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Retired from 26 years of teaching

**Topic:** Creative Nonfiction and the power of writing the past: how four Amherst College men remembered JFK's Last Speech...50 years later

**Intended audience:** college students/graduate students in advanced writing classes, particularly memoir writing the personal essay, creative nonfiction.

**Precis:** As Stephen Dobyns writes in *Best Words, Best Order*, "We write in part to discover why we are writing. The work begins in the intuition, and by writing and learning about what we have written, we carry that intuition into consciousness." Fifty years after the event, four Amherst College men were asked to remember and reflect in writing on a day that changed their lives. Examining how they approached that telling can teach us a lot about writing about the past: structural choices, uses of ethos, pathos and logos, the power of examples, addressing the tricks of memory, and the drive to make meaning, over time, from significant moments. This assignment asks the student to thoughtfully explore and contrast the four memoirs and comparatively examine the effects of choices made by the authors. To what extent did it seem intuition propelled the choices? To what extent does a reader question the memories recounted? How did the men draw upon sensory detail selectively to support their accounts? How did each author glean meaning from their memories? Which approach among the four was more effective, and why?

**Suggested Duration:** Three class periods/perhaps two weeks for writing the paper

1. Introduction of the material and criteria
2. Coming back to the class with discussion, questions, arguments—selecting which aspects of the essays to examine.
3. Bringing in or posting a completed written response sharing with the class, debriefing.

**Permission:** Jan Worth-Nelson grants solely to Reunion '64, Inc. and the JFK: The Last Speech project the right to republish this lesson plan in any form. Jan Worth-Nelson retains ownership of the material, except of course that included in the Dobyns, Perl and Schwartz books.

**Exercise/Assignment:**

Sources: Bicknell, Neil; Mills, Roger; and Worth-Nelson, Jan: *JFK: The Last Speech*. Mascot Books, 2018.

specifically, “Part One, Chapter One,” pp. 13-36

Part Four: Kennedy on Campus, pp. 67-96.

Part Two, Chapter Six, “Doing The Work He Couldn’t Complete,” pp. 113-166.

Dobyns, Stephen. *Best Words: Best Order*. Palgrave: 2003.

Perl, Sondra and Schwartz, Mimi. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*. especially pp. 80-84 “Twenty Ways to Talk About Creative Nonfiction.”

### **Desired Outcome:**

A written response of 2,000-3000 words in which the student demonstrates through use of quotes, examples, analysis, and reflections an ability to examine pathos, logos and ethos strategies, the pros and cons of “creative nonfiction,” evidence that the writer has examined the effect of each Amherst man’s narrative choices, compared their relative effects, and come to some conclusion or meaning.

### **The Assignment:**

*“There are two worlds: the world that we can measure with line and rule, and the world that we feel with our hearts and imagination. To be sensible of the truth of only one of these is to know truth by halves”—Leigh Hunt, quoted in Perl and Schwartz, Ch. 1.*

Although Amherst students of 1963 were grilled in the requirements of academic writing, the four essays that form the crux of this assignment are not academic—they are personal accounts of how a set of powerful events in their youth affected these men and how those events created ripple effects into their old age. The four essays thus provide a rich source of material on the power of memory, how they choose to write about their lives still in progress, and how they use writing to make meaning of their lives.

The paper, of 2,000-3,000 words, should roughly follow the following structure:

--Introduction: A summary introduction setting out the chief aspects of the four stories, the history of the essays, and the details of the JFK event.

--Development: A section summarizing and setting out the criteria used by the each of the four writers to examine the four essays.

--Analysis: The writer further assesses in four parts the strategies implemented by each Amherst essay writers, exploring the effect of those choices.

--Evaluation: The writer comes to some conclusions about the varying strategies chosen by each Amherst writer and what can be learned about the enduring effects of

powerful events and the ongoing meaning each writer attempts to harvest from their memories.

Questions that might be examined in the paper:

--Why did Ted Nelson choose to tell a humorous story about his Peace Corps service in which he self-deprecates over trying to kill a chicken? What is the effect of this narrative on the overall message of the memoir? Was this a strategy of pathos? Did it advance the overall impact of Nelson's story? What does that have to do with his overall narrative about his life as an activist?

--Steve Downs tells his own story as a peace activist, and how he began to use his law license but ultimately comes around to telling the story of Yassin, an Iraqi man who was accused of terrorism. Why does Downs tell Yassin's story and how does it function in his shaping of the memoir? What does this have to do with JFK?

--After detailing the travels and professional events of his youth and how he ended up in El Salvador, journalist Eugene Palumbo explains in some length for the reader the history of his wife Guadalupe. Why does he do this? How does it connect with JFK? How does it connect with Robert Frost? As memoir, how does it work for you?

--What is it about George Wanlass's essay, in which he conveys in detail his life as a rancher and art collector, that propels the narrative begun by JFK? What understanding do you come to about Wanlass as he relates his love of art and art collecting?