

Introduction to Prose and Poetry

Section #: CRWR1-UA.815.005

Time: Mon + Wed, 2pm to 3:15pm

Instructor: Clare Flanagan

Email: ckf2022@nyu.edu

Office Hours: TBD



“Why am I compelled to write? ... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and my anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy... Finally, I write because I’m scared of writing, but I’m more scared of not writing.” – *Gloria Anzaldúa*

“Poetry is about obsession. So tell me, right now – what are you obsessed with?” – *Kaveh Akbar*

Course Overview

If you’re reading this syllabus, I am grateful for you. Why? Because you’re brave enough to take an interest in a craft that is esoteric, intense, and made increasingly more difficult by the conditions of this world. There is little material or general certainty in the life of a writer – see the concerned expressions of the train-parents in the comic above – nor is it easy to find the space and inner quiet that the work requires. To pursue writing in a time like this is an act of courage and risk – a daring to imagine different futures, and a deeper, more generous engagement with your inner and outer life. In short, I think it’s awesome that you want to do this, and it would be a joy and an honor to have you in my class.

This semester, we’ll create a community where the work of writing feels safe, fun, and exciting. Whether you’re new to this or you’ve been writing prolifically for years, you’ll gain a stronger foothold in the fundamentals of poetry and prose. You’ll develop a consistent writing practice, respond to weekly homework prompts, and open yourselves to the insight and encouragement of your classmates in a workshop setting. By winter, you’ll find yourself with a deeper understanding of your tendencies, desires, and dreams – both within and outside the realm of writing. In a world that encourages (and sometimes requires) a certain level of distance and dissociation, our shared creative practice will bring us closer to each other and ourselves.

Course Structure

The first half of this semester will be dedicated to the study of poetry, while during the second half, we will focus on prose. The first few weeks of each genre will consist primarily of craft classes, where we'll get a handle on some fundamental topics and tools, read writing that exemplifies them, and then practice what we learn in generative homework prompts. Then, we'll transition into workshops, where each student will have the opportunity to share three pieces – one poem, one work of shorter fiction (4-6 pages), and then, each student's choice: a poem, a work of longer fiction (8-10 pages) or a work of creative nonfiction (6-10 pages.) You'll compile revised versions of these pieces into a final chapbook, which you will design, make, and share with your classmates at our end-of-semester celebration.

Electronics Policy

In order to encourage the deep focus, attentiveness, and respect that I find critical to the collective practice of writing, I strongly discourage the use of phones, tablets, and computers in the classroom. I will print out assigned readings and distribute them ahead of each class, so there will be no need to read them from a digital source. You will also be expected to print your own work (as well as your responses to your classmates' work) ahead of each workshop. I understand that this might seem like a pain in the ass, but I promise that it will help you engage with the course material in a deeper, more rewarding fashion. Sharing your writing – heck, writing at all! – requires an enormous amount of effort and vulnerability. It's critical that you respect that by being present for your classmates and giving them your full, undivided attention. Please note that I'm 100% willing to make exceptions if you require a computer, phone, or tablet for accessibility reasons – in that case, please do not hesitate to reach out to me via e-mail, and we will work out a way to meet your needs.

Coursework and Grading

Attendance and Participation: 30%

Writing requires a good deal of introspection and solitude. But the point of taking a creative writing course is to disrupt your personal echo chamber – to see your own habits and ideas reflected back to you clearly, and to benefit from the insights that your classmates have to share. With that in mind, attendance and participation are critical components of your grade. You'll be expected to show up on time, and to participate actively in discussions of a) the assigned reading and b) your classmates' writing. Because I don't want to overload you, I won't expect you to write weekly responses to our reading assignments. However, I will absolutely expect you to do them, and to show that you have done them by sharing your reactions, feelings, and questions in class.

I do understand that life gets in the way – COVID is still going around, and sometimes, you might need a day to recalibrate and take care of yourself. For that reason, you're allowed one excused absence throughout the semester. However, each additional missed class will result in a 5% reduction of your final grade (unless you have serious extenuating circumstances, test positive for COVID, or are otherwise contagiously ill.) I also know that lateness can't always be avoided, but please don't make a habit of it. If you arrive more than 15 minutes late over three times throughout the semester, I will begin to deduct 1% from your grade for each additional day that you're late.

Generative Homework Assignments: 15%

During our craft-oriented class sessions, I will assign a homework prompt related to the topic discussed in class – for example, you'll be asked to write a sonnet after the class session where we discuss those. Your responses to these prompts will be due to me via e-mail before each Monday class session, and will be graded based on timely completion. Grades on each of these assignments will be docked 10% for each day that they are late.

During weeks where we have two craft-oriented classes, you can choose one prompt to respond to and turn in the following Monday – no need to complete both, unless you really want to. You're also totally allowed to submit poems and prose written for homework to workshop, as long as your prose reaches the page minimum.

Workshop Responsibilities: 25%

On the first day of class, we'll split up into three workshop groups, each of which will turn in work four times throughout the semester. Workshops will occur on Wednesdays, so if it's your turn to be workshopped, please send your piece to our class e-mail chain by midnight the Friday before workshop takes place. (These due dates will shift during the last few weeks of the semester, where we'll have a shifted/extended workshop schedule to accommodate longer work. Please see the semester overview for more details.) This will give your classmates time to read, absorb, and write careful comments on your work – at least one page double-spaced. Two copies of these comments will be due at the beginning of workshop – one to the writer, and one to me, so I can review them and ensure that you're engaging thoughtfully.

You are also encouraged to annotate your classmates' work with your reactions, and to share marked-up drafts with them if you choose – although this does not count as a substitute for the written comments, which are due both to the writer and to me. We will talk more in class about workshop etiquette, and what kind of feedback you should aim to provide.

Daily/Weekly Notebook: 5%

Throughout the semester, you'll also be expected to keep a notebook, where you'll jot down observations, images, ideas, and feelings that arise as you go about your lives. Ideally, you'll be writing in this notebook daily, but if that seems daunting, aim for three times a week. The idea is to work towards making writing a consistent, constant habit, and to gather scraps of the world that you might end up using in your more polished work. You never know what could bloom into a story, an essay, or a poem!

I won't ask you to turn these notebooks in to me, but I do want to keep you accountable to this practice. To that end, I'll ask you to email me before class each Monday to share a snippet of something you wrote throughout the week – this can be a screenshot, a photo, or a re-typed section of a notebook page. (Feel free to turn this in alongside your generative homework assignment.) I may also ask you to incorporate parts of your notebook entries into in-class writing exercises.

Office Hours: 5%

We're going to learn a lot together as a group, but it can also be really helpful to discuss your work in a 1:1 setting. You'll be required to meet with me at least once during the semester – or more, if you want – to catch up and see how your writing is going. We'll talk more in class about how to schedule appointments and where to meet.

This is optional, but I highly encourage swapping drafts and meeting up with your classmates individually to talk writing – that's been one of the most fruitful and fun aspects of my own education. Some of my most meaningful relationships got their start in creative writing workshops, and that may be the case for you, too!

Outside Reading Attendance: 5%

There are tons of wonderful prose and poetry readings both on- and off-campus, many of which occur at the Lillian Vernon Creative Writers' House. Please pick at least one to attend throughout the semester, and then write a brief response paper to what you heard and saw – at least one page double-spaced. If you need guidance on which readings to attend, I'll be updating the class regularly regarding upcoming events. You can also reach out to me individually for suggestions.

Final Portfolio/Chapbook: 15%

At the end of the semester, you'll be designing and creating a small, bound volume – or “chapbook” – that consists of revised versions of every piece you brought into workshop, as well as one additional piece that you feel proud of. Your chapbook should have a title, a cover, a table of contents, and any other components that feel exciting or necessary to you – like an acknowledgements section, a character chart, or a map of the world where your writing takes place. This is meant to be a celebration of the hard work you've done throughout the semester, and a chance to share it within and beyond our class. Please bring at least 12 copies to share with me and your classmates, or more if you feel like distributing it further. We'll be passing out and reading from these chapbooks at our end-of-semester celebration, which I promise will be very fun.

Plagiarism

Please, please don't do this. Anyone who plagiarizes will be immediately failed and reported to the department. If you're under so much stress that you're tempted to copy work from another writer, come talk to me, and we can find a better solution.

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: <https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/student-accessibility.html>.

Additionally, if you have any needs that these resources fail to meet, don't hesitate to let me know. I want to make sure everyone has a safe, fair, and positive experience in our class, and I will do whatever I can to make that possible.

On Student Wellness

Unless I see explicit evidence that the speaker of a poem or story is the writer themselves, I will assume the speaker is fictional. However, certain content relating to murder, depression, suicide, sexual assault, or severe mental distress – essentially, anything that seems to be a cry for help – will cause me concern. Please send me an email putting this work in context before submitting writing, especially for workshop, that could be interpreted this way. If you do feel you need someone to talk to at any point in the semester, don't hesitate to reach out to me, and we can make a plan to help you access whatever support you need.

Required Texts

You won't need to purchase any books for this class, aside from maybe a notebook. Hard copies of all assigned readings will be distributed during each class, and PDFs will also be distributed via e-mail or posted to Brightspace for your convenience. If purchasing a notebook, printing your work, or any other aspect of this class poses a financial issue, please come talk to me, and we will find a solution.

An Overview of the Semester

Week 1

Wednesday, September 6 – Welcome + “The Secret” + Emulation

- Reading due: “On Keeping a Notebook” by Joan Didion, excerpt from an interview with Fred Moten, “Meditation at Lagunitas” by Robert Hass (available on Brightspace)
- Syllabus overview
- Workshop group assignments
- Discussion of dailiness, emulation, and upcoming emulation assignment
- Assignment given: first notebook entries

Week 2

Monday, September 11 – Form as Architecture (or, How to “Build” a Poem)

- Reading due: selections from *A Poetry Handbook* by Mary Oliver; poems by Ama Codjoe, Kaveh Akbar, Brian Tierney, Stephanie Burt, and Robert Lowell
- Assignment due: first notebook entry (we’ll share and discuss excerpts in class!)
- Assignment given: poem emulation

Wednesday, September 13 – Constraint as Freedom (or, I swear to God that sonnets are fun!!!)

- Reading due: sonnets by John Donne, Edwin Denby, Ted Berrigan, Douglas Kearney, Terrance Hayes, Kim Addonizio, and Diane Seuss
- In-class activity: collaborative sonnet
- Assignment given: write – you guessed it! – a sonnet

Week 3

Monday, September 18 – Confessional Poetry (or, what do we disclose and why?)

- Reading due: poems by Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, Sharon Olds, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Lucille Clifton, John Murillo, and Edgar Kunz; selections from Rachel Zucker’s *The Poetics of Wrongness*
- Assignment due: sonnet OR poem emulation
- In-class activity: confess (in poem form) to something you always wanted to do, but never did
- Assignment given: confessional poem

Wednesday, September 20 – Pastorals + Nature Poetry (or, how do we write about a world that’s burning?)

- Reading due: poems by Christopher Marlowe, James Wright, Grady Chambers, Benjamin Gucciardi, Yusef Komunyakaa, Lucille Clifton, Mikko Harvey, and Diana Khôi Nguyễn; selected essays from *Black Nature* (ed. Camille T. Dungy)
- In-class activity: write about a “thin place” – a location where the barrier between yourself and the world begins to disappear
- Assignment given: “nature” walk + poem

Workshop Group 1 poems due Friday, September 22 by midnight

Week 4

Monday, September 25 – Writing on heartbreak, loss, and grief (or, how do we write when there are no words?)

- Reading due: poems by Anne Carson, Diana Khô i NguyỄ n, Sharon Olds, Marie Howe, Linda Gregg, Lucille Clifton, Grady Chambers, Molly Brodak, and KB Brookins
- Assignment due: confessional poem OR nature poem
- In-class activity: write a poem that deranges “if-then” logic
- A few remarks on workshop + workshop etiquette
- Assignment given: write an elegy or a heartbreak poem. Please e-mail me if this is too heavy/close to home – I’d be happy to provide an alternative assignment.

Wednesday, September 27 – Workshop Group 1

- Responses to poems by Group 1 due

Workshop Group 2 poems due Friday, September 29 by midnight

Week 5

Monday, October 2 – Political Poetry (or, what can art really, actually do?)

- Reading due: poems by Solmaz Sharif, Danez Smith, Karisma Price, June Jordan, CA Conrad, Morgan Parker, Diane di Prima, Franny Choi
- Assignment due: elegy/heartbreak poem (or alternative assignment)
- In-class activity: screening of *The House is Black* (short film by Forugh Farrokhzad), discuss in conjunction with the assigned reading
- Assignment given: write a poem that forces the reader to “look” at something they’d rather not see; or, write a poem using found language from a violent or oppressive text.

Wednesday, October 4 – Workshop Group 2

- Responses to poems by Group 2 due

Workshop Group 3 poems due Friday, October 6 by midnight

Week 6 (Note: our class will meet on Tuesday this week due to Legislative Monday.)

Tuesday, October 10 – Image and Typography (or, where poetry and visual art intersect)

- Reading due: poems by Claudia Rankine, Edwin Torres, Jennifer S. Cheng, Douglas Kearney, Renee Gladman, Diana Khô i NguyỄ n, and Don Mee Choi
- Assignment due: poem that forces the reader to “look” OR a found “political” poem
- In-class activity: sketch a draft of a visual or typographically unusual poem
- Assignment given: write a poem that experiments with image and/or typography

Wednesday, October 11 – Workshop Group 3

- Responses to poems by group 3 due

Week 7

Monday, October 16 – Getting Weird With It (or, the surreal, absurd, and strange – plus, a transition into fiction!)

- Reading due: poems by Heather Christle, Max Ritvo, John Ashbery, James Tate, Ian Fishman, Kim Hyesoon, and Noel Kocot; “Tiger Blood” by Bud Smith
- Assignment due: love poem
- In-class activity: write a brief narrative poem with absurd elements
- Assignment given: write a fictional scene depicting an ordinary experience that becomes impossible, weird, or surreal in one very particular, specific way.

Wednesday, October 18 – Point of View (or desire, history, and diction as character-shapers)

- Reading due: “The Red Convertible” by Louise Erdrich, “How to Be a Writer” by Lorrie Moore
- In-class activity: “How to be a _____” (second-person free-write)
- Assignment given: Write a brief piece of fiction where the narrator’s point of view is defined primarily in relation to another character. Make sure to convey what they want (and why they want it) in language they would truly use.

Week 8

Monday, October 23 – Plot (or, the scaffolding of a story)

- Reading due: “Cathedral” by Raymond Carver, excerpt from “Notes on Narrative” by Darin Strauss
- Assignment due: weird, surreal scene OR POV exercise
- In-class activity: creating plot and subplot diagrams of “Cathedral”
- Assignment given: Write a brief story that ends with a happy “no” or an unhappy “yes.”

Wednesday, October 25 – Image, Motif, and Theme (or, what stories make you see)

- Reading due: “The Dead” by James Joyce
- Assignment due: happy “no” or unhappy “yes” story OR scene that conveys a theme
- In-class activity: write a fictional scene incorporating a real-life image that you observed and recorded in your notebook
- Assignment given: expand the scene you wrote in class into a longer piece in which that image recurs and accumulates meaning.

Week 9

Monday, October 30 – The Power of Delay (or, what stories withhold)

- Reading due: “A Temporary Matter” by Jhumpa Lahiri, “The Husband Stitch” by Carmen Maria Machado
- Assignment due: piece of fiction with a recurring image
- In-class activity: write about the last time you tried to keep a secret. How did you hide or obfuscate information? Did anyone find out?
- Assignment given: write a fictional piece driven by a “secret” that doesn’t get revealed until the very end.

Wednesday, November 1 – Beauty and Bleakness (or, why are sad stories SO good?)

- Reading due: “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” and “Emergency” by Denis Johnson, “Gling Gling Gling” by Bud Smith
- Assignment due: piece of fiction that employs delay
- In-class activity: write about a moment of levity, tenderness, or magic that you experienced in the midst of a difficult situation.
- Assignment given: expand that moment into a longer, fictionalized piece.

Workshop Group 1 short(er) stories due Friday, November 3 at midnight

Week 10

Monday, November 6 – A Crash Course in Creative Nonfiction (or, a good, hard look at yourself)

- Reading due: “Reflection and Retrospection” by Philip Lopate, “Pain Scale” by Eula Biss, excerpt from “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin
- Assignment due: fiction piece that hinges on a moment of softness amidst disaster.
- In-class activity: identify instances of a time-of-experience character POV and a time-of-writing narrator POV in the assigned reading.
- Assignment given: put the concept of a “double perspective” into practice – write (or begin writing) an essay about an experience or memory in which you wish you’d known something that you know now.

Wednesday, November 8 – Workshop Group 1

- Responses to short(er) stories by Group 1 due
- Assign new, larger workshop groups for the final weeks of the semester (to allow more time to workshop longer prose pieces)

Workshop Group 2 short(er) stories due by Friday, November 10 at midnight

Week 11

Monday, November 13 – Pop Culture and the Personal (or, hearing yourself in the music)

- Reading due: “Ecstasy” by Jia Tolentino, selections from *They Can’t Kill Us Until They Kill Us* by Hanif Abdurraqib (including “Carly Rae Jepsen Loves You Back”)
- In-class activity: free-write while listening to a song of your choice that is special/important to you.
- Assignment given (optional): write a short essay that revolves around an artist, song, film, or other piece of media you find meaningful.

Wednesday, November 15 – Workshop Group 2

- Responses to short(er) stories by Group 2 due

Workshop Group 3 short(er) stories due by Friday, November 17 at midnight

Week 12 (Includes Thanksgiving Break – Please note that workshop group 3 will take place on Monday, not Wednesday!)

Monday, November 20 – Workshop group 3

- Responses to short(er) stories by group 3 due

Wednesday, November 22 – No Class due to Thanksgiving Break.

*** Please note that at this point, workshop groups 1, 2, and 3 will be combined into two larger groups for the remainder of the semester. **Longer stories/essays for the NEW workshop group 1 are due by Tuesday, November 21 at midnight!** This is because we'll have an adjusted/extended workshop schedule throughout the rest of the semester in order to accommodate the longer work being submitted.***

Week 13

Monday, November 27 – Workshop Group 1

- Optional assignment due: short essay on an artist, song, film, or other piece of media.
- Responses to long(er) essays/stories by the first half of Workshop Group 1 due.

Long(er) stories/essays by Workshop Group 2 due by midnight on **Wednesday, November 29** – again, to accommodate our shifted workshop schedule/longer work.

Wednesday, November 29 – Workshop Group 1 continued

- Responses to long(er) stories/essays by the second half of Workshop Group 1 due.
- A quick word on revision.
- Assignment given: probably a good idea to start compiling your chapbook/revising your work now.

Week 14

Monday, December 3 – Workshop Group 2

- Responses to long(er) essays/stories by the first half of Workshop Group 2 due.

Wednesday, December 5 – Workshop Group 2 continued

- Responses to long(er) essays/stories by the second half of Workshop Group 2 due.
- Time for questions re: revision, chapbooks, etc.
- Assignment given: continue revising work from throughout the semester + compiling it into your final chapbook, which is due Wednesday, December 13.

Week 15

Monday, December 11 – Maintaining your Practice (or, finishing what we started)

- Readings due: selections from “Bird by Bird” by Anne Lamott
- Possible guest speaker – hopefully, Bud Smith!
- In-class activity: Q&A with guest speaker, intention-setting in pairs for life beyond our workshop

Wednesday, December 13 – Chapbook Reading, Distribution, and Celebration (woohoo!)

- I am so excited to see, hear, and read what you make! <3