As a teacher of creative nonfiction, I read a great deal of student writing in which the subject of nearly every sentence is “I,” as in “I learned this.” Among the pitfalls of the first-person singular, writes Tracy Kidder in his introduction to *The Best American Essays 1994*, is that “Unearned revelations flourish.” Like Kidder, I urge my students not to be beguiled by the first person. To take oneself out of one’s own sentences—to be the eye behind the camera instead of the figure in front of it—reflects a growing engagement with the wider world, a waning sense of the writer’s own importance vis-à-vis that world. Instantly, the writing becomes more interesting to read.

What follows is a statement that I myself would chafe at being asked to read. That’s not a complaint: it seems to me a worthwhile, even necessary, exercise to evaluate one’s progress, achievements and goals every few years, especially at the moment of being considered for a permanent place in a highly select academic community. What I wish to say is that I’m grateful to those of you about to embark on a 27-page document ([Ed. note] boiled down to 4 pages for the present purpose) in which the subject, stated or implied, of nearly every sentence is “I.” The revelations feel to me as if they were earned, but you will be the best judges of that.

I. Teaching

*Philosophy*

I’ll describe my philosophy of teaching in general then outline my thoughts on creative writing. As I wrote in my third-year review statement, I believe in salvation by art. Art’s insights into human emotion and psychology are often more durable and profound than those yielded by therapy; its ability to unsettle our certainties or assuage our fears can be more effective than the nightly news. To read well and to write precisely—especially in the genre of nonfiction—requires a kind of close attention to real people and events. It’s not possible to pay attention and not be changed. Marilynne Robinson, in an essay titled “Hallowed Be Your Name,” writes, “[I]t is reverent attention to this world that teaches us, and teaches us again, the imperatives of ethical refinement.”
My philosophy is crafted from observing, listening and reading. It remains constant and cohesive even as my methods continue to evolve. Its centerpiece is immersion. In literature and creative writing courses, I typically assign 100-200 pages of reading every week. Texts range from the canonical (*The Education of Henry Adams*) to the cutting edge (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers). In class, I tend to work synecdochically, carefully analyzing a few passages in order to illuminate the whole. Theory is front-loaded in all of my courses, even creative writing. I want my students to feel overwhelmed—as if they’re being asked to read more than they can follow or digest. For most, it is at the point of acute, even painful, sensory saturation and intellectual overload that real learning takes place.

As a principle and as a method, immersion pushes against the notion that literary texts are codes to be cracked. It suggests that something be gained from groping around in the dark without a map or instructions. If nothing else, students learn the topology of darkness. Presented with a difficult text, students tend to ask me, “What does it mean? Is it right or wrong? Do I have to read all 432 pages to pass the test?” Instead, I push them to ask themselves—as Susan Sontag urges in *Against Interpretation*—“What is this? And why does it make me feel this way?” I want them to exercise their (often atrophied) descriptive powers before flexing their (often formidable) interpretive muscles. (And yes, they have to read all 432 pages.)

As for creative writing, I believe it *can* be taught. That it can’t is a commonplace, not just among the faculty of English departments (unlike Colgate’s) that are hostile to creative writing but even among writing teachers themselves. It may serve as a handy excuse for self-indulgence or laziness: if writing can’t be taught, why bother?

The myth that creative writing can’t be taught lends itself to harmful misconceptions. Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice, writing recently in the Modern Language Association journal, *Profession*, list some of these misconceptions:

- The creative writing teacher serves only as a role model or mentor (or, worse, an idol).
- The creative writing classroom privileges artistic production over intellectual development.
- Creative writing is a romantic pursuit that cannot take place within the confines of a classroom.

In truth, creative writing is a distinct, if not time-honored, field with its own theories, philosophies, methodologies, and pedagogies that flow from the related fields of literature, composition, and rhetoric. Every year, the venerable Association of Writers and Writing Programs publishes a bound booklet of hundreds of pedagogy papers. What probably can’t be taught (or even, perhaps, defined) is
talent. And talent is roughly equal to that thing that can’t be taught in any classroom, regardless of subject matter: a kind of hunger for—and humility in the presence of—learning that eventually becomes wisdom.

Writing is a voyage of discovery, as Wallace Stegner writes in *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*. The writing teacher is the ship’s captain or expedition leader: the one in possession of the compass, tools and maps; the one who’s sailed this particular ocean or crossed those mountains before, if under different circumstances; the one with the most at stake in the venture’s success.

I teach creative writing not just because I love writing, but because I love teaching. In their *Profession* article, Ritter and Vanderslice quote Wendy Bishop, who says, “I teach writing precisely because I love these two intimately connected activities. Some days I am a writer who teaches (WT) and on the others, I am a teacher who writes (TW) but inevitably, I am one or the other.” Just so.

My creative writing pedagogy flows from these beliefs:

- Like literature students, creative writing students need to read deeply and widely.
- Students need to write as often as possible. When they’re starting out, it’s better for them to write lots of short pieces than a few long ones.
- Students often learn best by imitating work they admire—even satirizing what they do not.
- Students need to identify, in their own work and that of others, what is successful and what falls short, and why.
- Students need to revise early and often, and they need to understand the difference between revising (literally “re-seeing”) and proofreading or editing.
- Students need to grasp the fundamentals of written English before they can subvert, deconstruct, or deliberately flout those rules.
- Students need to be conversant in the tradition, terminology and techniques of the genre or form they are studying.
- As students advance, they need to be exposed to more of the theory, philosophy and debates regarding their genre.

As for the notion that creative writing courses privilege artistic production over intellectual development, I can’t take it seriously. Intellect is the lifeblood of art; there’s no point in positing some kind of hierarchy, or even hostility, between them. The creative writing classroom is where writers get their tools and instructions. It’s where ideas get aired, analyzed, discarded, or filed away for future use. When the creative writing classroom becomes the creative writing workshop, it is a space for constructive critiques of work composed elsewhere. The private becomes public and, in the process,
approaches the status of art. In the creative writing workshop, students learn what few writers can learn on their own, which is how to write for an audience.

**Goals & Methods**

In all of my courses, my approach is one of rigor tempered by kindness. My students often say I ask a great deal of them, and that I’m a hard grader. Even so, I’m familiar at first hand with the havoc wrought by the unforeseen, especially in the lives of college students. On the first day, I tell my students I expect them to attend every class, to be on time, to be prepared, and to hand in the work when it’s due. In practice, I usually overlook a couple of unexcused absences per student, and I say yes to one or two requests for extensions.

Because I believe that the best work happens during revision, I encourage my students to hand in their essays before the deadline. I comment on them as thoroughly as I can, then return them via e-mail or, if there’s time, in a face-to-face meeting. After a paper has received a grade, I do not allow students to rewrite it for a higher one. This policy of disallowing post-grade revision discourages students from handing in a rough draft at deadline time; it also prevents them from writing to a certain grade rather than writing the best paper they can.

All of my courses are discussion-based, although I occasionally lecture on background for a few minutes at the beginning of class. I continue to work on shaping discussions that are flexible enough to pursue a tantalizing line of thought without getting derailed. More importantly, I try to lead every discussion to a particular destination, wrapping it up in a meaningful way when class is over.

I require research in all of my courses except for CORE, where the demands of the syllabus keep the class trained more closely on the texts. I teach my literature students how to look up articles in library journals, and I ask my creative writing students to go beyond the boundaries of the library or Google by conducting original research or interviews.