

English 215
Introduction to Creative Writing
Block 6: Feb. 9 – March 4, 2015

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A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them –

William Stafford

Overview:

We will be taking William Stafford's words as a starting point for this class: how is it that we come to discover what it is that we have to say? As Robert Frost said, "No surprise for the writer; no surprise for the reader." How do we surprise ourselves?

Our goal will be to explore process, to experiment, to see language in ways that will surprise us and challenge us. We will focus on experimenting and opening up possibilities more than "finishing" pieces; exploration rather than expression; process rather than product. You will end up with a range of types of writing: character sketches, bits of dialogue, poem fragments, descriptions, etc. I would like you to develop as much "stuff" as possible rather than focusing on individual pieces—*write without expectation!* Our goal then will be to generate material that may take you months or years to even see where it came from or where it's going. *Writing takes times!* Certainly finished work may come out of this class, but you should not necessarily expect it. Some of you may well have work that you're already engaged in; this is fine, but for the purposes of this course I will ask you to be a blank slate, to start from scratch and see what emerges.

You will find that the experimentation we do in this class will only benefit any work you may be doing outside of this class. We will explore ways to foster creativity which is always of value. I will give you many exercises, and we will read about exercises that other people suggest—try any that sound interesting, whether or not I specifically assign it. The most important thing you can do this block is to *write a lot!* You should be willing to try a variety of approaches to your writing. We will do a great deal of in-class writing; I would like you to keep these exercises together as a way of generating material and cross-fertilizing ideas. Please bring your notebook to every session.

Good writing also inherently involves active reading. We will read a wide range of writers, and our conversations will focus on "craft" issues rather than interpretive issues (although the two can not be so easily separated). In other words, we will try to discover how writing achieves certain effects. I would like you to keep responses to the reading in the same book as another way of cross-fertilizing ideas. As you read, consider how a writer may have developed the work at hand—what seems most unique (as well as what seems less effective—sometimes we can learn as much from writers we don't like as those we admire).

If you take nothing else from this course, I hope that you will see the way that reading impacts your own writing and pushes you in new, exciting directions.

Objectives:

My hope is that students will

- better understand different approaches and methods to cultivate creativity in their lives.
- explore various forms of written, creative expression and develop methods for communicating various experiences.
- develop skills to critically read the creative work of other authors.
- be able to critically read their peers' work and orally communicate their aesthetic responses.
- understand different cultural aesthetics and values and incorporate their own aesthetic beliefs into their own written work.

Required Books:

There is no required book for this class. All readings will be posted on moodle. I would like you to print these out and bring them with you to class. It is probably easiest to get a binder and put them together into a binder as your own class anthology. Yes, the printing volume may be heavy—to that end, I would suggest that you print two-sided (and remember that, while the volume may seem heavy, it will be cheaper than the books I would assign to get this range of material).

You should also have a journal that you bring to class every day for in-class writing and discussion. I will not collect these journals, so it need not be the only use for this journal, but please make sure it has enough room to do a great deal of in-class writing. Please bring to every class!

Grading:

Students often suggest that creative writing is too subjective to be graded. While I don't completely agree with this notion, there is certainly some validity to the observation. More importantly, if our goal is to break through to fresh, unexpected material, worrying about a grade can prove counterproductive. Grading, then, will primarily focus on other classroom issues besides the quality of your creative work. You should feel free to experiment and push yourself in new directions in your writing without worrying too much about the graded aspect of your work. That said, I expect you to write a lot and I expect you to try many different approaches in your work. You should write more than what I specifically assign—the assignments and readings are starting points, but it's up to you to use these as a springboard and keep going. Your willingness to try new work and to willingly revise is more

important than how I evaluate the individual pieces. You will turn in a final portfolio that should show me the range of what you've been attempting over the course of the block.

I will grade this class holistically. In other words, I will give you a final grade based on the block's work as a whole rather than individual grades.

I will give you feedback on assignments over the block, and I will give periodic feedback to work in general. At any point, though, that you would like to talk about your grade or any other issues of concern, please come see me; I am happy to talk through any aspect of the course with you at any time.

Assignments:

- **Participation:** You are expected to come prepared to make comments, contribute writing exercises, discuss the reading etc. You should have at least one observation or question in your notebook about the daily reading, ready for each class. This is a large class, however; you are not necessarily expected to contribute every session but to make a substantive contribution over the course of the block. Please remember that a thoughtful question is often just as important as a comment—contribute to the conversation in whatever way feels appropriate to you. I will give feedback on participation mid-way through the block so you know where you stand and what you might work on.
- **Daily Writing:** Every weekday you will be turning in 1-2 pages of work electronically (not as hard copy). I will evaluate these on the way the work engages with a particular exercise and/or the stylistic issues we are discussing and your willingness to push yourself and experiment. More than anything, I will be looking to see variety and range in your writing over the course of the block. I will not comment specifically on every piece; instead, at the end of each week you will submit 1-2 pages of work done that week on which you would like feedback. Since my goal is to get you experimenting widely, *do not* necessarily wait for a specific exercise; try any exercises in the reading that seem interesting; pose exercises to your peers; imitate anyone's work you enjoy. If I do not specify a specific exercise for a given day, you may submit whatever you would like (as long as it is from this block) ***Write often*** and in many different ways.
- **Craft Paper:** You will each choose a poet that we read and analyze their work from a technical perspective (as opposed to a literary-critical perspective). In other words, I will want you to read as writers: how does a writer do what he or she does? The paper should discuss what particular stylistic elements you see as unique to a given writer. This paper will discuss many of the issues that we discuss throughout the block: tone, diction, imagery, rhythm, character, plot, pacing etc. These papers will be roughly 4 pages.
- **Workshop Discussion:** During the second and third rounds of workshop, you will each be responsible for beginning the conversation about a peers' work. You will open up with a few comments about what you think is most important about

the work and you will then pose two or three questions that you think are important to think about for that person's writing. I will lead the discussion at that point, so you will not be responsible for directing traffic of the ensuing discussion; your goal is to get us going.

- **Final Portfolio:** On the last Tuesday of class, you will turn in a portfolio of 7-8 pages that represent the range of work you've done over the block. It is true that this is not necessarily a large sampling; I want you to fully evaluate the work you've done to choose what seems most interesting and representative. I will be expecting you to challenge your work and experiment over the block; beyond the 6-7 pages, I would like to see at least 4 versions of 1 piece with a brief commentary explaining what you think works or not in different versions. You will also write a brief commentary of what you see as your strengths and weaknesses that will be included in the portfolio. I will grade this commentary as heavily as the work itself—rather than me judging the quality of the work alone, I will look at how you are thinking about your own work.
- **Process Paper:** Over the course of this block, you will be primarily exposed to my process as a writer. Much of this will not be inherently useful to you as a writer (we all need to find our own process). But the effort of trying on a particular process is useful in terms of finding our own way. At the same time, I want you to be exposed to what other writers have to say about their process. Over the course of the block, then, you will be engaged in some research to find out what other writers say about how they write. The goal will be for you to have a broader sense of the different ways that writers work, and for you to consider what might be most productive for you. This paper will ask you to reflect on your own experiences as a writer this block, using the ideas of at least four other writers. You will try to synthesize their ideas and mine and your own experiences into some statement about how you think about the process of writing.

Accommodations:

Cornell College is committed to providing equal educational opportunities to all students. If you have a documented learning disability and will need any accommodation in this course, you **must** request the accommodation(s) from [the instructor of the course] as early as possible and no later than the third day of the term. Additional information about the policies and procedures for accommodation of learning disabilities is available on the Cornell web site at http://www.cornellcollege.edu/academic_affairs/disabilities/.

I am happy to speak with you about any academic challenges you may have. Please feel free to stop in during my office hours or make an appointment.

Schedule:

We will meet from 9:30 – 11:30 and 1:00 – 3:00. Each week I will post a detailed schedule of meetings, readings, and assignments on moodle.