Cultivating Your Voice as a Writer
CRWRI-UA.815.021 Creative Writing: Introduction to Prose and Poetry

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Office Hours: By Appointment in TBD location
Course Meetings: Tues/Thurs 2pm-3:15pm in TBD room

“Go for broke. Always try and do too much. Dispense with safety nets. Take a deep breath before you begin talking. Aim for the stars. Keep grinning. Be bloody-minded. Argue with the world. And never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold on the thousand and one things—childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves—that go on slipping, like sand, through our fingers.”  
– Salman Rushdie

“Write what should not be forgotten.”  
- Isabel Allende

“First forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you’re inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won’t. Habit is persistence in practice.”  
–Octavia Butler

Course Overview
Congratulations, you’ve signed up for a creative writing class—you’re a writer. The question now becomes—what do you write? And how do you write it? And how can you make it better? Those are several questions, actually. In this course, we’ll work together as a community of writers to better understand our own writing and push it to new horizons. You’ll be exposed to the work of authors whom you haven’t previously read, hone your own practice as a writer through learning the strategies of others, learn new literary techniques and styles, develop your own work, and cultivate your own distinct voice.

Class Structure
After our first week (which will serve as an introduction to the course), each class will feature the following structure:

1) Class will begin with a fifteen minute “Pitch” in which I will take the perspective of a fellow writer in making the case for a certain approach to your work. This pitch will take the form of a craft lecture, including questions and comments from the class. The goal is not to convince you
to agree with each of these approaches to your writing—every writer has their own process and there is no “one size fits all” strategy—but I hope to expose you to the methods of other successful writers. You may agree entirely with some and wholly disagree with others. Yet in the process of doing so, it is my hope that you will gain a better understanding of what works for you.

2) We will then have a thirty minute discussion of our craft reading for the week. These may include poems, short stories, essays, and more.

3) From there, the class will conduct a workshop on student submitted work. Generally speaking, we will workshop one student’s work per class (a short story, novel excerpt, poem, or a combination of poems/short prose pieces), but we may occasionally workshop two. Further information on our workshop structure and expectations will be provided in a separate handout.

Grading

Points Distribution
Total: 100 points
Classroom Discussion Participation: 23 points
Written Workshop Feedback: 23 points
Reading Report: 23 points
Final Portfolio of Submitted Writing: 23 points
*The Literary Challenges: Up to 8 points

Scale
A: 93-100
A-: 90-92
B+: 87-89
B: 84-86
B-: 80-83
C+: 77-79
C: 74-76
C-: 70-73
D+: 67-69
D: 65-66
F: <65
In this course, you will primarily be graded upon your effort. The journey of growing as a writer is a long and uneven one, and we each have different starting points. Moreover, we are operating within a subjective medium. If you genuinely try your best on each assignment, you will receive a good grade in this course.

As you may have already noted, the first four areas where you may earn points (Classroom Discussion Participation, Written Workshop Feedback, Reading Report, and Final Portfolio) add up to 92 points or an A-. If you would like to earn an A in this class, you must additionally complete at least one of the “Literary Challenges.” These are, once again, graded for effort and feature various options.

You may be wondering: What qualifies as effort? To demonstrate that you’ve put effort into a piece of writing, it should mostly lack clerical and grammatical errors and reflect a solid depth of thought. That means you should have brainstormed a bit, written the piece, reread and thought about it further, done some editing, and proofread it. Writing is hard, and you are not expected to be perfect. But the way to become a better writer is to give your all to each piece of writing you do and then allow us to help you think through how you can make your best work even better.

If I view these criteria as not having been met, you will receive less than a perfect score on these assignments. If you’re willing to do the work, it’s extremely doable to receive an A-range grade in this class. But if you don’t do the work, I assure you that you will not receive such a grade.

**Assignments**

1) **Classroom Discussion Participation**

You will receive a participation grade based upon the quality of your contributions to class discussions, including our conversations on the weekly reading and our workshops of student submitted work. To receive a high participation grade: do the reading, think critically about what you’ve read, actively discuss your ideas and those of your peers in class, and engage with the comments of others in a respectful manner.

If you’re somebody who’s quick to jump into the conversation, please do your best not to dominate the discussion—great exchanges of ideas can only be had when everyone has an opportunity to contribute. If you’re somebody who tends to listen more in class discussions rather than speaking, that’s perfectly alright as well! Reach out to me, and we can find a way to ensure that you have a different opportunity to earn your participation points (this will typically be something along the lines of sending me some brief thoughts on the readings via email prior to class).

2) **Written Workshop Feedback**

You will be graded on the quality of the feedback you provide to your fellow writers. To earn a high score, you should be seriously reading the work of other students with a keen attention to detail, analyzing their writing, and providing them with ample, professional feedback. You’ll be receiving
another handout that lays out our workshop structure and how to write an effective feedback letter in greater detail.

3) **Reading Report** (due Dec. 20)

Throughout the semester, you will be assigned a variety of readings with the hope of exposing you to writers whose work holds lessons for your own, but I’d also like you to “assign yourself” a longer read. This must be a significant work of some length, but there is enormous flexibility. You can read a full-length novel or work of nonfiction. You can read a collection of poems or short stories. You can read a novella. The guidelines are about as wide-open as they can be—I want you to read something that you genuinely are interested in and that will prove useful to your writing in some way (perhaps through demonstrating a style that interests you, expanding your literary horizons to a different genre, addressing a subject area you’d like to set a piece of writing in, etc.).

If you’re a bookworm, go ahead and try something like *War and Peace* (don’t actually—it’s over 1,000 pages), but if you’re looking for something more manageable, feel free to read *The Metamorphosis*, which is less than 100. The point of this project is that I want you to think seriously about the process of choosing to read something that will be valuable to your own writing, read a longer work by yourself, and then analyze it in a reading report.

If you already have a book in mind, great! If the prospect of choosing something to read that’s related to your own writing feels daunting, that’s okay too! I’m happy to point you in the direction of books that may be useful to you. When we meet in office-hours, we can discuss book options. All selections are subject to instructor approval (selections will be due after the first two weeks of class).

The reading report, due at the end of the semester, should be 5 pages, double-spaced. You are tasked with analyzing what you’ve read in relation to your own writing. Maybe you’ve learned a craft lesson through this reading. Maybe you’ve realized that you want to write in the exact opposite style as what you’ve read. Maybe this book has been good research for a project you hope to develop. You’ll be graded based upon the quality of your analysis of your chosen work, the connection of it to your own writing, and the overall depth of thought of your report. Further information on the grading criteria and expectations for the paper will be provided later in the semester.

4) **Final Portfolio** (due Dec. 20)

Throughout the semester, we will be workshopping student work (a schedule for which will be sent out after the first class). You are expected in this class to write at least two works (these may be poems, short stories, novel excerpts, flash fiction, etc.). I encourage you to try your hand at both poetry and fiction, but you have the leeway to choose if you’d prefer to do two projects within one or the other. It’s incredibly valuable to experiment in other literary forms—I promise you’ll find it useful
(even if you’re an ardent poet who despises fiction or a steadfast fiction writer who finds poetry terrifying).

Your final portfolio will include your two works (or more, if we have additional workshop time available). Please include original copies of them, along with revised copies. These revisions should be real revisions—demonstrating that you’ve seriously worked to improve your writing and considered the suggestions you received in workshop. More information on the grading criteria for the final portfolio will be provided in a separate handout.

5) **The Challenges** (due Dec. 20)

   To earn an A in this class, you’ll have to complete at least one of the listed challenges, in addition to the above assignments. Each challenge is worth 1 point. So, if you’ve completed all other assignments and received full points on each one, you can complete one challenge to earn an A. If you’ve lost some points on the other assignments, you can make up for it through completing as many of these challenges as you see fit (for a maximum of 8 points). All challenges will be due at the same time as the Reading Report and Final Portfolio.

1. Attend a literary event and write a paragraph about what you learned from it. This is New York, city of writers! There are countless exciting literary events happening at NYU and throughout the city. Go to a literary event and then spend a few minutes writing down your thoughts about it. Feel free to check with me for suggestions on potential events.

2. Try writing a story or poem using the “cut-up” technique, which we’ll discuss in class on 10/31.

3. Try taking a piece of your writing and changing the perspective of it. For example, if you wrote it in first person, try second person or third person. You may be amazed by how much changes and how much can be revealed to you through a perspective shift. Include a paragraph on how the new perspective affected the writing.

4. Next time you’re hanging out with some friends or family, ask if you can record a few minutes of the conversation—transcribe it and write a paragraph about what you notice. The best way to learn how to write dialogue is to listen to how people really talk *and*, more importantly, how it translates to the page.
5. Watch a film about a writer or group of writers and write a paragraph analyzing it—from *Kill Your Darlings* to *The End of the Tour*, there’s plenty of options. Feel free to ask me for suggestions.

6. Write a mock cover letter to submit your work to a literary journal, agent, or editor. I’m happy to walk you through the general template and provide feedback—it may be useful if you hope to submit your writing to be published!

7. Watch the first five minutes of any film or television show and translate it into a work of fiction or poetry. Incorporate the scenes, dialogue, setting, characters, etc. Try to stay close to the source material but, as you’ll see, the change in medium will demand some other changes as well. Include a few sentences on what you learned from this exercise.

8. Write an ekphrastic story or poem. Choose any piece of art and write in direct response to it, as we’ll discuss on 10/19.

**Attendance Policy**

*You! Should! Come! To! Class!* My guarantee to you is that I will not waste your time – each one hour and fifteen minute class session will be a worthy investment of your attention. You’ll learn cool things, I promise! That being said, I understand college can be busy, so you are **allowed one absence**, no questions asked, as long as you let me know via email at least one hour before class. However, if you do not let me know ahead of time that you won’t be in class, your absence will result in a deduction to your participation grade.

If you use up your one absence and need to miss another class, the procedure is as follows: **email me at least one hour before class, including a reason for your absence, and then complete an additional assignment in lieu of your attendance.** There are plenty of perfectly legitimate reasons to be unable to attend class, such as: illness, family emergency, sleep deprivation, need for a mental health day, etc. College is tough, and I ask you to prioritize your well-being. There are also plenty of perfectly unacceptable reasons to be unable to attend class, including: being carried off by a flock of wayward seagulls, attending a concert by a musician that I deem not to make good music, and forgetting that class is a thing. Those will not be excused. If in doubt, ask.

If you email me with a reasonable excuse to miss class, I’ll email you back with an assignment you can complete to make up for the work you’ve missed. These assignments may be analytical or creative in scope and will vary based upon the content of the class you’ve missed. **These assignments will be designed to take roughly the same amount of time as the class to complete and will be due at the start of the following class.** If you do not submit an acceptable reason for missing class or fail to
complete the makeup assignment, you will receive a deduction to your participation grade. Additionally, I reserve the right to withdraw this option for being excused from class in the case of its overuse (i.e. if you’re missing an inordinately large number of classes).

You must attend class when you are being workshopped. This is pretty obvious—we can’t give you feedback if you’re not here. Obviously, if you are suddenly ill or dealing with an emergency, that’s okay, but generally speaking, you truly cannot miss class when you are being workshopped.

It’s essential that you are on time given how little time our class has together each week. I am not going to penalize you if you’re within five minutes of the starting time of class, but any later than that, and I will deduct points from your participation grade. If you have a good reason (i.e. sprinting across campus from another class, the subway got delayed, etc.), I’ll make an exception. Those good reasons are a rarity though—don’t be consistently late.

**Electronics Policy**
We will not be using electronics in this course. That means no laptops, phones, microwaves, leaf blowers, or anything else that seems to reflect modernity. Yes, I know, it’s annoying, and I am sorry. But our conversations will be made all the richer by our ability to fully focus on one another. So, please, limit your tools to that of a pen and notebook. The penalty for violating this policy will be severe: You will make the instructor sad, and he will ask you to please stop.

**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.

NYU’s Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities
726 Broadway, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10003-6675
Telephone: 212-998-4980
Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114
Web site: http://www.nyu.edu/csd

**Student Wellness Policy**
Unless we see 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 likely prompt the instructor’s 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.

**Academic Integrity**

It would truly be silly for you to cheat in this class. You’re here to write, explore your own distinct voice, and gain new skills that will allow you to reach your full potential as a creative thinker. You’ll be graded based upon your effort, rather than writing quality, so there is absolutely no incentive to take someone else’s words. It’s also just wrong. So please, don’t do that. I do not want to report you to the department, but, rest assured, I will do so if I discover you’ve plagiarized. For further information on NYU’s academic integrity policy, click here.

It is also worth noting that there is a rich history of writers engaging in intertextual conversations through creative references to the work of others. Writers tend to be influenced by one another—without stealing the work or words of anyone. Navigating the bounds of such intertextual discussions can be confusing for any writer, especially those just starting out, so please do contact me if you have questions about how to reference the work of another writer in a manner consistent with NYU’s policies of academic integrity and the expectations of this course. I’m happy to work with you.

**Classroom Etiquette**

Writing can be scary. We’re sharing unfinished work with one another and asking for constructive criticism—it’s enough to make anyone nervous! However, as a class, we will endeavor to create a welcoming, kind space that is defined by mutual respect and caring. We’re here to learn about ourselves as writers and grow into the writers we would like to become. It is essential that you treat one another with respect and empathy. There is zero tolerance for ad hominem attacks, bullying, harassment, or unprofessional behavior by any student. The penalties for any such behavior will jeopardize your standing in the class.

**Schedule**

**Note:** All readings will be provided. You do not have to purchase any books.

9/5: Review Syllabus and Course Expectations. Discuss “Rules of Writing.”

**Homework:** Read “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” by James Wright
Read “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff
Write Your Own Ten Rules of Writing
Schedule an appointment for office hours
9/7: Pitch: “Haruki Murakami and ‘missing and searching and finding.’” Discuss “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” and “Bullet in the Brain.” Mock Workshop.

**Homework:** Read “You are Jeff” by Richard Siken
Read “Mayakovsky” by Frank O’Hara
Read “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg
Read workshop submission


**Homework:** Read “Sexy” by Jhumpa Lahiri
Read “Positive Obsession” by Octavia Butler
Read workshop submission


**Homework:** Read “Bob Ross Paints Your Portrait” by Terrance Hayes
Read “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou
Read “Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath
Read workshop submission
Submit your Reading Report Book Selection


**Homework:** Read “The Diver” by V.S. Pritchett
Read “My First Fee” by Isaac Babel
Read “On Lifting” by Darin Strauss
Read workshop submission

Homework: Read “Two Nurses, Smoking” by David Means
    Read workshop submission


Homework: Read “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop
    Read “Sestina for Lizzette” by Noelle Kocot
    Read “On Visiting the Tomb of Burns” by John Keats
    Read workshop submission


Homework: Read “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” by Raymond Carver
    (Multiple Drafts)
    Read “Revisioning the Great Gatsby” by Susan Bell
    Read workshop submission


Homework: Read the opening of Jazz by Toni Morrison
    Read the opening of If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler by Italo Calvino
    Read the opening of The Stranger by Albert Camus
    Read the opening of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter S. Thompson
    Read workshop submission


Homework: Read “The Emperor of Ice Cream” by Wallace Stevens
    Read “In the Station of the Metro” by Ezra Pound
    Read “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous” by Ocean Vuong
    Read workshop submission

10/12: Pitch: “Narrative Mileage.” Discuss “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” “In the Station of the Metro,” and “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous.” Workshop.
Homework: Read “Carpathia” by Jesse Lee Kercheval
   Read “Indian Camp” by Ernest Hemingway
   Read workshop submission


   Homework: Read “Musée des Beaux Arts” by W.H. Auden
   Read “Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats
   Read “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” by William Carlos Williams
   Read “The Starry Night” by Anne Sexton
   Read workshop submission


   Homework: Read “The School” by Donald Barthelme
   Read “Rise, Baby, Rise!” by George Saunders
   Read workshop submission


   Homework: Read “Trevor” by Ocean Vuong
   Read excerpt from “The Glass Essay” by Anne Carson
   Read workshop submission


   Homework: Read “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe

10/31: Halloween! Wear a costume, if you’d like to. Or don’t. I will bring candy. We’ll be shaking things up this week—no workshop. Pitch: “Cut-Up Technique and Literary Chaos.” Discuss “The Raven.”

   Homework: Read “Ulysses” by Alfred Lord Tennyson
   Read excerpt from “The Cure at Troy” by Seamus Heaney
Read workshop submission


**Homework:** Read “Incarnations of Burned Children” by David Foster Wallace
Read “Off” by Aimee Bender
Read workshop submission


**Homework:** Read excerpts from *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine
Read workshop submission


**Homework:** Read “Letters to Jeb Bush” by Adam Dalva
Read “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” by David Foster Wallace
Read workshop submission


**Homework:** Read “Breathing Exercises” by Raven Leilani
Read “Miss Adele Amidst the Corsets” by Zadie Smith
Read workshop submission

11/16: Pitch: “Location, Location, Location.” Discuss “Breathing Exercises” and “Miss Adele Amidst the Corsets.” Workshop.

**Homework:** Read “The Poetics of Disobedience” by Alice Notley
Read excerpt from “The Descent of Alette” by Alice Notley
Read workshop submission

Homework: None! Enjoy Thanksgiving. Take some time to relax and destess.

11/28: Dialogue Day! Get excited! We’ll watch scenes from several films and read excerpts from a smattering of novels, short stories, and poems. Using these examples, we’ll discuss different (occasionally contradicting) approaches to dialogue in fiction.

Homework: Read “D-Day” by Rachel Khong
Read workshop submission


Homework: Watch “Mama” by Emi Mahmoud
Watch “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman
Read workshop submission

12/5: Pitch: “Read Out Loud.” Discuss “Mama” and “The Hill We Climb” Workshop.

Homework: Read excerpt from The Godfather Screenplay
Read excerpt from The Godfather book
Read excerpt from The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time play
Read excerpt from The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time book
Read workshop submission


Homework: Read “so you want to be a writer?” by Charles Bukowski
Watch excerpts from “Meeting the Man,” featuring James Baldwin
Watch “On Story” by George Saunders
Read workshop submission


Homework: Finish up your reading reports, portfolios, and literary challenges!
12/14: Pitch: “What are you supposed to do now?” Discuss your reading reports. Final thoughts!