

**Nolan Capps**

**CRIWRI-UA 815 013**

**Tu-Th 8:00-9:15 am**

### **Intro to Creative Writing**

“The ear is a great editor.”—Yusef Komunyakaa

“Get black on white.”—Guy de Maupassant

#### **Course Overview**

This course aims to give students strategies to become stronger writers. Of course, becoming a stronger writer means we’ll discuss craft, but it also means we’ll develop the confidence, routine, and enthusiasm required to become lifelong writers and self-directed students of the craft.

Step one is getting out of our own way: giving ourselves permission to write, developing a process, and getting to work. Step two—the first half of the term—is learning the *physics* of story. What gives stories *charge* and *momentum*? What makes a story gratifying? What keeps a reader glued to the page? Rather than focus on the beauty and power of a single sentence, as we study prose, we’ll look at the emotional mechanisms and plot devices which make good works of fiction impossible to put down.

Finally, in the second half of the term, we will examine the language itself. As we study poetry, we will learn to avoid cliché, craft startling images, and develop an ear for the rhythm and sound of language.

Each student is encouraged to develop a process, and to maintain a weekly journal describing the process and material produced. Each student will workshop at least one piece of prose and one poem and will be asked to provide written and spoken feedback to their peers—with a focus on kindness and constructive criticism. We will conduct ten-minute writing exercises each class period to generate ideas and challenge our creativity. Finally, we will conduct weekly readings which will inform our craft classes. These readings will include poems, short stories, and short novels (all available online or as handouts), as well as selections from *The Writer’s Journey* by Christopher Vogler. Students will submit a portfolio at midterm and at the end of the class.

#### **Grading**

Grading in this course is a function of your effort, participation, and attendance. If you submit original work, complete workshop letters for your peers, compile a portfolio

in a timely manner, and participate in workshops and class discussions, you will make an A in this class. The quality of your writing *does not matter*. First drafts are *always* flawed—and there’s freedom in recognizing this and giving yourself permission to create flawed work. There is no expectation for you to write *perfect* stories or poems—if such things exist—but there is an expectation for you to set and achieve realistic writing goals, to produce and revise drafts, and to assist your peers in doing the same. That said, your grade includes:

Workshop Submissions –	10%
Participation –	15%
Midterm Portfolio –	15%
Attendance –	20%
Workshop Letters –	20%
Final Portfolio –	20%

There will be an opportunity for a total of 5% extra credit in the form of Process Journals, for a possible final grade of 105%.

### **Workshop Structure**

Writers should submit to workshop one week in advance. Because the nature of submissions can vary greatly, I’m reluctant to place hard restrictions on length. Just so you have some guideline, anything between five and fifteen pages of prose is fine, so long as it has a beginning, middle, and end. Three to five pages of poetry is also fine—think three short poems or one long poem. If you’re working on something shorter or longer than these guidelines, discuss with the class beforehand, and we’ll decide whether it’s fair and acceptable.

Depending on the class size, we will workshop one to three students per workshop day. Each workshop session will last about twenty minutes, depending on the scope of the piece. I will begin by leading us in discussing the elements of the piece which work and excite us, and then we’ll take a few minutes to discuss the elements which could be improved in revisions. During this time, the author will listen and take notes, and only speak if a specific question arises. At the end of the workshop, the author will have an opportunity to ask questions of the class.

While I ask the class to be kind, I also ask the authors to be gracious and receptive to criticism—it’s not personal, it’s workshop. If comments become personal or insulting, however, I will step in and redirect the discussion in a more positive direction. If a student persists, or if their comments are hateful, racist, sexist, or otherwise demeaning, I will invite the offending student to leave.

Schedule note: while I've scheduled us four prose workshops and four poetry workshops, I know plans often go awry. Students *will* workshop at least once in prose, once in poetry, but our format and schedule are flexible and will adapt to the size and needs of the class and to any crises that emerge.

### **The Workshop Letter**

The Workshop is an invaluable tool to a writer's development, but even the best workshop and the most well-meaning criticism can shake a writer's confidence (trust me). Therefore, the most important rule for all feedback, including the workshop letter, is BE KIND. When you provide criticism, make sure it's criticism the author can use ("I was bored," or "the piece wasn't to my taste," is unacceptable). And remember, you're trying to help the author realize *her* vision of the piece, not writing the piece for her. Email your letters to me and to the author before the beginning of the workshop.

An "A" workshop letter is 250-500 words long, includes a brief synopsis of the piece and the author's aims, and identifies at least three elements of the piece that are working, or better yet, exciting. Finally, include at least one question you have about the piece, OR something in the piece that was unclear, OR something which could be improved in revisions. Remember, be kind. Workshop is not a contest or a chance to prove your intelligence. It's a place for art and artists to grow.

Grading note: workshop letters count twice as much as your submissions both because you'll write more of them, and because they force you to develop a critical eye and ear. In truth, workshop letters aren't for the author of the piece—they're for *you*.

### **Participation**

To receive a full 15% for participation, students must speak up every day in class. By speak up, I mean with a constructive comment or question during discussion or workshop. Absences will not affect your participation, unless attendance becomes a problem (three or more absences). If your participation grade is in danger, I will let you know before midterms, although I hope none of us have that problem.

### **Portfolios**

I will collect portfolios twice per semester, on October 22 and December 10. The midterm portfolio, for 15% of your final grade, will contain at least:

- 1) One piece of prose
- 2) The compilation of our daily writing exercises
- 3) Process Journals, for extra credit

The final portfolio, for 20% of your final grade, will contain at least:

- 1) Two drafts of a piece of prose (a first draft and a revision)
- 2) Three poems (at least one of these three must include a first draft and a revised draft)
- 3) The compilation of our daily writing exercises
- 4) Process Journals, for extra credit

Revision note: line-by-line editing is not revision. Rules of revision will be detailed in class and throughout the semester (because revision is where the magic happens).

### Process Journals

A Process Journal, which I will discuss more in the second week of class, is a documentation of the writer's routine. These will be somewhat individual, as a writer is entitled to develop her own routine and process. But here is an example:

Date	Writing & Word Count	Reading	Writing Time	Reading Time	Running Total (for July)
7.1.2020	800, rewriting "submission"	3-Day Blow, The Hobbit, Saunders Essay	1 hour	1 hour	800 words, 2 hours
7.2.2020	700, rewriting ""	Standard of Living	1 hour	15 minute	1500, 3 hr 15
7.3.2020	250, rewriting ""	Sea Oak, Saint, Finished Wired for Story	30 minute	1 hour 15	1750, 5 hr
7.4.2020	No Writing, Holiday	Finished Hobbit, Start Days of Abandonment	0	1 hour	1750, 6 hr

At the end of each month, I use a page in my Process Journal to describe accomplishments I've made over the past month, difficulties I've faced in my writing life, lessons I've learned, and notes about good (and sometimes bad) books that I've read. A reflection page is also a good place to pat yourself on the back, to write down some encouragement for yourself. Writing is a brutal, confidence-shaking business—sometimes, the only person who will encourage you is yourself.

Please note that I do not expect you to write an hour a day for this class. But I do expect you to develop a routine—twenty to thirty minutes of writing four to five days a week, and about the same of reading, should be enough—and I encourage you to document this routine in a journal, which can take the form of your choosing. Students who do so and turn in complete Process Journals will receive 2.5% extra credit on their midterm portfolio, and the same amount on their final portfolio.

## **Attendance**

Attendance constitutes 20% of your grade. I expect you to be here. One unexcused absence is fine and won't count against you. But each subsequent absence costs 5%. Any student who misses five classes will meet with me to discuss either makeup assignments or being dropped from the class.

I also expect punctuality. Class starts at 8 am—however, we're imperfect people in an imperfect world. Any student who arrives within five minutes of the start of class will not be marked late. Three late appearances (more than five minutes) count as an absence. Any student who arrives more than fifteen minutes late will be counted absent for the day.

Again, I understand that life is full of crises. If you have a legitimate reason for tardiness or absence, talk to me. If attendance becomes a problem, we will schedule a meeting to discuss a solution. Please know that if we start the class together, I want us to finish together.

## **Office Hours**

Office hours will be conducted through Zoom, and I have flexible availability Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday afternoons. I'd like every student to arrange to meet with me at least once over the semester, either to discuss the course directly, or for general writing or school-related questions. I am at your disposal.

## **Plagiarism**

Writers can, and should, borrow heavily from their own lives and from other writers. But there is a difference between influence and plagiarism. I will not tolerate plagiarism in this class. Don't do it. If I catch you lifting passages from published works, or worse, from your peers, I will report you. Please read NYU's Academic Integrity Policy: <https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policiesand-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html>

If you're struggling to meet a deadline or feeling overwhelmed, please talk to me. I'd much rather work out an extension than see you fail my class for cheating.

## **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 (address below):

NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities 726 Broadway,  
2nd Floor New York, NY 10003-6675 4

Telephone: 212-998-4980

Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114

Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

## **Student Wellness Policy**

Unless there is explicit evidence in workshop that the speaker of a work is the writer themselves, I 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 prompt my 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.

## **Course Schedule**

### **Week 1**

1) Thu 9.3: Introductions, syllabus and class expectations, begin reading *Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster\*

### **Week 2**

2) Tue 9.8: Craft lesson: Confidence, Routine & Process, introduction to Process Journals, workshop groups assigned, continue reading *Phantom Tollbooth*

3) Thu 9.10: Craft lesson: Inner and Outer Problem in *Phantom Tollbooth*. Plus: What is a Scene? Begin reading "The Half-Skinned Steer" by Annie Proulx

### **Week 3**

4) Tue 9.15: Craft lesson: Ultimatum (or, The Ticking Clock) in "The Half-Skinned Steer." Begin reading *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman\*

5) Thu 9.17: Craft lesson: The Ordinary World and Special World in *Coraline*. Workshop group 1 submits. Read "Bluebeard"

### **Week 4**

6) Tue 9.22: Craft lesson: The Forbidden Door in "Bluebeard." Plus: What is A Set-Up?

7) Thu 9.24: Workshop group 1, group 2 submits. Read “The Jewish Hunter” by Lorrie Moore

### **Week 5**

8) Tue 9.29: Craft lesson: Scene and Transition in “The Jewish Hunter”

9) Thu 10.1: Workshop group 2, group 3 submits. Read “The Era” by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

### **Week 6**

10) Tue 10.6: Craft lesson: Desire and Mission in “The Era.” Plus: Worldbuilding with Voice.

11) Thu 10.8: Workshop group 3, group 4 submits, read “Drown” by Junot Diaz

### **Week 7**

12) Tue 10.13: Craft lesson: Reader Expectation in “Drown.” Plus: Affect and Vulnerability

13) Thu 10.15: Workshop group 4, Read “The Pugilist at Rest” by Thom Jones

### **Week 8**

14) Tue 10.20: Final prose craft lesson: Literary Reference in “The Pugilist at Rest.” Plus: The Sacred and the Profane. Attempt to write a “Bad Poem”

15) Thu 10.22: First poetry craft lesson: sharing “Bad Poetry,” discussion of quality in poetry. Submit midterm portfolios. Read “What Work Is” by Phil Levine, and “Digging,” by Seamus Heaney

### **Week 9**

16) Tue 10.27: Craft lesson: The Mundane in “What Work Is,” and “Digging.” Plus, Forms: Haiku and Image

17) Thu 10.29: Workshop group 1 submits poetry. Read “The Eve of St. Agnes” by John Keats

### **Week 10**

18) Tue 11.3: Craft lesson: The Sensory in “Eve of St. Agnes”

19) Thu 11.5: Workshop group 1, group 2 submits. Read selections from Terrance Hayes

### **Week 11**

20) Tue 11.10: Forms: Sonnet, Rhythm, and Meter

21) Thu 11.12: Workshop group 2, group 3 submits. Read “An Inference of Mexico” by Robert Hayden

**Week 12**

22) Tue 11.17: Craft lesson: Scene and Tableau in “An Inference of Mexico”

23) Thu 11.19: Workshop group 3. Read “My Brother at 3 AM” by Natalie Diaz

**Week 13**

24) Tue 11.24: Forms: Villanelle, “My Brother at 3 AM.” Group 4 submits

Thu 11.26: Thanksgiving Break. Read selections from Ada Limón

**Week 14**

25): Tue 12.1: Craft lesson: Alliteration, Assonance, and Restraint

26): Thu 12.3: Group 4, final workshop

**Week 15**

27): Tue 12.8: Final craft lesson/discussion on topics chosen by students

Final Class: Thu 12.10: Student reading, final portfolios due

\*Please do not be alarmed by the inclusion of children’s books in this syllabus. These assignments are not an insult to your intelligence. I chose them because they are unsubtle and easy to deconstruct. The writers’ strategies lie on the surface for us to study, steal, and apply to more nuanced works.