“You need three things to write a story: obsession, nerve, and ground worth reporting on.”

—Amy Hempel

“I know words. I have the best words.”

—Donald John Trump

wait what is this

This class is a writing workshop. From stem to stern, its been designed to minimize any elements that might distract it from being a writing workshop. This is because writing workshops are wonderful. Simply put: we're here to read great stuff, write the greatest stuff we can, and provide each other with the support, feedback, and exchange of ideas that writers too often go without. We'll study and discuss the craft of writing, and investigate a wide variety of important literary questions (e.g. What are the best words?). We'll deepen our understanding of what makes a poem or story successful, discover (at least) a half-dozen new writers we love, and have ample opportunities to write and improve our own work.

How it works

There are exactly four (4.0) main things you'll be doing in this class, all of them vital to its (and your) success. Here are those four pillars, as well as their respective percentage of your final grade.

- 30% - Writing your own works of fiction and poetry
- 20% - Delivering written and spoken feedback on the work of your fellow writers
- 20% - Reading the assigned materials and discussing them in class
- 30% - Being punctual, maintaining a near-perfect attendance record, and submitting your assignments on time

Simple, right? These are the four essential components of any good writing workshop: the primary colors, if you will (and if there were four primary colors). I've stripped away all other bells, whistles, and busywork, so we have the ability to focus—with no excuses!—on being extremely good at these four things.

Who we'll be reading

So many awesome people.

On the fiction side, we'll be reading and discussing work by the following luminaries: Alice Munro, Junot Diaz, ZZ Packer, Lorrie Moore, Donald Barthelme Rebecca Makkai, Bernard Malamud, George Saunders, Jamaica Kincaid, Amy Hempel, Margaret Atwood, Hunter S. Thompson, David Foster Wallace, and Colson Whitehead.

How to a get a good grade in this class

Submit the best writing that you are currently capable of producing. It doesn’t have to be magazine-ready, but it does have to be your best effort. Above all, do not cheat yourself of the opportunity to push yourself and grow as a writer.

Read every story and poem assigned. Don’t skim them—read them, with a keen, critical eye for what makes each piece work. Take notes as you read. Mark up the text. Underline sentences you find remarkable.

Be an engaged, vociferous, and well-prepared participant in all class discussions. Again, take notes.

When delivering written and spoken feedback to your peers, be specific, helpful, and kind. Provide constructive, thoughtful criticism that will enable them to make their writing stronger.

Lastly, be on time to class and submit your assignments before their deadlines. This part is vital! Missing class and being late are the easiest ways to earn yourself a bad grade.

How to not get a good grade in this class

Submit writing that is sloppy, unedited, or otherwise evinces a lack of thought, effort, and care.

Try to write your stories/poems in a 24-hour period.

Skim the assigned readings 30 minutes before class. Have nothing substantive or insightful to say about them.

Don’t talk in class. Don’t take notes.

Give your peers feedback that is shallow, unhelpful, or mean-spirited.

Be late to class. Miss class. Miss your deadlines.

A typical day

Each day will be split into two segments: craft discussion to start, then workshop for the bulk of the class.

In craft discussion, we’ll work together to analyze that day’s materials (be they story, poem, or essay). We’ll examine what makes a piece work (or not work), and what principles of craft we can take from it that might be useful in our own writing. Each piece has valuable lessons to teach us about voice, plot, sentence construction, world building, character creation, etc., and we’ll discover those lessons through discussion and critical reading. I ask that you come to class every day ready to share at least three sentences you especially loved or especially hated in that day’s reading, and to discuss what it is about them that you find remarkable.

In workshop, we’ll discuss, compliment, and critique the work of our fellow writers. In addition to your spoken feedback, you are required to write line notes and constructive feedback on the work of each of your peers, to be given to them after their workshop. Out of respect for your peers, it is expected that these notes be thoughtful, detailed, and delivered on time.

For those being workshopped on Tuesdays please email to your story to the your classmates and I by 11:59pm on the Friday before your workshop. For those workshopped on Thursdays, please email it by 11:59pm on the Sunday before.
We'll discuss workshop etiquette at length in class, but for now I'll say this: err on the side of being helpful, specific, and supportive. When delivering criticism, never say “I don’t like this.” Instead, say “I don’t think this worked, for reasons X, Y, and Z, but here’s a suggestion that could make it better.” The goal of every workshop is to have the writer leave feeling good about what they’ve done well, and have a clear plan of action to improve what’s not yet working.

**Office hours**
I'll hold weekly office hours, which are a great opportunity to talk about writing, exchange book recommendations, and discuss any aspect of the course you’re particularly enjoying or struggling with. Come on by! Please email me in advance to set a time, so I can prevent overlapping appointments. I’m asking that you all attend office hours at least once, so we can discuss your work and goals. If there’s anything you’d like to discuss, from writing to wellness, please don’t hesitate to reach out.

**Attendance/Tardiness/Late Work Policy**
Absence, tardiness, and late work can do more damage to a writing workshop than almost any other type of class. As such, the penalties for them will be significant. Everyone is allowed one unexcused absence for the semester. After that, every absence (unless accompanied by a doctor’s note or some proof of emergency) will result in your attendance grade being lowered by half a letter (i.e. A to A-, B+ to B). Tardiness (defined as showing up to class more than 10 minutes after it starts) is also to be avoided at all costs. If you’re tardy three times you’ll earn yourself an unexcused absence, and the grade drop that comes with it.

As for late work: if you submit something in the 24-hour period after a deadline, you’ll only lose half a letter grade on that assignment. But every additional day of lateness will result in dropping a full letter grade (on top of the initial half-grade you dropped).

**Plagiarism?**
NO. Not even a little bit. You’ll get an F. Those found guilty of plagiarism, with no exceptions, will be reported to the NYU Committee on Academic Dismemberment—whereupon, after a thorough administrative review of your case, you and your plagiarized work will be duct-taped to a rocket and fired into the heart of the sun.

**Extra credit opportunities**
You can earn extra credit by attending a fiction or poetry reading, and writing a 1-page response paper about the experience. OR, if you’d prefer, I’ll give you a quick writing prompt to complete for that sweet, sweet X.C. Each method is redeemable once!

**FAQ**
**Q: How many times will each writer be workshopped?**
A: III. Once for fiction, once for poetry, and once for your choice of the two.

**Q: Do I have to write a specific type of fiction or poetry to submit to workshop?**
A: Negative. This class is here so you can write what you’re most excited to write.

**Q: What are the formatting requirements for the class?**
A: Classic. All submissions must be in 12-point Times New Roman, double spaced, 1-inch margins, emailed to the class as a .doc or .docx file. And please add page numbers.

**Q: Are there length requirements on workshop submissions?**

A: Yes, some. For fiction, I’m asking you submit at least 5 full pages of work, so we can get a substantial impression of your prose style. But I expect most fiction submissions to be more in the 10-20 page range, simply because it’s so hard to write a full, artistically successful short story in anything less. Please do not submit work in excess of 30 pages.

For poetry, length requirements are a trickier beast. There will be no minimum word or page count for poems. For your poetry workshops, I simply ask that you submit at 3 to 5 poems of substance: thoughtful, nuanced pieces that have received the full extent of your creative effort.

**PRO TIP:** As your workshopped submissions of fiction and poetry will be the largest individual parts of your grade, you’ll want to start thinking about these early—as in, now—and put in as much work as you can to make them their best.

**Q: Can I submit part of my novel?**

A: Possibly, but please see me or email me before doing so. I would strongly prefer you submit short stories, as novel chapters can be difficult to workshop (and the course as a whole is primarily focused on short stories).

**Q: How will fiction and poetry be split up?**

A: Simply. We’ll be focusing on the fiction for the first third of the class, poetry for the next third, and a mix of both as we workshop our final pieces.

**Q: How will we get the readings, handouts, and other class materials?**

A: I’ll be storing them in a class Google Drive Folder, where each week’s materials will be promptly and conveniently available. You can then print them, or read them on your various gadgets.

**Q: Tech?**

A: Laptops and e-readers are allowed, to give you convenient access our weekly reading. But if I get the impression that electronics are limiting our ability to focus, we’ll switch to a tech-free class environment.

**Q: Food?**

A: Sure! Just don’t be loud or messy.

**Disclaimer**

Like other epochal and deeply American documents (see: The Constitution), this syllabus is a living text that may contract or expand when prodded over the course of the semester. The essential structure of the course won’t change, but we may add or subtract a few authors from the syllabus.