This class is predominantly about discovery: how do poets and fiction writers bring their writing to life? How do we develop our ideas into stories and poems? How can we command inspiration when we feel “blocked”?

Through intensive reading and class discussions, we will disassemble a range of fiction and poetry, looking at what we can learn from established writers and how we can emulate some of their techniques. Combining what we learn with sparks of inspiration from reading and everyday life, we will create work that is truly our own.

**Class Objectives**

There are three main objectives in this class: improve your own writing, help others improve their writing, and have fun doing so.

We will:

- Learn how to better communicate our own vision and ideas through writing
- Begin to understand how structure and form shape our response to a piece of writing
- Play with different forms ourselves
- Learn how to persevere in moments of self-doubt and harness critical thinking to make the best of our own work
- Begin to identify what is resonant and interesting in our own writing
- Have a clearer sense of the reasons we may like or dislike a piece of writing
- Learn how to edit (and improve) our own work
- Learn how to deliver constructive feedback, and make the most of the feedback we receive
- Begin to get a sense of our own individual creative processes

I ultimately want you to experiment and challenge yourself: write from personal experience, write at the outer reaches of your imagination, write things you want throw out of the window and things you never want to look at again. Hopefully, along the way, you’ll write something you’re proud of too. There will be in-class exercises to help you do so.

**Grades**

- Written submissions, workshop critiques, final portfolio: 50%
- Class participation: 50%
Your three workshop submissions will include: a short story of 7-12 pages, at least 3 poems, and a third piece TBD — we’ll discuss in our first class.

Your portfolio of work at the semester will include your three workshop submissions, a series of short writing prompts (in class writing assignments as well as homework), and at least one substantial revision of a workshopped piece.

You will be rewarded for curiosity, support for others, commitment, and effort. If you come to class striving to progress and to nudge along the progress of others, you’ll have a good time and do well in this class.

This class has a **craft** and **workshop** component.

**Craft**

The fastest way to improve your write is to read — and we will be reading a lot! The craft segment of class will focus on a theme or issue which we will explore through discussion of poetry, prose, non-fiction, and in-class writing assignments. These will include:

- Elements of Storytelling in Fiction and Poetry (on Plot, Story, Narrative)
- Editing, Elision, and Negative Space
- Writing Real Life (and Death)
- World Building
- Voice and Character
- Dealing with Discomfort and Intimidating Subjects

Participation in class discussion is mandatory so come ready to speak! We want to foster an atmosphere where every individual feels comfortable sharing thoughts and reactions to our reading. Taste is completely subjective and there will often be no “right” or “wrong” answers. In dialogue with your peers, you will strengthen and deepen your own views, learn to see things new light, and be able to respectfully agree and disagree with other people’s impressions. Most importantly, you will begin to identify how writers create certain effects and how this corresponds with your own personal taste.

To compliment our reading and discussion, we will do in-class writing exercises which might include: writing an obituary for a character you’re struggling with, answering the Proust questionnaire for a new character, narrating a memory you have from someone else’s point of view, writing a letter you do not intend to send. Students will also be asked to do brief presentations on types of poetic form.

**Workshop**
Each student will submit work and receive written and verbal feedback from the class. You will submit three times.

Sharing your writing with a group of strangers is an inherently vulnerable process. As a group, we will provide rigorous constructive feedback and make sure each writer feels safe and supported. What we aim to do in workshop is make each piece a better version of itself: that does not mean imposing our own tastes on a piece but identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each piece while respecting its quiddity. If a writer is stuck, we will provide ideas. If a writer absolutely wants to achieve a certain effect, we will guide the writer down that path. If a piece is lacking direction, we’ll point to parts that can be developed.

Submission Guidelines
Stories: 7-12 pages, double spaced.
1-3 poems for each submission.

SERIF FONTS ONLY. Times, Georgia, Garamond, Cochin or any basic serif font.

Submissions must be PRINTED and STAPLED. The library has resources for this!

We will make a submission schedule on the first day of class. You will distribute hard copies of your work the week before you are scheduled to be workshopped. If you don’t turn in your work when you’re supposed to, your classmates will not read and respond to it, and our whole schedule gets thrown off. Emailed submissions are not acceptable.

Critique Guidelines
You will bring two print-outs of critiques — one for the writer, one for me. Critiques should be about half a page for each poem or one page per story, single spaced.

Workshop Etiquette:
We’ll discuss workshop format and etiquette on the first day of class, but here are a few thoughts:

When You’re a Reader:
• Read each submission twice. Once straight through for a genuine reading experience, then with a pen in hand. Provide line edits, note any points of confusion or joy, write a note summarizing your feedback.
• When delivering feedback, written or verbal: focus on strengths of the work first and then make suggestions about areas for improvement.
• Distinguish the narrator/protagonist of a piece from its author. Avoid saying “you” when you mean “the narrator.” This helps keep criticism from feeling personal.
• Do not make assumptions about the writer. Use common sense and be respectful of one another in your notes and in class. Racism, sexism, and intolerance of any kind will not be tolerated.
• Some submissions may not be your taste in subject matter or style. That is not an excuse to be dismissive. You should not shy away from genuine helpful criticism — moments where you are confused about what is happening on the page, or what
motivates the character’s behavior. But when delivering criticism, do so with empathy, kindness, and generosity.

- Don’t talk over others or shut down perspectives different than your own. Listen and engage. Be conscious of what has already been said. Contribute new thoughts to discussion.

When You’re the Writer:
- Take notes. Because workshop discussion is dynamic, insightful feedback might be expressed in the classroom that is not quite articulated in your letters.
- Stay quiet. Silence helps keep you from feeling a need to explain or defend your work and allows the discussion to develop. It leaves you free to listen and absorb.
- If you are asked a direct question, it’s up to you to respond or respectfully decline.
- Try not to get defensive. Workshop is a vulnerable space. It’s easy to feel threatened by criticism, especially when feedback from your classmates can sometimes feel harsher than what you might get in the “real world.” Remember that your classmates are examining your words with a particularly critical eye in an effort to help you strengthen each piece.
- Come prepared. You will have an opportunity to ask questions, if you have any, at the end of your critique. Do you still need perspective on anything? What most concerns you? Was anything said during workshop that you need clarified?

This class presents rare opportunity: a captive audience invested in praising the strengths and diagnosing the weaknesses of your original work. We’re going to make the most of it!

Class Guidelines

Attendance
You must come to class! Workshop is an experience that entails a lot of vulnerability and demands a lot of trust. If you show up erratically, you disrespect each individual’s contributions.

One unexcused absence – after that, every missed class lowers your grade.

Please don’t be late. More than 15 minutes late will be considered an absence and you will not be able to join class until break to minimize disruption to other students.

Reading
Please note down lines that catch your attention and copy at least one from each story or poem into your notebooks. This could be because it impressed/moved/confused/annoyed/excited you. These will serve as our jumping off point for class discussion. Think of two questions about the reading and bring these to class.

Class Participation
Class should be a dynamic discussion. You should come prepared to talk — not only about what you like and dislike, but with some idea why.
Note-taking
We will be collecting a lot of “found language” this semester. Most weeks, I will ask you to fill 1-2 pages with: words or phrases from books, jargon from newspaper articles or ads, snippets of eavesdropped conversations, lyrics you can’t get out of your head, funny things your relatives say.

Plagiarism
Just don’t. We’ll discuss more in our first class.

Electronics
None. Zilch. Bring a pen and paper.

Reading List

A provisional reading list follows. Writing will be predominantly contemporary, almost all modern.

Short stories, novel excerpts, graphic novels, and other not-easily-classifiable prose by: Donald Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Grace Paley, Lydia Davis, Junot Díaz, Mary Gaitskill, Denis Johnson, Jamaica Kincaid, Lorrie Moore, Maggie Nelson, George Saunders, Maupassant, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Mary Robison, Joyce Carroll Oates, Miranda July, Alison Bechdel, Michael Chabon, Chris Ware, and others
