

## Introduction to Prose and Poetry

Instructor: August Thompson

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### Objective

The objective and goal of this course is to examine modes of writing poetry and prose through studying classic and contemporary works, then using these jumping off points to explore the great, endless potential that is your own writing. For those new to writing, or those looking to continue, this is an opportunity to explore, fail gloriously, get dusted and dirtied up, brush yourself off, and continue on with the support of your fellow classmates and instructor. This is a class that is very much about effort and building on what you know, not about whatever one perceives to be as *talent*. Writing, as they say, is stumbling in the dark. I want this course to be your way to explore without breaking your nose.

Additionally, I want to emphasize that this is not a class for writers, but a class for writing. If you've never written a sentence of prose or uttered a limerick, you'll be just as home here as those who have years of writing experience.

We will study a variety of texts, including short and longform poetry, short stories, memoir and narrative nonfiction, a novella and a novel. By synthesizing these texts and talking about them in detail in a democratic style, we'll hope to learn something about what makes a piece of writing good, and how the process of revision can make the good great. Each week's craft will focus on different questions in writing—many perhaps unanswerable—and how these questions impact one's own writing.

In addition to studying texts, including those by Jennifer Egan, Denis Johnson, Roberto Bolaño, Ocean Vuong, Maggie Nelson, and many more, you will submit **3** pieces of writing throughout the semester to be workshopped by your classmates and your instructor. For those new to workshopping, the format of workshop will be explained in greater detail on the first day of class.

All of the reading done in this class will be done from the perspective of writing and how to become a better writer. If you want literary criticism or a more academic approach to prose and poetry, you may find this course lacking. If you want to push your craft and explore the many questions that writing offers, you've found a home.

### Class Structure

Excepting school holidays, we will meet twice a week on **Mondays and Wednesdays from 4:55 PM - 6:10 PM**. Generally, the class will be divided in two, with Monday classes dedicated to craft studies (aka reading the work of established authors and discussing the work) and Wednesdays dedicated to workshop. This may be malleable depending on how the semester plays out, but that's the general idea.

Most craft weeks will feature a combination of texts centralized around a certain theme, style or idea.

## **Weekly Assignments**

Each week you will have a set of responsibilities. The first is to complete the reading. I will keep the reading demands of this course relatively low so that we may discuss things in finer detail. For each set of readings, you will be required to do a brief creative response that follows guidelines I've set out weekly. **During weeks in which you workshop, you are exempt from turning in a creative reading response.**

Additionally, you are expected to mark up your classmates' writing for workshop and write a response. Your response should be about a page long, and reflect the form of a letter that offers critique and instills confidence. Write what you thought worked, what you thought needed bettering, questions you had, etc. This should come from a place of empathy and compassion—writing is the ultimate act of vulnerability. Let's create a space that is brave enough to be vulnerable.

I will collect both the weekly reading assignments and the letter-length responses to workshop (that means print two copies.) Both will be core elements of your grade as well as launching pads for discussion.

Please, do the reading. It makes life so much more fun. And if it's evident that you are not doing the reading, I will be forced to lower your grade by one third of a letter grade.

## **Workshop Submissions**

On your assigned workshop dates, you will submit your piece a full week before your workshop date. That means all workshop pieces must be submitted by the **Thursday** before your workshop by **10 PM**. This will give your classmates plenty of time to read with generosity and focus. (For example, if you are workshopping on September 29th, you will have to submit your piece by September 23rd at 10 PM.)

Please, submit all work in 12 point font—Times, Times New Roman and Garamond are acceptable—and make sure to double space.

**You are expected to print out each reading and workshop piece before class. No computers or tablets will be allowed. Each piece should be marked up with pen.**

Throughout the semester, you will turn in **three workshop pieces**:

—one poem or set of poems, between 2 and 6 pages.

—one piece of prose (fiction or creative nonfiction,) between 5 and 15 pages.

—one piece of your choosing, either poetry, prose, or some combination.

## **Final Portfolio**

On the last day of class, before our video celebration, you will turn in a final portfolio. This portfolio will consist of your **3 workshop pieces** and **all reading responses**. Additionally, you

will be required to make **substantial revision** to **one** of the three workshop pieces to be turned in with your portfolio. Please discuss with me which piece you plan on revising before doing so.

### **Grading**

In-class participation (attendance, contribution to discussions): 30%

Writing: 25%

Written feedback to classmates: 25%

Final Portfolio: 20%

### **Attendance**

You are allowed one unexcused absence. Each unexcused absence beyond that will drop your letter grade automatically a third of a letter grade (A to A-, B+ to B.)

Being more than 10 minutes late counts as an unexcused absence. Punctuality is particularly important on workshop days. Give your classmates' hard work and vulnerability the attention and time it deserves.

### **Participation**

Please, come to class ready to talk. Readings completed, responses written. Workshop submissions marked up dutifully, responses written. Workshops live and die on the hill of discussion—I'll be there to encourage you and direct and, of course, offer advice and feedback, but good conversation is what will keep us all sane, not to mention all of us progressing.

If you're a person who prefers to be quiet in class, I'm compassionate to this as well. While not mandatory, I'd encourage you to write me an email or come to office hours so we can discuss alternative ways in which you can show your participation.

### **Technology**

Phones, laptops and tablets should be turned off and put in your backpack. Violations of this will lead to a lowering of your grade a third of a letter grade per incident.

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism means instantly failing the course and being reported to the overseers of academic integrity.

### **Office Hours**

TBD

Each student is encouraged to come to as many office hours as possible. **One** office hour meeting with me during the semester is mandatory.

### **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 register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980, or at 726 Broadway (2nd floor) or at [www.nyu.edu/csd](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, we 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 receive 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.

Additionally, I encourage you to think deeply about the why if writing about things like sexual violence, racism, prejudice and beyond. Shock value is not a viable reason for this class.

### **Texts:**

Texts for each week will be posted by me to your NYU Classes course. Most will either be available online or scanned and posted by me.

There are two required texts which you must purchase or check out from the library:

*Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson  
*A Visit From the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

### ***Week One***

MONDAY  
**NO CLASS (Labor Day)**

WEDNESDAY  
Welcome – Introductions – Review Syllabus—Assign Workshop Groups

### ***Week Two***

MONDAY  
Fiction Craft 1: In pursuit of perfection.

What is a perfect short story? Can such a thing exist? Do short stories have an obligation to achieve “perfection” because of their brevity, whereas a novel’s exploratory nature and length excuses it from words like flawless? We’ll look at three short stories that are often lauded in writing classes (much like this one) as go-to, can’t-miss short stories. All three are very different, yet the same modifier is applied to them. Why is that?

Readings:

- The School*, Donald Barthelme
- Babylon Revisited*, F. Scott Fitzgerald
- A Good Man is Hard To Find*, Flannery O’Conner

**Assignment:** Select a passage from a piece of prose—a favorite novel, a favorite short story, memoir, etc.—that you view as ‘perfect’ and write a paragraph explanation of why.

## **WORKSHOP GROUP A SUBMITS**

### **Week Three**

WEDNESDAY

#### **Workshop Group A**

MONDAY 9/20

Poetry craft 1: Then and now.

There’s a temptation to think of the practice of poetry as something either esoteric or dusty. We’re going to take a look at the classic poems that helped shape how poets write, and the poetry you’ll find today.

Readings:

*Sonnet 29*, William Shakespeare

*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*, Emily Dickinson

*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong

[\*Four Poems by Maggie Nelson\*](#), Maggie Nelson

**Assignment:** write a poem, one page or less, that combines what you perceive as *then* and *now*.

### **Week Four**

WEDNESDAY

#### **Workshop Group B**

MONDAY

*Fiction Craft 2:* What we talk about when we talk about talking in fiction.

Dialogue is tricky enough in real life, let alone in writing. But to write good dialogue in fiction is to achieve verisimilitude without sounding boring. People in real life swear excessively, talk in loops and spirals, and never say what they’re saying unless they’ve been drinking (though I may be projecting here.) How can you achieve dialogue that sounds believable without falling into the trapdoors of real life speech?

Readings:

*A Temporary Matter*, Jhumpa Lahirix

*Bullfighting*, Roddy Doyle

*Charity*, Charles Baxter

**Assignment:** record a conversation you have with someone, then rewrite the conversation as dialogue.

## Week Five

Wednesday

### Workshop Group C

Monday

*Poetry Craft 2: Forms*

While poetry can be anything, it is also very often something specific. We'll survey different forms of poetry, from haiku to sonnet and beyond, to better understand the rules. Then we'll break them.

Readings:

*An Acrostic*, Edgar Allan Poe (Yes, Poe wrote an acrostic.)

*Do not go gentle into that good night*, Dylan Thomas (Villanelle)

[\*These Haikus\*](#), Various

*Ekphrastic*, Rebecca Wolff

*Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market*, Pablo Neruda

*You Were You Are Elegy*, Mary Jo Bang

**Assignment:** write a poem in one of these standard styles (if you choose haiku, you have to do 3,) then blow up the form and rewrite it.

## Week Six

WEDNESDAY

### Workshop Group D

MONDAY

*Fiction Craft: Finding a voice.*

Voice is a word you'll hear a lot in your workshop career, but what is it exactly, and how do you get good at it? Does every author have a voice? Can a lack of a voice be a voice? How do you shape your own voice?

Excerpts from *The Savage Detectives*, Roberto Bolaño

*Children as Enemies*, Ha Jinn

*Sonny's Blues*, James Baldwin

Wednesday

**Workshop Group A**

**Week Seven**

Monday 10/18

*Poetry Craft 3*: New York, NY

Much of the power of poetry is the way it evokes that which cannot be defined by speech. How really does love feel, how do the leaves on the tree move, what does silence sound like? Poetry, too, can evoke the sense, identity and rhythm of a place. This week we'll look at a collection of poems about New York City, compare and contrast them, and think about how you live, think, breath, eat, smell, feel New York. Things to consider: how does talking about where you're from or where you live talk about your biography?

*Mannahatta*, by Walt Whitman

*The City That Does Not Sleep*, Federico Garcia Lorca

*Marcy Me*, Jay-Z

*Awaking in New York*, Maya Angelou

*NY State of Mind*, Nas

**Weather permitting site visit: TBD**

Assignment: write a poem, one page or under, about your New York.

WEDNESDAY

**Workshop Group A**

**Week Eight**

MONDAY

Fiction craft: setting, time and place.

The boundlessness of fiction is maybe its greatest appeal. To write beyond yourself, your location, the lives you've lead. In studying the masterful *Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson, we'll look at different ways to weave time in and out of itself and to build vivid locations far from cityscapes. How can one harness research, or a lack of it, to create a convincing past? Are the details the essence of achieving believability, or is it a feeling?

Read excerpts of *Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson.

Selected pieces by Stuart Dybek.

Assignment: write a paragraph or page set in a place or time you've never been.

WEDNESDAY 10/27

## Workshop Group B

### Week Nine

Monday 11/1

Poetry Craft: For The Sake Of Song (or Sound)

How does sound impact poetry? Does a poem transform when it's sung, when it's spoken, when it's yelled? For this class, I'm assigning poems that play with sound and contemporary songs with poetic merit. Think about how words can be employed with different style, delivery, even swagger and how that changes the words on the page. Are there moments where the lyrics look better on paper than in song?

**Please read the song lyrics before you listen to the track.**

songs:

*Slow Burn*, Kacey Musgraves

*Futura Free*, Frank Ocean

*Should I*, Young Thug + Future

*Life's a Bitch*, Nas + AZ

poems:

-Sam Sax: "LISP",

-Paul Celan: "Death Fugue"

-Saeed Jones: "Body and Kentucky Bourbon"

Assignment: write a short poem which evokes and incorporates sound.

WEDNESDAY

## Workshop Group C

### Week Ten

MONDAY

Fiction craft: Why, and how, we revise.

The adage of "writing is rewriting" is, for most writers, a continual truth. What does revision really look like, what does it accomplish, and how can one do it efficiently? How does inspiration play into a process of tinkering and reforming? How much revision is too much? Can you revise something thoroughly while maintaining its original intent?

Readings:

*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by Raymond Carver

*Rough Crossings*, [New Yorker](#) article

*Beginners* by Raymond Carver



WEDNESDAY

**Workshop Group D**

**Week Eleven**

MONDAY 11/15

Nonfiction craft: Real life, perfected.

Memoir, auto-fiction, creative nonfiction—what are they, why do we delineate these terms? What can memoir accomplish that auto-fiction can't? Can one transmute the truth from real life into a story that is reconstructed? How much reportage is required to achieve reality? Can you tell someone else's story with the loyalty and truth of your own?

*Townie* by Andre Dubus III, excerpts

[\*Truck Stop Killer\*](#) by Vanessa Veselka

*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* by David Foster Wallace

WEDNESDAY

**Workshop Group A**

**Week Twelve**

MONDAY

Craft: POV and putting it all together pt 1. Prose and poetry come in so many forms, overlapping and crashing and blending all at once. In the masterful *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan achieves impossibility after impossibility, busting form bravely while maintaining a cohesive vision.

Reading: *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, first third.

Assignment: Emulate one of the points of view from *Goon Squad* and write a 3 page story in this perspective. (Stretched over 3 weeks.)

WEDNESDAY

**Workshop Group B**

**Week Thirteen**

MONDAY

Craft: POV and putting it all together pt 2. Prose and poetry come in so many forms, overlapping and crashing and blending all at once. In the masterful *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan achieves impossibility after impossibility, busting form bravely while maintaining a cohesive vision.

Reading: *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, first half

Assignment: Emulate one of the points of view from *Goon Squad* and write a 3 page story in this perspective. (Stretched over 3 weeks.)

WEDNESDAY

**Workshop Group C**

### **Week Fourteen**

MONDAY

Craft: Putting it all together pt 3. Prose and poetry come in so many forms, overlapping and crashing and blending all at once. In the masterful *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan achieves impossibility after impossibility, busting form bravely while maintaining a cohesive vision.

Reading:

*A Visit From the Goon Squad* (Final third)

Assignment: Emulate one of the points of view from this story and write a page story in this perspective. (Turned in today.)

WEDNESDAY

**Workshop Group D**

### **Week Fifteen**

MONDAY

Adaptations: Many of our favorite movies come from great books or short stories. And many of the worse movies come from books or poems. Let's take a look at both. **Please watch *Burning* before class.**

Readings:

*Barn Burning*, Haruki Murakami

Watch: *Burning* (2019)

Selections from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* by TS Elliott

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