

Instructor: Benjamin West

Course Number: CRWRI-UA 815.024

Time: Mondays and Wednesdays, 8:00 – 9:15 am

Classroom:

Office Hours: By appointment

Contact: benjaminbondwest@gmail.com

The most basic goal of this class is to get *you* to put words on the page and, eventually, hopefully soon, become proud of those words. It does not matter if you have dozens of empty Moleskines on your shelf, or if you don't know the difference between parataxis and hypotaxis. It does not matter, really, if you've never considered yourself a writer before this moment. All that matters—and this is of the utmost importance—all that matters is that you *want* to write and that you're *willing* to dedicate time and energy to growing your craft.

You also should have a hunger for, and hopefully some sort of history with, reading. Have you ever met a musician who doesn't listen to music? A filmmaker who doesn't like movies? "Writing is only a more exacting form of reading," David Morley writes in the *Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing*. I don't care if you're not well read—with virtually a Library of Babel out there in the world, nobody can actually claim to be truly *well read*. But I hope you enjoy the act of reading for knowledge and pleasure, because once you're there, we can build on that the critical eye of a deep reader for whom every poem, story, or essay has the potential to be an influence or a lesson.

This class will be exceedingly hands-on and discussion-based. I will not be standing up at the front of some fluorescent room talking *at* you for an hour and fifteen minutes. We're all bringing something unique to the table, so while I will be there to center the conversation, expect to participate, to learn, and in a way, to teach.

The Basics

So, here's how we'll go about this. Mondays will be our workshop days and Wednesdays will be our craft discussion days. Every Monday, once we've established in detail what a workshop is and had our hand at a practice one, we'll be using our class time to critique our fellow students' stories, essays, or poems. On Wednesdays we'll be discussing the major tenants of creative writing, things like metaphor, point of view, rhythm and the writer's voice. We'll do this by reading a wide range of famous and not-so-famous prose and poetry and discussing as a class

how the work relates to the topic at hand. We'll also frequently do in class writing exercises and play literary games. We might even leave the classroom every once in a while.

The Specifics

This class will be tech free. Everything will be done using paper hard copies.

There will only be one text you need to buy, Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, which is available at the NYU bookstore and extensively online (for cheap copies I recommend Abebooks or Thriftbooks, though order ahead to make up for shipping times!). All other texts will be linked or posted via Google Drive.

Mondays:

-Ultimately, the most effective way to learn to write is just to do it. So we'll begin workshopping almost immediately.

-Each person will be workshopped 3 times. At least two of the pieces must be prose, though all three can be so. You must also specify what genre you're working in (fiction, nonfiction, or poetry) when you submit, though it's okay to blur the lines or subvert expectations a little bit. Workshop 2 or 3 can be a revision.

-Prose workshops will be between 5 and 10 pages double spaced. Poetry will consist of 4 to 8 poems of any length.

-Workshop pieces will be submitted the previous Monday. Submitting students will print out 13 copies (one for everybody including me) and bring them to class.

-To prepare to workshop your classmates' work, before class you'll be making line edits on the hard copies they've handed out. You'll also write a (1ish) page letter summarizing your overall takeaways. You'll use both the manuscript and the letter to help guide your critiques in class, and then you'll hand them in to the student. Please also print out a second copy of the letter to hand in to me.

Wednesdays:

-Wednesdays you'll come to class having read the assigned material. Typically, it will be one to two prose pieces and a poem. You'll also come having written about 300 to 500 words analyzing how the readings relate to one another. You'll print these out and hand them in after class.

-I highly recommend you print out the readings and make notes and observations in the margins. This will give you something to reference during discussion (remember, no laptops). That said, it is not required.

-Once we've discussed the readings and followed the discussion wherever it takes us, we'll typically do an in class writing assignments or play a game. These assignments won't be turned in, but sometimes we'll read them aloud.

-Occasionally, we'll use Wednesdays to go out into the world to partake in boots on the ground writing exercises or even have a guest come to class.

General:

Throughout the semester, we'll all be writing a 'Stimuli' journal as a semi-daily habit. We'll discuss exactly what it will entail in class and read some examples, but just know that this will not take up much of your time. Every few weeks, I'll ask you to send me 5 to 8 of your favorite entries and we'll use them in class.

In lieu of an exam, you'll be submitting a portfolio of your revised work. This will consist of two revised pieces from workshop and two shorter pieces expanded either from our weekly in-class prompts or your weekly reading responses.

Finally, you can get extra credit by going to author readings, hosted at the CWP Writers' House (you'll definitely see me there) or throughout the city at places like KGB Bar (you'll quite possibly see me there).

Grading:

Creative assignments (25%): The three pieces you'll hand in for workshop. They must meet the length requirements, and be printed and on time when your group submits.

Participation (20%): This is a big one. I know 8 A.M. is early, but class participation is the backbone of what we're doing here—on both Mondays and Wednesdays. Please see me if you're having trouble speaking up in class; I can one hundred percent relate and we'll work out ways to make it easier. Also, I will reach out in private and let you know in advance if your participation grade is suffering in any way.

Workshop critiques (20%): This means critiquing your classmates' work when they are being workshopped. Marking up their manuscript and writing them a letter with your overall summarized thoughts.

Final portfolio (15%): Due on my desk exam week

Reading responses (10%): Reading responses due on Wednesdays.

Stimuli journal (10%): Stimuli journal due sporadically.

Attendance: You have to come to class. I allow one unexcused absence during the semester, and after that each missed class results in a grade deduction (e.g. “B+” becomes “B”). If you arrive more than 15 minutes late, you’ll be marked tardy. And two tardies equal an absence.

Cheating: Plagiarism is very very rare in courses like this one. That said, if you turn in work that isn’t your own, you’ll immediately fail the class and be reported to higher academic authority. I’m not worried about this at all, but still, it’s so easy to check when something seems off. Just don’t do it.

In a similar vein, you’re allowed to submit one revised piece as one of your workshops. Do not submit anything written for another class for workshop.

Disclaimers and other important notes: I reserve the right to change course requirements, readings, etc. I almost certainly won’t, but if it becomes necessary, I’ll let you know far in advance and explain why. Just know this syllabus is not a binding contract.

If you have any concerns about your health or mental health related to this course, including concerns about trauma, triggering materials, PTSD, or difficult interactions in workshop, please come talk to me about them. Like any creative writing course, we may interact with disturbing narratives.

That said, please include a trigger warning if your piece is dealing with difficult topics.

How to reach me: Email, benjaminbondwest@gmail.com, is by far the best way. If something is urgent, please send me a text at **757-784-6268**. I get a lot of spam calls, so I rarely pick up numbers not in my contacts. **Office hours are by appointment only** but don’t let that scare you away!

Schedule:

September

5 (M) NO CLASS (Labor Day)

- 7 (W) Ice Breaker. Go over syllabus, set workshop schedule, discuss workshop etiquette.
- 12 (M) *Cultivating creativity*. Habits. Discussion of ongoing ‘stimuli’ journal project.
[Otherpppl podcast episode 373—Bud Smith](#)
Excerpts from Peter Handke’s *The Weight of the World*, Annie Ernaux’s *Exteriors*, and Joan Didion’s *South and West*
- 14 (W) *Formal restrictions as your grindstone*. Writers block is a myth. Discussion of future daily writing assignments
No readings due in class, but begin Renata Adler’s *Speedboat*
- 19 (M) Practice workshop!
Remedies by Kali Fajardo-Anstine
Group 1 submits
- 21 (W) *Blurred lines what are genres? And where do they collude or collide?*
Renata Adler’s Speedboat
- 26 (M) Group 1 workshop
Group 2 submits
- 28 (W) Class activity. [Meet in Washington Square Park](#)

October

- 3 (M) Group 2 workshop

Group 3 submits

- 5 (W) *Voice and style*
On Style by Emily Hiestand
Been by Kiese Laymon (prologue to *Heavy*)
- 10 (M) NO CLASS (Fall Break) Meet Tuesday (tomorrow)
- 11 (T) Group 3 workshop
Group 4 submits
- 12 (W) *Defamiliarization, obfuscation, vivification*. Discussion of metaphor and other tools in your toolbox

Excerpts from both Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* and Kate Braverman's *Lithium for Medea*

When My Brother Was an Aztec by Natalie Diaz
- 17 (M) Group 4 workshop
Group 1 submits
- 19 (W) *Point of View*

Excerpts from Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*
- 24 (M) Group 1 workshop
Group 2 submits
- 26 (W) *Odd nodes of literature*. Discussion of concrete poetry, cut ups, exquisite corpse, and more

Bring a cheap paperback you don't mind destroying

31 (M) Group 2 workshop
Group 3 submits

November

2 (W) *Rhythm makes music*
James Wright's *A Poem Written Under an Archway in a Discontinued Railroad Station Fargo, North Dakota*
Girl by Jamaica Kincaid

7 (M) Group 3 workshop
Group 4 submits

9 (W) *The objective correlative*
Trilobites by Breece D'J Pancake
The Search for Marvin Gardens by John McPhee

14 (M) Group 4 workshop
Group 1 submits (Last round!)

16 (W) *Exploding the moment*
Chapters 1 through 3 of Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*

21 (M) Group 1 workshop
Group 2 submits

23 (W) NO CLASS (Fall Break)

28 (M) Group 2 workshop

Group 3 submits

30 (W) *Research*. Introduction to common tools for writers.

As crazy as it seems: Please bring your laptops to class today

December

5 (M) Group 3 workshop

Group 4 submits

7 (W) *The mundane*

Pink and Blue by The Mountain Goats

College by Mary Ruefle

12 (M) Group 4 workshop

14 (W) *How?, why?, where?, to submit your work*