

INTRODUCTION TO PROSE & POETRY: THE PRACTICE AND CRAFT OF CREATIVE WRITING

COURSE SUMMARY/MINIATURE VERSION OF YOUR INSTRUCTOR'S THEORY OF CREATIVE WRITING

Hi y'all: My name is Ross, and if you choose to take this section of this class, I'll be your instructor. Not that this makes me any kind of expert on how to do it, but I have been writing creatively for a while, long enough to find out that what people refer to as *creative writing*—regardless of what genre they happen to be talking about—is (at least) two things.

For one, creative writing is a *craft*: by which Merriam-Webster means, “an occupation, trade or activity requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill,” and by which I mean, “a thing you can, with effort and attention, learn to get better at,” and by “*get better at*,” I really mean, “enjoy doing more.” People like to talk about how writing can't be taught, and this is partly true: creative writing does involve vision and self-motivation, which put together people often call *talent*. But it's only partly true that creative writing can't be taught, and it's even less true that it can't be learned. Think of the writer you most admire right now, and then think of your favorite thing that person has written. Now: matter what piece of writing you're thinking of (be it poem, short story, novel, essay, memoir, screenplay, song, or other), I can guarantee you two things about it.

Guarantee 1: that piece of writing is not the first thing this author wrote.

Guarantee 2: Guarantee 1 is not a coincidence.

If you trust me on those, then you'll trust me when I say that at least part of creative writing can be learned or developed, and that part is what I'm calling *craft*. In this class we're going to get at *craft* by reading widely, and talking and thinking about how the writer's we've read do what they do. Note: this is not the same kind of conversation you had in AP English. We are very much not going to be talking about what, e.g., the symbol of the golf course in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* means in the context of the economic conditions of the postbellum South. We are not in the business of affixing meaning here. We are in the business of seeing what we do and don't like in a piece of writing, and whether we we can profitably borrow or at least learn anything from it.

For another, creative writing is a *practice*: for which M-W supplies like seven different definitions, my favorite being “a repeated or customary action” and “a systematic exercise for proficiency,” although I might personally amend that second definition to read, “a systematic exercise for discovering things you did not otherwise know to be true,” or “a systematic exercise for promoting the mental wellbeing of self and others.” Now, given these definitions, *craft* and *practice* are not mutually exclusive terms, but they also aren't the same thing. And while *craft* is important, and we want to bring what we learn about *craft* to bear on our creative writing practice, *there is no craft without practice*. The chicken in this case definitely came first. You have to write the first thing in order to write the best or most satisfying thing, and in order to make it the best or most satisfying thing, you are going to have to revise the thing. And while we can talk about practice, the leading-horses-to-water cliché very much applies here. Only you can teach yourself *to write*. But to facilitate you learning this part, this class will require you to do some creative writing of your own, and will grade you (sort of) on the writing you do. Hopefully that's an exciting prospect for you; if not, pause here and reconsider enrolling in this class.

Note: for the most part, your grade in this class will be a function of your effort, not a function of “how good the instructor thought my story was.” Readerly taste is subjective, and mine is not particularly important here. But I will be able to tell if you're phoning it in, and I'll definitely be able to tell if you're plagiarizing, or absent. Avoid those three things and you will get a grade you can at the very least live with.

COURSE SYNOPSIS:

There are roughly two parts to this class, corresponding to creative writing as both *craft* and *practice*. In the first half of class, we're going to read published work from the list below, and we're going

to try to do so *as writers* (which is different from reading as critics, or as literature students; we'll talk about this more later). We'll also do some writing exercises in class, which will not be graded but will, hopefully, be fun and/or stimulative of the creative writing you do submit for a grade. Your grades here will depend on your participation in class and short written assignments in which you'll respond to the readings. Your participation in class is going to be imperative; the nice part is, there are no wrong answers here.

This is going to prepare us for the second half of this class, when we will move on to workshopping your own creative work. We'll talk at length about how workshop is gonna go, but just as a brief logistical overview: each of you will workshop two original pieces of creative writing over the second half of the semester. You'll also be responsible for writing critique letters to each of your classmates' workshop submissions. As a class, we'll workshop two pieces per session, meaning we'll talk about each piece for about half an hour. Your grade here will depend on your (verbal) contribution to workshop, your critique letters to your classmates, and the creative work you submit yourself. As a final project, you'll turn in a revised draft of one of your two workshop submissions.

GRADING BREAKDOWN:

Class participation: 20%

Written responses: 20%

Workshop critique letters: 20%

First workshop submission: 10%

Second workshop submission: 10%

Final draft: 10%

Instructor discretion: 10%. (I'll tack 10% onto whichever of the above sections you have the highest grade on. One thing we're gonna try to do in this class is appreciate, and celebrate, what we're good at).

ATTENDANCE/LATENESS/LATE WORK POLICY:

Basically: if you show up, and make all reasonable efforts to be on time, I'll be very grateful. There's not gonna be a set policy about lateness. Class is going to start on time. If you are routinely not present when that happens, and are missing a substantive amount of discussion and/or slowing the class down as a result, that's something I'll deal with on a case-by-case basis.

Grading implications of unexcused absences:

1: Freebie. We're all human.

2-4: Costs one-third of a letter grade. You miss two classes without advance notice/excuse, the very best you can do here is an A-. Miss four, your ceiling is a B.

5+: Grounds for failure, subject to instructor discretion.

Basically also: turn your assignments in on time. Everything we write in this class—whether it's a response to an assigned reading, a critique letter for your classmate's piece, or your own creative work—will form the basis for our class discussions, so if you aren't turning in work on time, you individually might as well not be present, and we collectively might as well forego the whole endeavor. You'll be docked one letter grade per day of lateness for all written assignments, with the exception of your workshop pieces. These you simply cannot submit late without torpedoing an entire class period, and the consequence for that is an F.

LAPTOP/ELECTRONIC DEVICE POLICY:

No laptops open in class. Nor phones or tablets. Don't take this personally. We're all human, and the screens are designed to distract humans.

READING LIST:

Below is a list of the stuff I'd like for us to read this semester. I love most of these and have strong feelings about all of them, but we probably will not have a chance to read them all. Rather than breaking our reading list into genre, we're going to proceed in units that correspond to elements that matter to every genre of creative writing. That means we'll be reading poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction as we go along. One thing I hope you emerge from this class with is a sense of freedom with respect to genre: a sense that you enjoy the writing you're doing, even if you don't know exactly what to call it.

Rather than trying to hammer out the whole schedule now, I'm going to assign the readings for each class as we go along, getting your feedback and then curating from this selection the works I think you all will get the most out of reading.

Note: You will not need to buy anything. I'll provide digital copies of all of this stuff. You will, however, be responsible for printing those digital copies out and bringing them to class.

Note also: If you are interested in an education in the more technical aspects of poetry—if, e.g., you want lessons on trochaic feet and tetrameter—I am going to strongly encourage you to use your NYU tuition dollars toward another section of this class. I am not an authority on this stuff and won't try to pass as one.

UNIT 1: VOICE (OR: A STORY COMES FROM SOMEONE)

Greg Jackson, "Wagner in the Desert"
Junot Diaz, "How to Date a Browngirl"
George Saunders, "Pastoralia" and "Victory Lap"
Ottessa Mossfeigh, excerpts from *Eileen*
Brian Washington, excerpts from *Lot*
Ocean Vuong, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong"
Natalie Diaz, "When My Brother Was an Aztec"

UNIT 2: SETTING (OR: WHERE ARE WE, AND HOW DO WE KNOW WE'RE HERE?)

Maggie Nelson, excerpts from *The Argonauts*
Don DeLillo, "Pafko at the Wall"
Emma Kline, "White Noise"
Jenny Offill, excerpts from *Weather*
Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis"
John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Getting Down to What is Really Real"
David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"
Major Jackson, "November in Xichang"

UNIT 3: PLOT (OR: TIME + TENSION)

Denis Johnson, excerpts from *Jesus' Son*
Carolyn Forché, "The Colonel"
Eileen Myles, "Peanut Butter"
David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon"
Joan Didion, excerpts from *My Year of Magical Thinking*
Alice Munro, "The Progress of Love"
Atticus Lish, excerpts from *Preparation for the Next Life*