

Introduction to Fiction and Poetry CRWRI-UA.815.006

Fall 2019

Tuesday/Thursday 9:30 AM - 10:45 AM

Lillian Fishman

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Office Hours: **TBD 2 hours & location**

Course Objectives

When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway.

—James Baldwin

When we write we are trying to uncover something, and to communicate what it is we uncover. Often writing is a way of trying to understand ourselves and what we think. And even if we know, when we begin, what we want to say, the language we use transforms how we understand ourselves and our ideas: we create a piece of language, a text that exists outside of us and in relationship to other readers.

Writing is not just an exercise in beauty or form or absurdity but a means of communication. When we read, we are going to look for the *center* of the thing we are reading: What is it about? What does it mean to us? Why does it mean that to us—what language has the writer used to communicate the center of their story?

Our goal is to read like writers, with an eye toward what we can take for ourselves from the writing we admire. You are probably here because you enjoy reading for pleasure. This semester, when you read and enjoy what you're reading, ask yourselves why: which words and sentences do you like? What's exciting about them? Bring them in to class and we'll talk about how you can pull that off yourself—what language you can use to convey that same excitement, that same pleasure.

In Class

Tuesdays will be craft days: we will discuss the assigned readings. Our objective in these discussions will be to observe the specific decisions the author has made and the techniques they have used to communicate with us, and to explore how these elements inform our encounter with the work.

Because language is so important to us here, please come to class on Tuesdays with five sentences or lines from the text(s) we've read that you liked or that struck you in some way. You will not be asked to turn them in, so you may bring them in any non-screen form—printed or handwritten. You will be asked to read them out and describe what struck you about them as part of our discussion.

Reading is absolutely crucial both to the process of writing and to class participation, and throughout the semester there will be occasional pop quizzes, which will count toward your participation grade.

Thursdays will be workshop days: we will discuss each other's work. Pieces for workshop will be distributed one week in advance. On the day you submit your work, please bring 16 printed copies to class. For every workshop, you must prepare bring written feedback for each of your classmates who have submitted (one page, double-spaced, printed) addressing the following questions:

1. What do you think is the *center* of this piece? We'll discuss what this means in class, but you can interpret it in different ways: what do you think it's about? What part or theme is the most important? Is there something central and significant that you feel the writer is trying to tell you in this piece? Another way of phrasing this question is: What is the writer trying to tell us?
2. Where do you notice the writer using a technique effectively? What language are they using, and what does it convey to you?
3. Where do you notice a place where the language confuses or loses you? Can you point out why the language is unclear, why it undermines what the writer is trying to say, or why it feels inconsistent with the language that felt effective to you?

Please bring one printed copy of your response to class, to give to the writer, and email one copy to me (lrf314@nyu.edu) before the start of class.

Workshop

Workshop is a process designed around improving our work by bringing to light elements of it that we have not realized ourselves. Our duty in workshop is not to tell a writer whether we like or dislike the work, or what they should write instead. Our duty is to try to understand what kind of story or poem the writer is trying to write, and help point out to them what strategies of theirs are helping us understand, and what strategies are confusing us or making the text less clear. The language we use is around what *works* and what *doesn't work*. You should pay attention to what you like and don't like—but then think about *why* you like a certain sentence or section, or *why* you don't. What in the language excited you? Or confused you, or bored you?

Because it's so important that we help a writer work toward writing the kind of text they want to write, we'll start each workshop by going around and describing what we understood as the *center of the text*. When you read a story or a poem, ask yourself: what do you think it's about? What part or theme is most important? What do you think the writer is trying to tell us? One of the best and most exciting things workshop can do is show you whether other people are hearing what you are trying to say in your work.

The structure of workshop in our class will be like this: first, the writer will read the first few sentences of the story, or the first stanza or two of the poem. (It's important for us to hear how things sound out loud—we learn new things about the language this way.) Then we will go around and try to describe, in a sentence or two, what we think is at the center of the text. We'll have a discussion about what's working in the piece and what isn't. During this main portion of the workshop, the writer is quiet, just listening. For the last couple of minutes, the writer will have the opportunity to ask any questions they might have. Each student's workshop will last about 20 minutes.

When it is your turn to submit for workshop, please submit between 4-10 pages of prose (a short story or multiple flash fictions), and, in our poetry unit, 2 poems totaling 5 pages or less. Submissions should be in Times New Roman, 12pt, double-spaced. Include page numbers and

your name on every page. Please bring 16 copies on the day your group is assigned to submit (one week before your workshop day).

Workshop signups:

- | | |
|----------|----|
| Group A: | 1. |
| | 2. |
| | 3. |
| Group B: | 1. |
| | 2. |
| | 3. |
| Group C: | 1. |
| | 2. |
| | 3. |
| Group D: | 1. |
| | 2. |
| | 3. |
| Group E: | 1. |
| | 2. |
| | 3. |

Written Assignments

For craft days: please do the reading and come prepared with five sentences or lines that struck you, with thoughts on why. (Handwritten is fine.)

For workshop days: please read your classmates' work, write a one-page letter, email me a copy, and print a copy for each of your classmates before class (16 copies).

Portfolio for the end of the semester: at the end of the semester you will submit a portfolio of your work, which will be graded not on any subjective measure of the quality of the writing but on whether you have made revisions based on the comments you received in workshop. The portfolio will include:

1. One revised short story
2. Two revised poems (or one flash fiction, if you prefer)
3. One revised in-class writing assignment
4. A two-page (double-spaced) letter describing the process of revision, and how workshop informed your thoughts on the work you've revised

Grading

This is not a course that grades you on the quality of your writing. If you do the necessary reading, are an active participant of the class, and submit your materials as required, you will get an A. More granularly, here's how the grading breaks down:

Participation (attendance, discussion, pop quizzes):	40%
Writing (workshop submissions & comments for classmates):	40%
Revised portfolio:	20%

Plagiarism: Zero-tolerance. Plagiarism of any kind will be reported to the university.

Policies

Attendance: Consistent attendance and participation are crucial elements of the course. One unexcused absence will be permitted without any repercussion. After one unexcused absence, your grade will drop by a half letter (i.e. from an A to an A-) for each subsequent absence.

Excessive tardiness (arriving more than 10 minutes after the start of class) will count as half an absence; two instances of tardiness will be documented as one unexcused absence. If you are late by more than 30 minutes it will count as a full unexcused absence.

Things happen—if you need to miss class, contact me with advanced notice and we will work something out.

Technology: No laptops, phones, or tablets allowed in class. If for any reason you need to take notes on a computer or tablet, please get in touch with me.

Food: You are welcome to bring beverages and unobtrusive snacks to class. Because this is a morning class, please take whatever measures necessary to arrive on time. Bring your breakfast if you'd like, though please don't make a mess.

Office Hours

Students are encouraged to meet with me during posted Office Hours at least twice during the semester, preferably once after your first workshop, and once before the end of the semester to discuss the progress of your work.

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.

NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities
726 Broadway, 2nd Floor
New York, NY
10003-6675
Telephone: 212-998-4980
Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114
Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

Student Wellness Policy

Unless we see explicit evidence in workshop that the speaker of a work is the writer themselves, we assume the speaker is fictional. However, certain content relating to murder, depression, suicide, sexual assault, or severe mental distress, such as seems to be a possible cry for help, will likely prompt the instructor's attention. Please send an email putting this work in context before submitting work, especially for workshop, that may be interpreted as such. If you do feel you need someone to talk to at any point in the semester, please feel safe to reach out to me and I can guide you to the NYU Wellness Center.

SYLLABUS

Week 1

Tuesday, September 3 First Sentences, using Stanley Fish's *How to Write A Sentence*
Assignment: please bring to class 3 first sentences you love
In-class writing exercise

Thursday, September 5 Michael Chabon, *A Model World*
(A craft day, because we won't be prepped for workshop yet.)
Group A distributes stories

FICTION

Week 2

Tuesday, September 10 Cheever, *The Swimmer*
George Saunders, *Thank You Esther Forbes*

Thursday, September 12 Group A workshop
Group B distributes stories

Week 3

Tuesday, September 17 Donald Barthelme, *The School*
George Saunders on Barthelme, *The Perfect Gerbil*
Lorrie Moore, *People Like That Are The Only People Here ?*

Thursday, September 19 Group B workshop
Group C distributes stories

Week 4

Tuesday, September 24 ZZ Packer, *Brownies*
Otesa Moshfegh, *An Honest Woman*

Thursday, September 26 Group C workshop
Group D distributes stories

Week 5

Tuesday, October 1 Sheila Heti, *How Should A Person Be?* (Prologue & Ch. 1)
Jeanette Winterson, *Written On The Body* (pp 9-24)

Thursday, October 3 Group D workshop
Group E distributes stories

FLASH AND FLUID FORMS

Week 6

Tuesday, October 8 Jamaica Kincaid, *Girl*
Rick Moody, *Boys*
Lydia Davis, *A Second Chance*

Thursday, October 10 Group E workshop
Group A distributes a flash or cross-genre piece

POETRY

Week 7

Tuesday, October 15 No class—(Monday schedule)

Thursday, October 17 Group A workshop
Group B distributes a flash or cross-genre piece

Week 8

Tuesday, October 22 Gregory Orr, “Some Basic Issues” from *A Primer for Poets*
(A very teachable poem: maybe “Ballad in A” or “Art of Losing”)
Tracy K. Smith, “I Don’t Miss It”

Thursday, October 24 Group B workshop
Group C distributes a flash or cross-genre piece

Week 9

Tuesday, October 29 Robert Hass, “Meditation at Lagunitas”
W. S. Merwin, “The Nails”
Li-Young Lee, “The Gift”

Thursday, October 31 Group C workshop
Group D distributes a flash or cross-genre piece

Week 10

Tuesday, November 5 e. e. cummings, “[2 little whos]”
Frank O’Hara, “Meditations in an Emergency”
Ross Gay, “Feet”

Thursday, November 7 Group D workshop

	Group E distributes a flash or cross-genre piece
Week 11	
<i>Tuesday, November 12</i>	Adrienne Rich, “A Woman Dead in her Forties” Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus” (?) Margaret Ross, “Macho”
<i>Thursday, November 14</i>	Group E Workshop Group A distributes poems
Week 12	
<i>Tuesday, November 19</i>	Group A workshop Group B distributes poems
<i>Thursday, November 21</i>	Group B workshop Group C distributes poems
Week 13	
<i>Tuesday, November 26</i>	Group C workshop Group D distributes poems
<i>Thursday, November 28</i>	No class—Thanksgiving
Week 14	
<i>Tuesday, December 3</i>	Group D workshop Group E distributes poems
<i>Thursday, December 5</i>	Group E workshop
Week 15	
<i>Tuesday, December 10</i>	Anne Carson, <i>The Glass Essay</i> Marilynne Robinson, <i>When I Was A Child I Read Books</i> or possibly <i>What Are We Doing Here?</i>
<i>Thursday, December 12</i>	No class—please turn in your portfolios by 3pm