the disciplinary procedures that the University will follow. For the complete Code of Student Conduct: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/board/code.pdf>

Course Schedule:

Week 1: What is Nature writing?

Discover some of the classic and contemporary Canadian nature writers. We will discuss the

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concept of wilderness and its importance to the Canadian psyche starting with Northrop Frye's thesis. We will discuss course expectations, potential story resources and hone in on each student's particular areas of interest. We will start weekly journal exercises. There will be a description of field trips options and sign-up sheets. You will learn about the naturalists who will come to speak in our class. It is also possible to work on an eco-system of interest to you as close as your own backyard. We will do some exercises on sensory detail in nature writing. We will discuss the types of stories that you can do including blog posts, essays, editorials, articles or public relations and advertising copy. Come prepared to write!

Week 2: Building Blocks of Nature Writing

Review how to write a story outline and include a beginning, middle and end. Discuss why good quotes are so important to a story and learn how to ask the right questions that get the best quotes. Discuss how to craft a strong lead and snappy ending so that a story has balance. If applicable, map out the research required for your story. Discuss the importance of edits and rewrites. Review the value of photographs in nature writing work – how they help tell a story. Discuss the importance of the ALERT process in nature writing:

ASK questions,

LISTEN for answers

EXPLORE to understand

REFLECT on what you learn

TRANSFORM your discoveries into written work that will endure.

We will use a variety of active learning techniques, in addition to field trips, to improve our powers of observation. It is useful to find out something about the site's history, the natural or the built environment that exists there, and gather insights, either by interviews or by readings. Are there other lives that were connected with your place? Try to imagine who lived here and their lifestyle. Carefully observe details about the plants and other creatures that live there. You want to find details about your place from what you see, smell, hear, feel, and pass on that information to your reader.

Apprentice yourself to your place. Try to learn from it and take careful notes. Look for things that you want to know more about. How old are the trees that are there? How did they get planted? Are there any non-native trees growing there? Who might have planted them? Is the vegetation different than it would have been fifty years ago, or a hundred years ago? If there are buildings, where did the material to build them come from? Who else has used the site, and what did it mean to them? What is happening to the site today? Is it changing? In what ways? Is this good or bad?

There will be a discussion about optional field trips that include, but are not limited, to the following:

OPTIONAL FIELD TRIPS:

Huron Street Woods

Meet the leader at the back of the parking lot for the playing fields to the north of the sewage

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treatment plant on Adelaide St North at Kipps Lane. We will be enjoying spring birds, flowers and wildlife.

Circle R Ranch Wildflower Walk

Meet at the main entrance on Carriage Rd for directions to parking. This location offers some unique opportunities to view native flower species.

Kains Woods Environmentally Significant Area

We will watch for spring wildflowers, migrating birds, and ancient river terraces. This is a hilly area and some sections of the trail are very steep. Directions: Follow Oxford St west from Hyde Park Rd; at the first lights after crossing the river, turn right onto Kains Rd and follow it as it curves left. Turn right onto Riverbend Rd and watch for the ESA entrance beside house number 1888. Park on the street.

Whimbrel Watch at Port Stanley

Meet the leader by Mackie's Restaurant in Port Stanley. We will look for migrating shorebirds and resident bird species in Port Stanley Harbour and at the sewage lagoons.

Thames Valley Trail North of Thorndale Road.

Meet at the parking area on Plover Mills Rd, just east of Valleyview Rd before you get to the bridge (southeast corner of Valleyview Rd and Plover Mills Rd). The 911 sign reads 16608. We will walk south along the Thames Valley Trail through fields and woods, looking at late spring flowering shrubs and trees and birds. Wear sturdy footwear; the trail may be wet in sections.

Week 3: Nature in Literature

Speaker night

Nature writers blend first-person narration and observation into narrative non-fiction. We will discuss science and environmental writing. We will explore the craft of fiction and nature. Discover some of the classic nature writers including works by Canadians including Farley Mowat, Sharon Butala, R.D. Lawrence, Graeme Gibson and Margaret Atwood – writers who changed the way we look at our natural world. Discuss the concept of wilderness and its importance to the Canadian psyche starting with Northrop Frye's thesis. We will discuss the impact of American authors including Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey and Wallace Stegner and their contribution to understanding nature on our shared continent.

Week 4: Nature Reflections

Speaker night

Tonight we will reflect on what you have learned from your field trip observations and the story you would like to tell about your place. We will discuss where you can go for any additional resources you need to tell your story. For example, your research might require a visit to the library or a phone call to the City of London, the Upper Thames Regional Association, Million Trees London, the Ontario Wildlife Service, to an expert at Western University or some other agency that has nature specialists. As you write, look for chances to include sensory details from your journals that will help the reader fully experience your place.

Week 5: Transformative Green Ink

Speaker night

Tonight we will transform our observations into copy. For students who have an interest in making their nature observations into copy, it is important to understand the basics of blog posts and on-line submissions. Most media outlets require brief and succinct written work. Even newspapers “chunk up” larger stories into bite size morsels. We will learn how to take larger stories and cut them into size for a variety of blogs and social media applications. Learn how to make your words count. The nature writing exercise tonight is to create a Public Service Announcement (PSA) to encourage visitation or some other “call to action” for your site.

Week 6: Take Flight with Nature Stories

In-class workshop. Everyone will read from their work. Review resource sheets. And most importantly – discuss where you take your writing from here to get published – or to get closer to your favourite nature site in The Forest City. **Enjoy some local food treats tonight.**