

Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction & Poetry

Fall 2018, M/W 11am-12:15pm

Instructor: Annabel Graham

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Office Hours: by appointment

“I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.” –Joan Didion

“Write hard and clear about what hurts.” –Ernest Hemingway

OVERVIEW

A good writer must first and foremost be a good reader. This is not a literature course, but we will be reading pieces of (for the most part, contemporary) writing that I find exemplary in the hopes of grasping what exactly makes those pieces work so well. We’ll also be reading and discussing our own original work and the work of our peers. My goal is to help you expand your comprehension of the craft of creative writing while simultaneously honing your own writing skills. By the end of the semester, I’d like each of you to walk away with a deeper understanding of what moves you, what feels most essential and true to you in a piece of writing—as well as a small portfolio of your own work that you feel proud of.

CRAFT

In our craft discussions (on Mondays), we’ll be looking at short stories, poems, essays and hybrid texts as writers—taking them apart, discussing not only what they’re communicating and what themes they deal with but how they affect us, why they work, and how we can utilize similar techniques in our own writing. In analyzing a piece of writing, we will think of ourselves as carpenters considering the construction of a house.

We’ll conclude our weekly discussions of craft with brief in-class writing exercises pertaining to that week’s topic, so that you can start putting some of the craft lessons you’ve learned into motion. You are welcome (and encouraged!) to expand upon any of these in-class writing exercises at home.

WORKSHOP

In workshop (on Wednesdays), we will discuss, critique and compliment the work of our classmates. Experimentation, specificity, boldness and risk-taking in your writing are encouraged. You’ll be graded on the effort you put in and your willingness to learn and grow as a writer—not on your expertise. I am much more concerned with your work being vulnerable, interesting, and emotionally true than adhering strictly to one genre. Many of my favorite works explore the elements of different genres simultaneously, bending preconceived notions of what a poem, short story or essay looks like. That’s not to say that short stories and poems written in more traditional forms are not

encouraged—they are—but rather to give you the permission to experiment and the freedom to test the boundaries of genre.

Submissions

Those being workshopped must submit their work by email on the Thursday evening before class. Submission deadlines are not to be taken lightly. If you submit late, you're only hurting yourself, as your classmates will have less time to thoroughly read and comment on your work. A late submission will also affect your grade. If you are unable to submit by the deadline for some reason, please email me.

Short stories or works of prose may be between 5 and 15 pages in length, 12pt font (Times New Roman or similar), double-spaced.

Poetry submissions may be up to 3 pages (whether one or multiple poems is up to you). Poems should be in 12pt font.

Responses

You are responsible for printing out a copy of each workshop piece and bringing it to class. You're encouraged to mark up your classmates' work by hand as you read, highlighting passages that you think work particularly well, underlining sentences that strike you, and identifying areas of confusion as well as any grammatical, syntactical or spelling errors. You will return your marked-up hard copy to the writer after each workshop, along with your workshop letter. Write your (the reader's) name on each submission and staple your workshop letter to the back.

You will write a one-page letter to each classmate for each of their workshop submissions. On the day of the workshop, you will bring two hard copies of each letter to class—one for the writer, and one to hand in to me. In your feedback letters, focus first on what is working in each piece—positive feedback is criticism, too. By the same token, 100% positive feedback is not particularly helpful to the writer. Strive for balance. You'll want to identify any points of confusion and give constructive ideas on how a piece might be strengthened. It is usually that which is successful in a piece of writing that helps us identify points of inconsistency or uncertainty.

Etiquette

Treat your classmates and their work with respect. Sharing our writing is deeply personal and vulnerable; it's imperative that we create a safe and collaborative environment in which to take risks and try new things. Unless otherwise indicated, we will assume that the narrator of any first-person work is a fictional character.

READING MATERIALS

All reading materials will either be handed out in class, emailed to you or uploaded as PDFs to NYUClasses. When texts are uploaded or emailed, you are responsible for printing and bringing a hard copy to class.

WRITER'S JOURNAL

Much of a writer's work is done in solitude, outside of a classroom setting. Writing by hand coordinates the left brain with the right brain, boosts cognitive skills, improves memory and inspires creativity. I expect everyone to buy a journal or notebook for use outside of class (what kind is completely up to you, though I suggest something small and lightweight, so that you can carry it around with you during the day). Your writer's journals will be used for weekly observations and writing exercises. I'll collect these journals twice: once halfway through the semester, and once at the end of the semester. Your observations and exercises will be graded for effort, not quality. If you don't want me to read them due to privacy, I'll honor that. The only part of this that will affect your grade is whether you do them or not.

Observations

I'd like you to write at least 14 observations by hand in your journal each week. That's 2 observations per day. You are more than welcome to write more than 14 each week. Obviously, I'll have no idea if you write 5 observations on Monday and none on Tuesday, but I strongly encourage you to try as hard as you can to stick to at least 2 per day, so that it becomes a habit.

These observations should be easy, and should take up very little of your time. You may find it easier to record your observations as you go about your day, rather than sitting down at a designated time to record them. This is about specificity, learning to see, and recognizing what moves you. I'm not expecting perfectly-crafted sentences, high lyricism, metaphors and similes, or ruminations on the meaning of what you chose to record. Just simple observations of things you notice in the world during the day—images or scenes that intrigue you in some way or make you think associatively of something else, snippets of overheard dialogue. New York is an especially rich atmosphere for observation—at any given point during the day (or night), there is something unique and interesting happening around you. If you don't think there is, look closer.

If you see something worth recording and don't have your notebook on you, you may record it in your smartphone and then transfer it to your writer's journal when you get home. Another way of doing this is snapping a quick photo of the scene or image you want to record, and then writing about it when you get home.

Exercises

Throughout the course of the semester, I will also assign various writing exercises and prompts to be completed in your writer's journal. The idea is to take risks, be free, and explore new techniques and approaches. You're also welcome to continue with and expand upon any in-class writing exercises in your writer's journal.

FINAL PORTFOLIO

This class will not have a final exam, but at the end of the semester you will submit a final portfolio, which will consist of:

- 1) Your revised pieces of writing, along with earlier drafts of that writing (so that we can track your progress)
- 2) One writing exercise expanded into a short story, poem, memoir fragment or hybrid piece
- 3) One brief (1-2 pages, double-spaced) written statement about your writing and your progress during the course

GRADING BREAKDOWN

40% - Your writing. Much of this percentage will come from the submission of your final portfolio and the strength of your revisions.

30% - Participation. This includes attendance, punctuality, in-class engagement and coming to office hours at least once.

30% - Preparation. This means coming to class having thoroughly and carefully read the assigned materials, reading and responding thoughtfully to your peers' work, and completing your observations and writing exercises.

EXTRA CREDIT

You have the whole semester to complete two of the following for a 10% boost in your grade. If you already have an A+ and choose to complete any of these assignments anyway, you'll simply become a more well-rounded and cultured human being.

- 1) Attend a literary reading (at NYU or elsewhere) and write a 1-2 page response paper
- 2) Memorize a poem of at least 14 lines and recite it aloud to the class
- 3) Write a book review of at least 2 pages on a novel, short story collection, or collection of poetry

OFFICE HOURS

I am available for weekly office hours by appointment. You are required to come see me at least once, after your first workshop, so that I can get a better idea of who you are and what your writing goals are. After that, you're welcome to come as often as you like. Please email me to schedule a time.

POLICIES

Attendance

Everyone is expected to attend every class. You are permitted one unexcused absence without penalty. After that, each following absence will lower your grade by 10%. I do understand that emergencies happen. If one does, please email me and we can discuss on a case-by-case basis. All assignments are due as normal, regardless of whether you are in class or not.

Tardiness

If you are more than 10 minutes late for class, you will be considered tardy. Being tardy to class twice will be counted as one absence. Showing up to class more than 20 minutes late will also be counted as an absence. In a class like this, where we are sharing and discussing personal work, being tardy or absent can be very disruptive and hinders the workshop environment. It's imperative that we take this seriously.

Late Assignments

Late assignments will not be accepted, unless you have made previous arrangements with me and have an adequate reason for needing additional time.

Plagiarism

Don't do it—it's lazy, dishonest, obvious, and will result in immediate disciplinary action.

Technology

No laptops, smartphones, iPads, or any other electronics will be permitted during class time unless otherwise instructed. Make sure to print a physical copy of your readings ahead of time.

Food

Snacks and beverages are permitted in class, as long as they're not distracting. Use your discretion.

Difficult Material

If you submit a piece of writing which exhibits potential dangers, or deals with topics such as murder, depression, suicide, or severe mental distress, you may expect a brief note or email from me to make sure you are doing okay. In such cases, I'd appreciate an email ahead of time to assure me that your work is a reflection on your creativity, and not your current state of mind. If you do feel that you need counseling or someone to talk to at any point during the semester, please feel free to reach out to me, and I can guide you to the NYU Wellness Center.

Disability Disclosure Statement

Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980.

COURSE SCHEDULE

(*note: schedule and assigned readings are subject to change, depending on the climate and where our discussions take us. All readings should be completed by the date they are listed).

WEEK ONE

Wednesday, September 5th

- Introductions, create workshop schedule
- Discussion: why we write, genre, observations, learning to see
- In-class exercise: 100-word autobiography
- *note: for this first week only, those being workshopped on Wednesday, Sept 12th may submit their work by midnight on Sunday, Sept 9th (rather than on Thursday, Sept 6th)

WEEK TWO

Monday, September 10th

- CRAFT: Writers On Writing
- Joan Didion, Gary Lutz, Lorrie Moore, Anne Lamott

Wednesday, September 12th

- Workshop Group A

WEEK THREE

Monday, September 17th

- CRAFT: Writing the Fragment, Flash Fiction
- Lydia Davis, Julio Cortázar, Amy Hempel, Daniil Kharms, Heinrich Boll

Wednesday, September 19th

- Workshop Group B

WEEK FOUR

Monday, September 24th

- CRAFT: Writing Place
- Claire Vaye Watkins, Annie Proulx, Anna Noyes, Elizabeth Bishop

Wednesday, September 26th

- Workshop Group C

WEEK FIVE

Monday, October 1st

- CRAFT: Surrealism & The Fantastic

-Carmen Maria Machado, Donald Barthelme, Aimee Bender, Kiki Petrosino
Wednesday, October 3rd
-Workshop Group A

WEEK SIX

Monday, October 8th – NO CLASS (Fall Recess)

Wednesday, October 10th
-Workshop Group B

WEEK SEVEN

Monday, October 15th
-CRAFT: Writing Trauma
- Mona Simpson, Cynthia Ozick, David Foster Wallace, T Kira Madden (possible class visit)

Wednesday, October 17th
-Workshop Group C

WEEK EIGHT

Monday, October 22nd
-CRAFT: Danger & Desire
-Jayne Anne Phillips, Denis Johnson, Melanie Rae Thon, Chelsea Bieker

Wednesday, October 24th
-Workshop Group A

WEEK NINE

Monday, October 29th
-CRAFT: Voice
-John Edgar Wideman, Joy Williams, Grace Paley

Wednesday, October 31st
-Workshop Group B

WEEK TEN

Monday, November 5th
-CRAFT: Identity & Politics
- Ocean Vuong, Layli Long Soldier, James Baldwin

Wednesday, November 11th
-Workshop Group C

WEEK ELEVEN

Monday, November 12th
-CRAFT: Ideas of Gender
- Jamaica Kincaid, Rick Moody, Eileen Myles, Danez Smith

Wednesday, November 14th
-Workshop Group A

WEEK TWELVE

Monday, November 19th
-CRAFT: Complex Relationships, Character
-A.M. Homes, Flannery O'Connor, Junot Diaz, James Salter

Wednesday, November 21st NO CLASS (Thanksgiving break)

WEEK THIRTEEN

Monday, November 26th
-CRAFT: Language & Lyricism
-Beth Nugent, Carl Phillips, Aracelis Girmay

Wednesday, November 28th
-Workshop Group B

WEEK FOURTEEN

Monday, December 3rd
-CRAFT: Hybrid Texts
-Maggie Nelson, Noy Holland, Anne Carson, Claudia Rankine, Susan Steinberg

Wednesday, December 5th
-Workshop Group C

WEEK FIFTEEN

Monday, December 10th
-CRAFT: Realism & Revision

-Richard Yates, Mary Gaitskill, Raymond Carver (pre & post Lish edits)

Wednesday, December 12th – Last Day of Class!

-Final Writing Portfolios due

-Party, reading from portfolios