Students often read varied and interesting texts in school: stories, poems, plays, speeches, histories, memoirs, accounts of explorations and discoveries, lives of famous people. But what they write tends to be much more limited—usually just paragraphs or brief essays summarizing or analyzing what they've read. As a result students often come to see school writing as dull and formulaic, unconnected to what they actually care about. (Or at least this is what many of the freshmen in my college writing classes tell me.) Even those occasional moments when students are asked to compose a story or poem can sometimes seem only to underline the distinction between the fun of creative writing and the routine of most school work.

In this seminar we will try to break down the opposition between creative and school writing by looking at what is sometimes called the “fourth genre” of literature. Creative nonfiction is writing about facts—about real people, things, and events. But it is also writing that aims to be as engaging as fiction. The voice of the writer is key. We read a piece of creative nonfiction not only for what it tells us about its subject but also for what we can learn about its author.

We'll approach our study of creative nonfiction in two ways. First, we’ll read and discuss some of the best nonfiction writers at work today—authors like Joyce Carol Oates, Roxanne Gay, Oliver Sacks, Atul Gawande, Ta Nehisi Coates, and Naomi Wolf. Second, I’ll ask you to try your own hand at writing a few brief pieces of creative nonfiction, so you get a sense of what it feels like. (You'll do most of this writing in class.) We'll use Bird by Bird, Anne Lamott's wonderful book about the process of writing, as our guide for these exercises.

Most pieces of creative nonfiction are rooted in either the author’s own experiences (personal narratives), their observations of events (reporting), their conversations with others (interviews or profiles), or their responses to things they've read or watched or listened to (criticism). We can ask students in all grades to experiment with these four kinds of writing—to write about things they've done or seen, or about other people or books that interest them. The challenge is to help them do so in lively and imaginative ways. I will thus encourage seminar participants to develop a class unit by first assembling a set of nonfiction readings that will speak to the interests of their students (much as I will look for readings that engage us), and then by scaffolding a set of assignments that guide students in writing their own pieces of creative nonfiction.