

**Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry
(CRWRI-UA.815.021)**

Instructor: Waleed Bhatti
Time: Tuesday/Thursday 12:30-1:45pm
Location: Bobst Library Room LL148

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Office Hours by Appointment

“The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.”
Flannery O’Connor

“What art offers is space - a certain breathing room for the spirit.”
John Updike

Purpose:

As an artistic form, writing is quite minimal; Words on pages and not much else. Rather than asking how we derive meaning from such a form, it may be more advantageous for you as writers to ask, how do writers *make* meaning in their work? And so, in this introductory creative writing class, we will explore the art of storytelling and poetry through the ways in which language, voice, characterization, structure, rhythm, and themes are employed by writers to “create meaning”. At the end of it all, we will have gained a more profound insight into the art of writing.

Course Structure:

The first half of the semester will focus on fiction craft and fiction workshops. After Spring Break, the remaining semester will focus on poetry craft and poetry workshops.

Our primary objectives in the craft discussions will be to share observations about the specific decisions and techniques authors have made and used, and to explore how these elements inform our encounter with their work. We will end our discussions with in-class writing exercises as a creative response to the readings. You will submit **six** of these responses over the course of the semester, **three for fiction, three for poetry.**

Workshops will begin in the fourth week of class. You will be divided into groups for workshop and each Thursday the groups will alternate. **Everyone will submit two poems and two stories.**

- **Short stories should be 7-10 pages**
- **Poetry should not exceed 10 pages**

Pieces for workshop must be distributed one week in advance so that I and your fellow classmates can respond thoughtfully. **Print two copies of your responses**, one for the writer and one for me.

Readings:

You will find the list and schedule of required readings at the end of this syllabus. You **must** read each assigned story or poem prior to each class, as the bulk of all craft lessons will be focused on discussing and analyzing the readings in detail. The majority of our prose readings will be short stories, and I will provide photocopies or free digital links for those as well as the poems a week ahead of time.

You will also each read one novel in the second half of the semester as part of your final project and portfolio. Each book will be assigned by me on an individual basis.

Submissions:

All craft responses, exercises, workshop submissions, final essays, and portfolios must be turned in on the assigned deadlines. **It is your responsibility to have photocopies of your workshop piece available the week preceding your workshop.** Email submissions are highly discouraged and will only be accepted in the event of an excused absence. All class submissions must be **typed and printed**. All prose submissions (including stories, essays, responses, et cetera) must be **double-spaced**.

Final Portfolio:

At the end of the semester, you will submit a portfolio of all the pieces you have workshopped in class with revised editions. **One revised short story or two revised poems** is the requirement. You will also submit a **1-2 page letter** outlining the changes you made, why you made them, and which critiques from workshops you found helpful in revising your work.

You will also submit a **1000-1500 word** essay as part of your final portfolio on the novel that you are assigned earlier in the semester. Details of the project will be discussed in class.

Extra Credit:

You're in NYC, the literary capital of the world. Go to a reading, a panel discussion, a book launch, get out there and then write a **page-long response** about your experience. There are also readings at the Lillian Vernon Writer's House every week, find one you like, attend, and bask in the joy of free wine and cheese.

Grading:

Participation – 40%

Writing Assignments – 40%

Final Portfolio – 20%

Extra Credit – 5% (added to final grade)

Attendance:

Attendance is expected at every class meeting. The reason is simple; it's near impossible to thoroughly workshop each other's work if people don't attend. Each unexplained absence will result in a 5% decrease to your total grade. Two or more instances in which you are late to class will count as an absence (you will have a five-minute grace period after the start of class in which to come in without penalty). Absences or lateness owing to a medical or other emergency circumstance must be accompanied by a doctor's (or other official) note.

If you have an emergency and cannot attend class, nor obtain a note, it will be necessary to contact me and explain the absence. I'll judge whether or not the explanation is considered sufficient enough to waive the penalty. Students who are absent the day of their workshop will not receive a make-up workshop, whether the absence is excused or not. Students who are late for their workshop will go last and only for as long as time allows.

Plagiarism:

The sole purpose of this class is reading and writing creative, original pieces. It should then (hopefully) come as no surprise to you that there is a zero-tolerance plagiarism policy in effect. You will fail the class and all instances of plagiarism will be reported to the department, without exception. There is no justifiable excuse. Don't do it.

Electronics:

This class only works if you are fully present. All electronic devices must be silent and out of sight during class. We may at some point make use of screens or the internet during our craft discussions, but for the most part, I'd like you to use pen and paper to take notes. If I catch you on a device goofing off (it's not hard; there won't be many of us in the class), I'll ask you to put it away. If I catch you a second time (whether in the same class or on another day), I'll ask you to leave the class. Each subsequent time you'll also be asked to leave.

Office Hours:

You must meet with me at least once during the semester, but personally, I'd recommend meeting at least twice, once before Spring Break and once after. You are also free to schedule additional meetings if you like. In these sessions, we can discuss what you are working on, what you are reading, your goals for your writing, and any other topic that you think would be valuable to discuss with me. Don't be shy!

Contact:

Feel free to email me any questions and concerns you have, and I'll do my best to respond to you within 24 hours. I've provided my phone number in case you need to contact me **urgently**. For the most part, I'd rather we communicate through email.

Health & Wellness:

Take your physical and mental health seriously. NYU offers many (free) services to support you, including the Wellness Exchange. The Wellness Exchange is your key to accessing the University's extensive health and mental health resources designed to address your needs. You can call a private hotline (212-443-9999), available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which will put you in touch with a professional who can help to address day-to-day challenges as well as other health-related concerns. These might include: medical issues, academic stress, depression, sexual assault, anxiety, alcohol and other drug dependence, sexually transmitted infections, eating disorders, etc. The hotline is also available if you just need to talk or want to call about a friend.

You can also stop by the Wellness Center right by campus:
726 Broadway
New York, NY
10003

You can also email them: wellness.exchange@nyu.edu

On Difficult Materials in Class:

This is a class about art, and art may (and often does) deal with difficult and disturbing themes. The prose and poetry written by your classmates may include difficult subject matter; the readings that I assign you will. I want you to be prepared for this in general, but I also want you to know that should you feel uncomfortable with certain class material, you are always welcome to speak to me privately. I cannot promise how class discussions will go, either during craft or workshop classes, but I will do my best to guide these discussions in an open and respectful manner.

Furthermore, as this is a creative writing course, unless there is explicit evidence to suggest otherwise, I will assume all speakers, characters, and events in your submissions are fictional. However, if there are concerning themes (murder, suicide, rape, etc.) or it seems like a cry for help, I will reach out to you via email to check in. If I am still concerned, or I don't hear back from you, I will reach out on your behalf to the Wellness Center and/or your advisor. This will be done with the utmost respect and privacy and only out of my concern for your health and safety. If you are struggling, please feel safe to reach out to me and I can help guide you to the available resources.

Workshop Procedure and Etiquette:

Workshopping is an exciting way to engage with literary craft and to move your own writing forward. Whether you're the one being workshopped or you're doing the workshopping, the issues that come up in discussion open new avenues of exploration and discovery for your work. Here are some guidelines to maximize the benefit for everyone:

Writers

- Submit pieces that you have worked on intensively, not something you slapped together the night before. On the other hand, make sure it's a fresh piece, one you genuinely want feedback on. Don't bring in a story or poem you wrote two years ago and are finished with.
- Don't get defensive. It's easy to feel threatened by criticism of creative work, since its sources are often deeply personal. But the workshop process is designed to help you develop as a writer, and that requires focusing a critical eye on your own work.
- **Think carefully before bringing autobiographical material to class.** Make sure it's something you're comfortable submitting to the workshop process.
- Silence is the best response as your work is being critiqued. This keeps you from feeling you have to explain or defend your work and leaves you free to listen. When asked a direct question, it's up to you whether you want to respond or respectfully decline. When the critique is over, you'll have a chance to ask your own questions and clarify comments made by me and your peers.
- Finally, remember that you are the sole author of your work. One of the skills of workshopping is the ability to sift through a range of critiques and pick out what's most useful to you.

Readers

- Read each piece twice. On the first read, simply absorb the story/poem. Sit with it for a moment. On the second read, begin your critical analysis.
- You should make line notes on the physical manuscript. See a great line? Note it. See a typo or grammatical error? Note it. Something not working as well as it could? Note it. Once you complete your line notes, write a response letter to the writer, telling them in greater detail what you enjoyed about their piece and what you think could be improved. Always start with what you like before moving onto questions, suggestions, and criticisms. Be both honest and respectful.
- Keep in mind that your first duty is to understand what the writer is trying to do and to help them do it better. Be open to the writer's unique vision and respectful of their struggle to put that vision on paper. **Don't assume that what the writer is trying to do has no value because it's not to your taste, and don't try to rewrite a writer's work to reflect your own preferences or style.**

**Provisional Reading and Workshop Schedule
(subject to change)**

FICTION aka GOOD LYING

Class 1 – Tuesday January 28th

Welcome!

First Day Introductions and Jubilations

Discuss Submission Schedule

Create Workshop Groups

Class 2 – Thursday January 30th

Darin Strauss – *Notes on Narrative* (essay)

Lesley Nneka Arimah – *Who Will Greet You at Home?*

Class 3 – Tuesday February 4th

Mock Fiction Workshop

Donald Barthelme – *The School*

George Saunders – *The Perfect Gerbil* (essay)

Class 4 – Thursday February 6th

Mock Fiction Workshop

Lorrie Moore – *How to Become a Writer*

Zadie Smith – *In Defense of Fiction* (essay)

ON NARRATIVE

Class 5 – Tuesday February 11th

John Cheever – *Reunion*

Denis Johnson – *Emergency*

Tobias Wolff – *Bullet in the Brain*

Class 6 – Thursday February 13th

Workshop A Stories Due

Etgar Keret – *One Gram Short*

Jamil Jan Kochai – *Playing MGSV: The Phantom Pain*

ON ATMOSPHERE

Class 7 – Tuesday February 18th

First Fiction Craft Response Due

Shirley Jackson – *The Lottery*

Raymond Carver – *Tell the Women We're Going*

Class 8 – Thursday February 20th

Workshop Group A

Workshop B Stories Due

John Updike – *Separating*

Ernest Hemingway – *Hills Like White Elephants*

ON CHARACTER

Class 9 – Tuesday February 25th

Second Fiction Craft Response Due

Anne Enright – *Natalie*

Jamaica Kincaid – *Girl*

Jeffrey Eugenides – *Baster*

Class 10 – Thursday February 27th

Workshop Group B

Workshop A Stories Due

Anton Chekov – *The Lady with the Dog*

Alain Mabanckou – *Robinette* (excerpt from *Broken Glass*)

Class 11 – Tuesday March 3rd

Alice Munro – *Boys and Girls*

Ottessa Moshfegh – *An Honest Woman*

Class 12 – Thursday March 5th

Workshop Group A

Workshop B Stories Due

James Baldwin – *Sonny's Blues*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman – *The Yellow Wallpaper*

ON the SPECULATIVE

Class 13 – Tuesday March 10th

Third Fiction Craft Response Due

George Saunders – *Escape from Spiderhead*

John Chu – *The Water that Falls on You from Nowhere*

Class 14 – Thursday March 12th

Workshop Group B

Ursula Vernon – *Jackalope Wives*

Amal El-Mohtar – *Seasons of Glass and Iron*

SPRING BREAK

No Classes

POETIC ReBEGINNINGS

Class 15 – Tuesday March 24th

Welcome back!

Discussion of your Portfolios

Individual Novel Assignments

Allen Ginsberg – *Howl / Wichita Vortex Sutra* (with composition by Phillip Glass)

Class 16 – Thursday March 26th

Mock Poetry Workshop

Edgar Allen Poe – *The Raven*

D.H. Lawrence – *Bavarian Gentians / The Mosquito*

Robert Frost – *Mending Wall / Stopping by Woods on Snowy Evening*

ON FORM

Class 17 – Tuesday March 31st

Sonnet L'Abbé – *CXIV*

Hasan Namir – *The Worst / How to Kill Homosexuals*

E.E. Cummings – *[as freedom is a breakfastfood] / ["kitty". sixteen,5'1",white,prostitute]*

Class 18 – Thursday April 2nd

Workshop B Poems Due

Terrance Hayes – *American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin*

Frank O'Hara – *Rhapsody / Ave Maria / ["Khrushchev is coming on the right day!"]*

Class 19 – Tuesday April 7th

Tommy Pico – Poems from *Junk and Feed*

Pablo Neruda – *The Men / Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market*

Ocean Vuong – *Aubade with Burning City / On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Class 20 – Thursday April 9th

Workshop Group B

Workshop A Poems Due

Langston Hughes – *Theme for English B / If-ing / Let America be America Again*

Danez Smith – *Dinosaurs in the Hood / dream where every black person is standing by the ocean*

ON SOUND

Class 21 – Tuesday April 14th

First Poetry Craft Response Due

Richard Aldington – *XOPIKΣ*

Jericho Brown – *Host / Hustle / Duplex*

Rachel Zucker – *Poem / Soundmachine*

**Class 22 – Thursday April 16th
Workshop Group A**

Workshop B Poems Due

Anne Carson – *The Glass Essay*
Basho, Buson, and Issa – Various *Haikus*
Toi Derricotte – *Abuse / Poem for My Father*

ON POETIC NARRATIVE

Class 23 – Tuesday April 21st

Second Poetry Craft Responses Due

Sylvia Plath – *The Colossus*
Brenda Shaughnessy – *Liquid Flesh / Why I Stayed, 1997-2001*
Sharon Olds – *Saturn / Ode to the Clitoris / The Task of Naming Me*

Class 24 – Thursday April 23rd

Workshop Group B

Workshop A Poems Due

Margaret Atwood – *They eat out / Marrying the Hangman*
Sally Wen Mao – *The Toll of the Sea / Anna May Wong Stars as Cyborg #86*

Class 25 – Tuesday April 28th

Third Poetry Response Due

Claude McKay – *The Lynching*
Nicole Sealey – *Even the Gods / Clue*
Natalie Diaz – *It was the Animals / My Brother My Wound*

Class 26 – Thursday April 30th

Workshop Group A

Robert Hayden – *The Ballad of Nat Turner*
William Butler Yeats – *Easter, 1916 / The Tower*
Emma Lazarus – *The New Colossus / By the Waters of Babylon*

FINALE

Class 27 – Tuesday May 5th

General End-of-the-Semester Discussion

What makes stories and poems “good?”

Flannery O’Connor – *Good Country People*
Ilya Kaminsky – Poems from *Deaf Republic / We Lived Happily During the War*

Class 28 – Thursday May 7th

End of Class Party

Class Readings
e x c i t e m e n t

Monday May 11th
Portfolio and Final Project Due

You should place them in my mailbox at the Lillian Vernon Writer's House by 5pm

The mailboxes are in the basement of the house by the kitchen

There's an elevator on the main floor by the stairs

And more stairs in the back of the house

I have faith you'll find it