“Easy reading is damn hard writing.” – Nathaniel Hawthorne

“Writing isn’t hard work, it’s a nightmare. Coal mining is hard work. This is a nightmare. There’s a tremendous uncertainty that’s built into the profession, a sustained level of doubt that supports you in some way. A good doctor isn’t in a battle with his work. In most professions there’s a beginning, a middle, and an end. With writing, it’s always beginning again. Temperamentally, we need that newness…” – Philip Roth

Course Overview
Roth and Hawthorne get at something central to writing: that which is fun doesn’t appear so, and that which appears so, isn’t. Those passages that zip up the spine, the books you forever treasure—they’re almost always the result of a lot of pacing, a lot of snacking, and a lot of rewriting. The purpose of this class is to channel that desperation, to use it to rework life into words. To embrace uncertainty, to capture “that newness” we often feel when we chance upon an idea, and to preserve it into fresh, invigorating poetry and prose. We’ll read writers known to be fun and casual, exciting even. We’ll pay attention to pacing and allusion, to vernacular language and everyday imagery, and to the work habits of the writers we love. We’ll learn to crave revision.

We will focus on poetry during the first half of the semester, and then we will move on to fiction. However, this is not a clean break. Poetry and prose have always been interrelated. Expect thematic lectures, in-class readings, and a special guest. Extra credit will be given for attending literary events in New York City.

Course Objectives
• To familiarize ourselves with writers from disparate times and places.
• To approach our own experiences with an editor’s eye. What, if crafted, will make for compelling literature?
• To develop a vocabulary to talk about our own work and the work of others.
• To establish an editorial presence that is distinct from our writerly mode.
• To deepen and refine our work through conversation and revision.
• To apply these lessons critically in the form of a book review.

Structure
We’ll have two types of classes: craft and workshop. We’re going to start heavy on craft and end heavy on workshop, but for the bulk of the semester we’ll do craft on Tuesday, and workshop on Thursday. Craft classes will focus on an in-depth discussion of the assigned texts, followed by a conversation about specific elements or literary techniques. On Thursday we’ll be workshopping student pieces. We will also have in-class writing exercises.
**Workshopping**

Workshopping is one of the key components of studying creative writing. The class will be divided into groups. Each group will submit **four times** in the semester: two sets of poems, and then two short stories. **Your submission is due one week before you are scheduled to be workshopped.** A few notes:

- All submissions are to be printed in **12 point, double-spaced Times New Roman.**
- Number your pages.
- Poetry submissions should be 2-5 pages long and consist of 1-3 poems.
- Short Story submissions are to be 10-15 pages in length.
- **Submissions are due one week prior to being workshopped.** Submitting late inconveniences your classmates and will adversely affect your grade.

On workshopping days, equal time will be given to discussing the work of each students. You’re required to provide in-depth line edits and to write a one-page letter to the student, discussing specific elements of the piece. You need to print two copies of this letter and bring to class (one is for the student, the other is for me). **Responses should be at least 250 words (12 point, double-spaced Times New Roman) but you’re of course welcome to write more.** The letter should include:

- Specific elements which are working in the piece,
- What can be improved or refined,
- How the piece demonstrates concepts or techniques we have discussed in class.
- **These can, and should, be used to guide your comments in class.**

These letters are a key part of the workshopping process. They provide invaluable feedback to the writers being workshopped, and train the reader to become more exacting in their own work. I cannot overstate their importance. Because of that, they will be a key element of your participation grade. However, they are but one part of workshopping. The in-class discussion is of equal importance. I find that it’s helpful to set some etiquette guidelines so that we make the most of each opportunity to discuss each other’s work.

- Using our letters as a guide, we will begin by going around the room and each person pointing out one thing that we especially liked in the piece. It’s my experience that this leads to a more organic conversation about the pieces.
- Remember, we are discussing the work of a writer, not the writer herself. Speak about the piece, not the person. Workshop can be a nerve-wracking experience, so we owe it to each other to be kind and generous when discussing our work.
- That said, empty praise helps nobody. **The goal of workshop is to help each story or poem become the best possible version of itself.** In order to do that we must be honest with ourselves, and each other, about what needs to be refined or reconsidered.
- Finally, while I am leading this workshop, and will take an active role in directing the conversation, **each student will be responsible for contributing their thoughts.** This is key to a truly successful workshop.
Grading
Attendance and Participation: 40%
Weekly Responses: 30%
Final Portfolio: 30%

Attendance and Participation
Writing is a matter of showing up. Every day. On time. Anybody will tell you, a disciplined routine is how you grow. For our purposes, this is a discussion-based class. Not only do you not learn if you’re not in class, participating, you deplete the learning experience of your classmates. After one unexcused absence, each will result in a reduction of your grade a third of a letter grade (A to A -, A - to B +, and so on).

Excused absences must involve a doctor’s note or similar official documentation. If you have to miss class let me know ahead of time. Also, don’t be late. Three instances of lateness result in an unexcused absence.

Weekly Responses
Because there is no writing without reading, each week we will have assigned readings. These short stories, essays, and poems have been selected because they illustrate various concepts, have been deemed culturally important (life, it seems, has a required reading list), and, simply, are a great deal of fun.

Each week, you’re required to write a one-page response to the reading and email to me by Sunday night at midnight. Basically, I want you to choose 3-5 sentences that stood out to you, and write a few sentences about each. Why did you like it? Why did you hate it? How does it illustrate an idea we’ve touched on in class? How could it be done better?

Book Review
Again, because there is no writing without reading, we’ll be writing a brief (800-1200 word) review of a recent book of fiction or poetry. I will distribute a list of books to choose from at the beginning of the semester, along with a list of websites and publications that feature solid, contemporary literary criticism.

Final Portfolio
During the last week of class, each student will be required to hand in their final portfolio, which will include revised versions of the four workshopped pieces. Revision is essential. This is to demonstrate a fundamental truth: writing is rewriting. Each piece must be revised to a degree that it warrants my rereading. In addition to the four pieces, please include your book review and an additional piece expanded from an in-class exercise. These six pieces will be placed in a folder and then submitted to me.

Office Hours
Students are required to meet with me at least once during the semester, though more visits are encouraged. These meetings are especially helpful after you’ve been workshopped, but we can also discuss any number of topics, including class readings, your writing process, writing as a
career, publication. If you’re unable to meet during the scheduled time, contact me and we’ll
arrange another time to meet.

**Plagiarism**
Is remarkably easy to spot. Don’t do it. Any cases will result in a failing grade and will be
reported to the university.

**Electronics in class**
Are not allowed. Readings will need to be printed out and marked up, as will submissions. While
there’s a conversation to be had about reading on devises, we’re taking the stripped down,
traditional approach of paper and pen. Trust me on this.

**Food and Drink**
Drinks are fine. Food is distracting.

**Readings**
I’ll distribute PDFs of works by Elizabeth Bishop, Claudia Rankine, Frederick Seidel, Ottessa
Moshfegh, Michael Chabon, Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Lorrie Moore, Lucia Berlin,
and Joy Williams, to name just a few. In addition to these texts, I’d like for you to purchase:

- **A new notebook** that will be only used for this class. This will serve as your journal for
  the semester. I expect you to be taking notes in and out of class. Treat yourself. Head to
  McNally Jackson Goods for the Study on 8th Street.
- **Richard Hugo**, *The Triggering Town*
- **Adrian Matejka**, *Map to the Stars*
- **Ben Marcus**, *New American Stories (Vintage Contemporaries)*

**Part One: Notes on Craft**

*Week One*
Tuesday, September 4 / Introduction (What is a workshop?)
Thursday September 6 / In-Class Writing Exercise

*Week Two*
Tuesday, September 11 / Description: *Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams*
Thursday, September 13 / In-Class Editing exercise, Group A Submit

**Part Two: Poetry**

*Week Three*
Tuesday, September 18 / Finding a Form: *Philip Larkin, Sharon Olds, Terrance Hayes*
Thursday, September 20 **Group A workshop**, Group B Submit

*Week Four*
Tuesday, September 25 / Confession: *Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Jenny Zhang*
Thursday, September 27 **Group B Workshop**, Group C Submit

*Week Five*
Tuesday, October 2 / The Everyday: Frederick Seidel, Adrian Matejka, Ariana Reines
Thursday, October 4 Group C Workshop, Group A Submit

Week Six
Fall Break. If you are travelling take copious notes.

Week Seven
Tuesday, October 16 / The Poetics of Prose: John Berger, Maggie Nelson, Michael Ondaatje
Thursday, October 18 Group A Workshop, Group B Submit

Part Three: Fiction

Week Eight
Tuesday, October 23 / Leads, Expectation: Michael Chabon’s “The Little Knife”
Thursday, October 25 Group B Workshop, Group C Submit

Week Nine
Tuesday, October 30 / Narration and Character: Ottessa Moshfegh’s “Bettering Myself”
Thursday, November 1 Group C Workshop, Group A Submit

Week Ten
Tuesday, November 6 / Rising Action and Resolution: Donald Barthelme’s “The School”
Thursday, November 8 Group A Workshop, Group B Submit

Week Eleven
Tuesday, November 13 / Reworking: Raymond Carver’s “Beginners” + “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”
Thursday, November 15 Group B Workshop, Group C Submit

Week Twelve
Tuesday, November 20 / Group C Workshop, Group A Submit
Thursday, November 22 / Thanksgiving. No class. If you are travelling take copious notes. This is a fine opportunity to experience the stuff of lasting literature: going home; arguments around the dinner table; enormous portions of food. Also, football and shopping.

Week Thirteen
Tuesday, November 27 Group A Workshop, Group B Submit
Thursday, November 29 Group B Workshop, Group C Submit

Week Fourteen
Tuesday, December 4 Group C Workshop
Thursday, December 5 Guest Speaker

Week Fifteen
Tuesday, December 11 What’s Next? On Work and Routine.
Thursday, December 13 Portfolios Due