

Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry

CRWRI-UA.815.014

Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:30-10:45 AM

Instructor: Eleanor Wright

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Office hours: By appointment

Objective:

Rotating between workshops and craft discussions, this course offers a rigorous introduction to the practice of creating poetry, fiction, and hybrid work. Each week we'll spend one class critiquing student pieces and the other excavating a range of published texts to discern authorial approaches. We'll write a lot and borrow liberally from what we read, deploying or subverting the tactics our favorite authors use. By the end of the course, you'll have delved into a rich assortment of fiction and poetry—including your own and your classmates'. You'll be comfortable identifying and commenting on key craft elements in the work you read, and making fresh and judicious use of those elements as you write and revise.

Reading:

Each week we'll read a mix of selections related to a specific craft topic; texts will be uploaded to Classes, and I'll also distribute print-outs in advance. Please read everything by Tuesday of the week it's due—and please read *everything*: I know you need time to write, so I've whittled our syllabus to an eminently manageable load (fewer than 30 pages a week). If class discussions lag, I will institute mandatory written responses.

Writing:

- 1) **Notebook.** This is not a requirement and I won't collect or grade it. But I strongly recommend that everyone write daily—journaling, drafting, jotting down brief observations or overheard speech. Even if you ignore this sage advice, bring paper and a writing implement to class.
- 2) **Weekly assignments.** Each week, I'll assign a short writing exercise related to our topic. These are due to me in hard copy the following Tuesday. You're more than welcome to turn an assignment into a workshop piece, but that's not required—they're just meant to keep you writing regularly, help you try out the strategies we discuss in class, and encourage experimentation. Twice during the semester, you may substitute a free write (poetry or prose) for the assigned prompt.
- 3) **Workshop pieces.** Over the course of the semester everyone will submit two poems; one short (2-4 double-spaced pages) piece of fiction; and one longer (5-12 double-spaced pages) story to be workshoped in class. Your piece is always due at the start of class one meeting *before* the date it's set to be discussed, and it's your responsibility to print hard copies for everyone.
- 4) **Workshop critiques.** Provide thoughtful written responses to your classmates' workshop pieces. This means line-by-line annotation as well as a short letter summarizing your thoughts; we'll talk in class about how to keep comments focused and helpful. Critiques are typically handed directly to the writer, but if I suspect based on your verbal feedback that yours may be cursory, I will ask to see it.
- 5) **Revisions and reflection.** Finally, you're required to substantially revise any three of your four workshop pieces, and to write a short (2-3 double-spaced pages)

reflection—either a “why I write” manifesto or simply an account of your development as a writer since September (or a mix of the two). These are due to me, via email or in my mailbox, by 5 PM on Dec. 15.

Listening:

At the start of each month I’ll provide a list of free readings, discussions, and other literary events at NYU (<http://www.cwp.fas.nyu.edu/page/readingseries>) and elsewhere in the city. Over the whole semester—i.e., before Dec. 15—you’re required to attend at least one, and to submit a short write-up so I know you were really there. (A few sentences reacting to what you saw is fine, though I’m happy to read more.) If you find an event that’s not on my list, run it by me first—I’ll probably okay it.

Office Hours:

You’re required to meet with me once, and you’re more than welcome to come regularly. I’ll circulate a sign-up sheet each week, though you may also schedule meetings by email.

Grades:

Your grade will reflect thorough and timely completion of all the above requirements, as well as regular class participation. Note that I don’t accept late work (if necessary, contact me in advance to request an extension), and that, of course, plagiarism is never tolerated—see University policy or contact me with questions. Grading breakdown is roughly as follows:

- Participation: Attend every class (no more than one unexcused absence, and do not miss your own workshop), arriving on time. Read the assigned texts and your peers’ work carefully before class, respond to workshop pieces in writing, and contribute actively and appropriately to discussion. Note that students who accrue three or more *excused* absences may be asked to complete written assignments in lieu of missed class discussion. 35%
- Thirteen weekly assignments and one event write-up. 30%
- Four workshop pieces: Put considerable effort into these, or you’ll be wasting your own and your peers’ class time. 20%
- Three revisions, reflection, and office hours. 15%

Workshop environment:

We’ll talk more during our first meeting, but basically, it’s your and my job to create a supportive and comfortable space where everyone feels able to learn, ask questions, take risks, and share their work. That means respecting each other’s writing (and each other’s feedback), whether or not it’s your “style”—indeed, I hope our craft discussions will help you appreciate and comment insightfully on work you might not have chosen to read recreationally. If something said or done in class, or any material from our readings or a classmate’s workshop submission, makes you uncomfortable, please tell me right away.

Note: This is a low-tech space. Unless there’s a special circumstance that you explain to me before class, do not use laptops, tablets, phones, etc.

Tentative Calendar and Reading List

* Note: Subject to change! I plan to incorporate most of these authors and exercises, but you'll receive a finalized, more detailed schedule the first day of class.

Week One: Welcome

9/5- Introductions, syllabus, workshop groups, questions

9/7- Getting started: Prompts, exercises, and generative habits

Reading due: Essays

Week Two (poetry): Image and Metaphor

9/12- Robert Hass, Wallace Stevens, Tracy K. Smith, Ocean Vuong, Charles Simic, Lucille Clifton, Emily Dickinson, James Richardson, Naomi Shihab Nye, James Tate, Rumi, Saeed Jones, Ada Limon

Writing due: List poem

9/14- Workshop Group A

Week Three (poetry): Form, Line, Sound

9/19- Michael Dickman, Ross Gay, William Shakespeare, Gwendolyn Brooks, W.S. Merwin, Terrance Hayes, Kay Ryan, Anne Carson

Writing due: Poem describing a concrete act, object, or image

9/21- Workshop Group B

Week Four (poetry): Geographies, Mythologies, Identities

9/26- Ocean Vuong, Daniel Borzutzky, Ishion Hutchinson, Louise Glück, Claudia Rankine

Writing due: Villanelle, sestina, pantoum, or sonnet

9/28- Workshop Group C

Week Five (poetry): Stealing, Erasing, Appropriating

10/3- Tom Phillips, Solmaz Sharif, Monica Youn, Robin Coste Lewis, Kimiko Hahn

Writing due: Poem about the "place" (real or imagined) you're "from" (literally or figuratively)

10/5- Workshop Group A

Week Six: In-Between Forms

10/10- Anne Carson, David Foster Wallace, Susan Howe, C.D. Wright, Maggie Nelson, Michael Ondaatje

Writing due: Erasure of a text provided in class or a text of your choice

10/12- Workshop Group B

Week Seven (fiction): Plot and Time Management

10/17- Jenny Offil, Virginia Woolf, Flannery O'Connor, George Saunders

Writing due: Poem in the style/voice of someone we've read, OR a poem that responds to something we've read

10/19- Workshop Group C

Week Eight (fiction): Narrative Perspective, Voice

10/24- Zadie Smith, Alice Munro, Lucia Berlin, Haruki Murakami

Writing due: Describe the same sequence of events twice, the second time focusing on different details and changing the pacing

10/26- Workshop Groups 1+2

Week Nine (fiction): Characters

10/31- Jamaica Kincaid, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Edwidge Danticat

Writing due: Write a scene using a surprising narrative perspective, OR relate a memory from a point of view other than your own

11/2- Workshop Groups 3+4

Week Ten (fiction): Dialogue

11/7- James Joyce, Toni Morrison, Denis Johnson

Writing due: A character sketch or a few paragraphs closely describing someone

11/9- Workshop Group 1

Week Eleven (fiction): Genre

11/14- Helen Oyeyemi, Jorge Luis Borges, Kurt Vonnegut, Octavia Butler, Italo Calvino

Writing due: Three short dialogues, two recorded from overheard speech and one invented

11/16- Workshop Group 2

Week Twelve

11/21- Workshop Group 3

Writing due: A scene borrowing tropes or conventions from a particular genre (fairy tales, science fiction, etc.)

[Thanksgiving]

Week Thirteen: Revision

11/28- TBD (interviews and essays)

Writing due: Free write

11/30- Workshop Group 4

Week Fourteen: Other Forms

12/5- Graphic novels, cartoons (assignments TBD)

Writing due: Try out any new form that involves words—personal essay, poetry/prose hybrid, spoken word performance, cartooning, songwriting, etc. (email me mp3, video, or image files before class)

12/7- Songs, scripts, screenplays, spoken word (assignments TBD)

Week Fifteen: The End

[no class on 12/12]

12/14- In-class reading and party

Writing due on 12/15: Three revisions, reflection, event write-up (if not already submitted)