

Creative Writing: Introduction to Poetry and Prose

Instructor: Margaret Wright (she/her)
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Office Hours: By appointment
Tues/Thurs: 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM

"When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you to anyway." – James Baldwin

"If you ask me to tell you why I write it probably has to do with this deep comfort/discomfort of being in the world and this option of devotion." – Eileen Myles

Course Description

The purpose of this course is for us to read and write together. We'll study a variety of writers (mostly contemporary), and then think and talk together about what excites, confuses, angers, or compels us in their work. We'll ask how they find their way to what they, or we, don't know; and how they turn us towards (or away from) the option of devotion. My hope is that through close reading, good conversation, and regular writing, each of you will further develop your own voice(s) as a writer and feel curious and galvanized to create work that excites you.

Structure

On Tuesdays we'll talk together about the week's readings/assigned materials. We'll also do some in-class writing from prompts related to our conversation, which will hopefully jumpstart your next week of writing.

On Thursdays we'll workshop each other's work. For our first two workshops, I'll divide you into two groups, so that we can hear everyone's voices before the semester gets too far ahead of us. For the majority of the workshop you'll be divided into three groups, so as to allow for more discussion time for each piece. Our last workshop will be more of a read-around, in which everyone reads something new that they're working on and excited about.

Course Materials

Most of your readings will be pdf packets, which I will send out two weeks in advance. You are responsible for printing and annotating the readings before class. Towards the end of the semester, we will read one full poetry collection and one full book of prose (a short story collection, novel, play, book of essays, etc) together. To select these books, everyone will pick one author we've read over the course of the semester and "nominate" a book of theirs to read. We will then vote as a class to make the final selection. You will be responsible for purchasing these two books. If this is a financial difficulty for you, please come to talk to me and we'll figure out a solution.

Assignments

Peer Critiques: Due Thursdays. Students will submit 1/2 page of written feedback (double-spaced) to each student being workshopped. (Students will also submit one copy of the critique to me.) We'll talk more about what type of feedback might be incorporated into a critique during our first two classes.

Reading Responses: Due Tuesdays. Before class, students will submit a short (one-paragraph) response to one or more piece(s) from the readings. These responses shouldn't be sources of stress – just a place to gather a few of your thoughts, observations, and questions before class.

In-Class Presentations: Over the course of the semester, each student will prepare one 10-minute presentation on a piece of writing they want to share with the class. They'll talk about what draws them to the piece, what questions they have about it, and what we might borrow for our own work that week.

Notebooks: For the duration of the class, I ask that you keep a notebook in which you write for 10 minutes every day – you can include small sketches and observations, internal monologues, overheard language, persistent questions, ideas for future pieces, etc. I won't check these every day, but once every week or so I'll ask everyone to send me a recent entry.

Workshop Pieces: Over the course of the semester each of you will submit five new pieces to workshop. While genre is a fluid thing, two pieces should incorporate craft elements of poetry, two should incorporate craft elements of prose, and one is entirely up to you. Each week, I'll offer a writing assignment for next week's workshop piece based off of our readings and discussions. Each of you is required to workshop at least two pieces that emerge from these assignments. (You can workshop your assignment piece every week if you like.)

Final Portfolio/Revision: On the final day of class, everyone will submit a portfolio of the work they produced over the course of the workshop. At least one workshop piece must be substantially revised.

Office Hours: Each student is required to come to office hours at least twice over the course of the semester, once before spring break and once after. More visits are welcome!

Extra Credit Reading Event: This is not required, but each student is invited to attend at least one word-focused event (a reading, a literary panel or talkback, a play, etc) over the course of the semester and write a one-page reflection on what you heard or saw for extra credit.

Grading

40% Peer Critiques and Workshop Pieces

25% Participation (craft discussions and workshops, oral presentation, office hours)

20% Final Portfolio

15% Reading Responses & Notebook Pages

Expectations

You don't have to think of yourself as "a writer" (whatever that means) to be in this class. Everyone, whatever their previous experience with reading or writing, is welcome. In addition, you will not be graded on the quality of your writing – both because "quality" is entirely subjective, and also because assigning grades to creative work disincentivizes risk and play. The expectations a student must meet to succeed in this class are:

1) *Arrive on time and participate in class discussion.* I understand that speaking in class is easier for some students than for others. If it's something you struggle with, please come and talk with me in office hours about how we might work together to make it easier for you. Each student is allowed one unexcused absence per semester. After that, each additional absence will bring your participation grade down by one third of a letter grade (A to A-). Arriving to class more than 10 minutes late counts as an absence. If extraordinary circumstances result in your missing class time beyond your one unexcused absence, come and talk to me about what's happening, and we'll try to figure out a way for you to make the work up.

2) *Print the readings, read them thoroughly, and bring them to class.* I've designed this class to be relatively light on reading so as to ensure that each student has the time to read thoroughly each week. Skimming or skipping the readings will be a disservice to you and your classmates.

3) *Don't use technology in class.* If you require special accommodation on this front, just let me know and we'll work something out.

4) *Be kind and curious.* Writing is scary and personal and political and precarious. As we figure out how to read and respond to each other's work, I ask that we all practice kindness, patience, and curiosity. We'll assume good intentions in each other's work and feedback, while also attending seriously to the impact that our words and actions have on each other (recognizing that impact often differs from intent).

5) *Talk to me!* Each student is required to come to office hours at least twice over the course of the semester, but students shouldn't hesitate to schedule additional office hours, and/or to contact me via email with any questions/concerns/suggestions/etc.

6) *Turn your assignments in on time.* Late work will receive a 1/3 letter mark deduction (A to A-) for each day it is late. (If outside circumstances prevent you from turning an assignment in on time, come talk to me about it.)

7) *Plagiarism will not be tolerated.* NYU's policy on academic integrity will be strictly enforced. Consult NYU's academic integrity policy here: <https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyuas/cas/academic-integrity.html>

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 Website: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

Student Wellness Policy

Students will be writing and sharing pieces that may contain personal information and/or personal history. In all submissions, 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 require urgent attention, will prompt my concern. For any work that may be interpreted as such, please send an email putting it in context before submitting, especially for workshop. If you do feel you need someone to talk to at any point in the semester, please reach out to me and I can guide you to the NYU Wellness Center.

Schedule:

Subject to substantial change!

WEEK ONE

Tuesday 1/25 Introductions, go over syllabus, talk about critiques, in-class writing exercise.

Thursday 1/27 Craft discussion on essays on writing: James Baldwin, Eileen Myles, Joan Didion, Reginald Shepherd

WEEK TWO

Tuesday 2/8 Sound & Silence: Poetry of Listening – Kimiko Hahn, Taylor Johnson, W.S. Merwin, Ada Limón, Jorie Graham, Naomi Shihab Nye, Arthur Sze, Emily Dickinson, Layli Long Soldier

Thursday 2/10 Workshop 1/2 the class

WEEK THREE

Tuesday 2/15 Poetry of Place: Towns, Nations, & Outer Space – Anne Carson, Jenny Xie, Tracy K Smith, Ilya Kaminsky, Joy Harjo, Tracy Fuad, Solmaz Sharif, Layli Long Soldier, Tyree Daye

Thursday 2/17 Workshop 1/2 the class

WEEK FOUR

Tuesday 2/22 Poetry on the Page: Form, Line, and Repetition – Terrance Hayes, Diane Seuss, Jericho Brown, Angel Nafis, Wendy Xu, Tracy K Smith, Lucille Clifton, Matthea Harvey, Francine J. Harris, Kim Hyesoon, James Tate

Thursday 2/24 Workshop Group A

WEEK FIVE

Tuesday 3/1 You & I: Complicated Speakers & Persona Poetry – Louise Glück, Patricia Smith, Anne Carson, Cathy Park Hong, Catherine Barnett, Anne Sexton, Arda Collins, Carl Phillips,

Jack Spicer, Marie Howe

Thursday 3/3 Workshop Group B

WEEK SIX

Tuesday 3/8 Hybrid Forms & Erasure – Maggie Nelson, Don Mee Choi, Claudia Rankine, CD Wright, Tom Phillips, Jordan Abel, Srikanth Reddy, Alice Oswald

Thursday 3/10 Workshop Group C

SPRING BREAK

WEEK SEVEN

Tuesday 3/22 Lyric Time in Narrative Forms – Jhumpa Lahiri, Alice Munro, Ben Lerner, Toni Morrison, Eileen Myles, Yoko Ogawa, Lucia Berlin

Thursday 3/24 Workshop Group A

WEEK EIGHT

Tuesday 3/29 Revelation and Discovery: Raymond Carver, Joy Williams, Gabriel García Márquez, Haruki Murakami, Helen Oyeyemi, Jenny Offill

Thursday 3/31 Workshop Group B

WEEK NINE

Tuesday 4/5 Dreams, Myths & Monstrosities (Fiction & Drama): Karen Russell, John Guare, Jez Butterworth, Samanta Schweblin, Mary Zimmerman, Jorge Luis Borges

Thursday 4/7 Workshop Group C

WEEK TEN

Tuesday 4/12 TBD: One complete work of poetry, chosen by you all

Thursday 4/14 Workshop Group A

WEEK ELEVEN

Tuesday 4/19 TBD: One complete work of prose, chosen by you all

Thursday 4/21 Workshop Group B

WEEK TWELVE

Tuesday 4/26 The Craft of Revision – Carl Phillips, Raymond Carver, Elizabeth Bishop,

Yusef Komunyakaa, Nicole Sealey

Thursday 4/28 – Workshop Group C

WEEK THIRTEEN

Tuesday 5/3 Writers in Conversation and Community: The Letters of Elizabeth Bishop, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath

Thursday 5/5 Full group read-around workshop with a new piece of your choice (in any genre or non-genre!)

WEEK FOURTEEN

Tuesday 5/10 – Writers on Readings: We'll watch writers reading/performing their work aloud and discuss a variety of approaches, both traditional and experimental, to sharing work with a live audience. Sonia Sanchez, Franny Choi, Alice Oswald, Douglas Kearney, CAConrad.

Thursday 5/12 – Class Reading and party! Portfolios Due