

ENG 215: INTRODUCTION TO CREATIVE WRITING

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“We should not forget that to be a fine story writer is to be an artist of language, someone who uses sentences to produce feeling. However simple this sounds, there is something extraordinary about it to me, given how few sentences that we encounter in our daily lives can manage to make us feel anything, to stir us toward revelation. The sentence, as a technology, is used for so many rote exchanges, so many basic communication requirements, that to rescue it from these necessary mundanities, to turn it into feeling, is to do something strenuous and heroic.”

—*Ben Marcus*

“I always say to people, practice an art, no matter how well or badly [you do it], because then you have the experience of becoming, and it makes your soul grow.”

—*Kurt Vonnegut*

::DESCRIPTION::

In this class, we’ll form a community of writers, learning from what we read and write, and from each other. Because writing well requires reading well, we’ll read plenty of contemporary poetry and fiction, considering each piece from a writer’s perspective: how is it put together? What makes it unique, interesting, and effective? How and what can we learn from it? We’ll develop our vocabulary for talking about what we read and write, and build a toolbox of techniques to use in our writing. We’ll also read craft essays on writing. But above all, we will write, and through writing we will explore our ideas, expand our imaginations, and pay closer, deeper attention to the world in which we live.

This is a multi-genre course, meaning we will read and write poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and things that fall somewhere in between. As paint is the medium of the painter, clay that of the ceramicist, and light that of the photographer, words will be our medium. There will be days that we’ll focus on tools and techniques more applicable to poetry (line breaks, for example), and days we’ll focus on tools of the fiction writer (character, for example, or plot structure), but because many tools are useful regardless of the genre, we will often read both poems and stories. You will be expected to try writing both poetry and prose, but it will often be up to you *when* you choose to write a poem, story, essay, or some hybrid creature of your own devising.

As a member of this unique community, you’ll be sharing your writing with the group. This can be scary because writing—even when fictional—is personal. Whether we are discussing published writing or student writing, I expect a respectful community of writers who are generous with their ideas and their words. Please cultivate a spirit of generosity, kindness, curiosity, and helpfulness.

::REQUIRED MATERIALS::

Justin Torres: *We The Animals*

Claudia Rankine: *Citizen*

(Many!) readings will be posted on Moodle

A notebook or journal for notes and writing exercises

A binder for handouts and printed Moodle readings

::COURSE REQUIREMENTS::

Come to class. Your presence is essential to your success in this course, and is essential to the community I hope you will find here. If you are not here, not only will you miss out on all sorts of exercises that will hopefully inspire and motivate your writing, but we will miss your voice in discussions. Each of us will have a unique view of everything we read, and it is the sum of our viewpoints that is most useful. You have one “free” absence, no questions asked. If you miss more than one day of class, you will lose one letter-grade from your participation grade. If you miss more than two days of class, you will fail the course. If you are absent or falling behind due to illness, please email me, and meet with me as soon as possible to discuss a 15 day health withdrawal. If you know you will miss a class, contact me ahead of time. You are responsible for completing the work you miss and for retrieving any materials you missed. If you are late for class, or leave early, three times it will count as an absence. Please be on time.

Be prepared and actively participate in class. Complete the assigned readings, bring printed copies of them, and be ready to discuss them. Because much of this course depends on your brilliant, creative ideas and well-considered opinions, I hope each of you will speak often. Be generous and bold with your ideas. I hope you’ll find it easy to participate in this class. I understand that some of you are quieter than others. Written comments, talking points and reading responses (posted on moodle) will also count toward participation grades, but do your best to add something to the conversation each day. Let me know how I can help you to speak up more often. We really want to hear your ideas!

Be curious, bold, imaginative, and kind when discussing each other’s work. I hope our classroom will be a comfortable and creative environment. Please cultivate respect for each other. Honor and accept different opinions, beliefs, values, and voices. Insensitivity or intolerance of people based on their gender, race, religion, sexuality, disability, etc., will result in you being dropped from the course.

Do the assigned writing exercises and have fun with them. Take risks. Challenge yourself. Try new things, new voices, new styles, new forms. Share your work with the class often (and turn them in to me).

Turn your assignments in on time. I will not accept late work.

::ASSIGNMENTS::

TALKING POINTS AND READING RESPONSES:

One of the best ways of learning to write is by reading and considering the choices a writer has made. Therefore, we will read and discuss a lot of contemporary poetry and fiction in this class. All reading assignments will be posted on Moodle (with the exceptions of the two required books).

Please print them out, keep them in a binder, and bring them to class with your notes, questions, highlighting, and other evidence of active reading.

For each thing you read, you will be expected to write at least two “talking points” that you could share with the class. **Bring them to class and post them points on moodle before class.** Write down what you most admire about a poem or story, what you would steal or emulate, or analyze what seems puzzling or askew in a piece. Be specific! I am not particularly interested in whether or not you *liked* a piece. I am more interested in textual analysis. What have you observed about a piece? What makes it different from other things we have read? How is the writer playing with alliteration or point-of-view or sound? Write down terms or concepts that are unclear. Ask a question of me, or of your classmates, but also consider your own answer, even if you are unsure. Talking points should be between 2 sentences and a paragraph.

I will occasionally ask you to write a longer response to a reading assignment. These responses should be between 1-2 pages, double-spaced. I will provide guiding questions, but you are also welcome to write about things outside those questions. Please follow your interest where it leads. These responses are *not* formal essays. They are spaces for you to think on paper. They also will help us start, and continue, class discussions. Print and bring these longer responses to class with you.

Talking points are worth 1 point each. Reading responses are worth up to 3 points.

WRITING EXERCISES:

You will complete many writing exercises, both in and out of class. Most days, one of these will be due on Moodle before class begins. I will sometimes ask you to bring a printed copy to class. Exercises will be worth up to 2 points each.

RUNNING LIST OF TERMS, TOOLS, & CONCEPTS:

Throughout the block, keep a list of creative writing terms, tools, and concepts that we discuss. These will not be collected or assessed during the block, but will be important for your final portfolio when you will be required to define and discuss 8 of them. My recommendation is that you make at least one entry in your terms list each day, beginning with “Concrete v. Abstract Language” on day 1. Some of the terms will come up casually when we are discussing reading assignments or exercises, or in workshop. Please ask if you are unfamiliar with a term or concept, or would like to spend more time on it. (See Final Portfolio Requirements for more details on how this will be assessed).

SHOW & TELL PRESENTATION (On the wonders of the world!):

One of the goals of our time together is to develop the habit of thinking and seeing as writers, which means observing closely, tuning in to our senses and thoughts, and recognizing material for stories, poems, or essays in our daily lives. To this end, each of you will give one 5-7 minute “Show & Tell” presentation on something that inspires you to write. This could be as simple as reading a 2-3 minute poem or story excerpt by a writer you admire and discussing what you love about the writer’s work. It could be a YouTube video of an amazing dance performance, spoken word poet, or musician. You could bring in the mushrooms you gathered on a hike and ask us to write about them. You might do brief research into the types of waves that roll on the ocean and teach us about them (with photos!). You might tell us about an Ebola treatment center: Who is there? What are their methods of treatment? Where is it? The purpose is to present something to us that you find curious, amazing, inspiring, or riveting (*inspiring* doesn’t always mean *wonderful*...) These are relatively

informal presentations, but PLEASE DO NOT EXCEED 7 MINUTES. The purpose is to add to our idea bank, and to show us a little of your world and how you think. You might also think of this as a challenge to recognize something you're already fascinated by that might make good material for your own writing. You will sign up for your presentation date on the second day of class. Presentations will take place during weeks 2 and 3.

3 WORKSHOP PIECES: 1 poem, 1 town/campus piece (plus revision), 1 story

1. Workshop Poem: On Friday of Week 1, we will have small group, quick workshops of one of the poems you have written. This poem can be an exercise response from earlier in the week, or something new you have written outside of the exercises. It should be a work in progress, but not a first draft. Spend some time on it. While no one will expect perfection, it should be free of spelling and punctuation errors, and should demonstrate some consideration of the topics we've discussed earlier in the week (image, line breaks, diction, etc.) It is due at 9:30AM on Friday, March 20. Please bring 6 printed copies to class.

2. Town/Campus Piece: This is a class project. Each of you will write a short piece inspired by the Cornell campus or our surrounding town. This piece can be a poem, very short story (2 page max), or very short nonfiction (2 page max). The first draft will be due on Thursday, March 26. The revised version is due via moodle at 9:30AM on April 7. More details to come.

3. Workshop Story: Fiction workshops will take place during weeks 3 and 4. You will turn in 19 (double-spaced, stapled, titled) copies of your story one class day before your workshop. Workshop drafts will be between 6 and 10 pages.

WRITTEN WORKSHOP COMMENTS:

The first two workshops will be small-group mini-workshops. Each writer will take notes on what is said about her/his piece in the moment. For the final workshop, you will turn in your stories a day before your workshop. Each class member will read the story and write a 300-500 word response. Please type and print your responses to each story you read, and give them to the writer with your copy of their story (including your margin notes and charming doodles). **You will also need to send me a copy of your written responses via moodle. Please send me *all of your responses as a single document* on the last day of workshop (Monday, April 6).** I will provide further guidance on my expectations before we begin the fiction workshops.

WORKSHOP LEADER:

Each of you will serve as the workshop leader for one story. As leader, your responsibility is to choose which page the writer will read aloud to the class, summarize the piece for the group, comment on what makes the story unique or something that is working well within it, and ask the rest of the group a question. This should take about 5 minutes.

FINAL PORTFOLIO: (see attached sheet for more details)

- Introductory Note (2 pages, double-spaced)
- Revisions of 3 poems
- Revised workshop story
- Eight Craft Terms with definitions and discussion

GRADING:

Talking Points and Reading Responses: 15%

Writing Exercises: 15%

Show & Tell Presentation: 5%

Workshop Pieces (3): 15%

Written Workshop Comments: 15%

Workshop Leader: 5%

Participation: 5%

Final Portfolio: 25%

Note on Grading: Your writing is important, but an A will not prove that you are a wonderful (or terrible) writer. Only you know if you are communicating what you want, how you want, and this will be your lifelong struggle if you continue writing. Excellent writing will be reflected in your final grade, but it is not enough to earn an A, nor is it the only way to earn an A. If you have a solid attendance record and are consistently engaged in your work and in class discussions...if you complete each written assignment with care...If you put earnest effort into revision...If you approach writing as an adventure, with imagination and curiosity, you will get a good grade (B+ and A- are “good” grades). You can see, in the grade breakdown above, that many elements of your grade are based on whether or not you complete a task. However, I will give you partial credit if you complete tasks half-heartedly. Please meet with me if you have questions about your progress or upcoming assignments.

It is my hope that you are already interested in reading and writing, and in being part of a writing community. A writing workshop is a unique experience—this will be a place where your creativity matters. Your experience and understanding can be put into words. Indulge yourselves! Have fun, but take your writing seriously, too. Take your classmates’ writing seriously Try new, daring things with your writing. Invent and imagine. At the end of the semester you’ll be a better writer and a better reader (and your grade will reflect your hard work).

SCHEDULE:

Most days, we will meet from 9:30-11:00 am and 1:00-3:00 p.m. Days when this is not the case are noted on the syllabus. I will do my best to remind you of schedule deviations, but ultimately this is your responsibility. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to find out about any announcements, assignments, or changes and to ensure you turn in your assignments on time. Please check with a classmate and/or on Moodle before contacting me, but if you are unsure, email me or speak to me after class. Readings and assignments are due on the days they are listed. I will regularly note changes and details on moodle.

Mon. March 16 9:00-11:00 1:00-3:00	Course Introduction, syllabus, Compound Words exercise Discuss: Robert Hass: “A Story About the Body” and Natalie Diaz: “Abecedarian...” Exercise: Abstract & Concrete language
Tues. March 17	DUE: poem developed from concrete sentences or compound word exercise OR Abecedarian

9:30-11:00	<p>Bly “Image as a Form of Intelligence” Tim O’Brien: “The Things They Carried” (M) Phillip Levine: “Bell Isle, 1949” & “You Can Have It” (M) Simic, Bishop (Optional: Mary Oliver: “Imagery”)</p>
1:00-3:00	Truths/Lies Exercise
Weds. March 18 9:30-12:00 NO AFTERNOON CLASS	DUE: Poem or 1-2 pages prose from Truths/Lies exercise READ: Richard Hugo: “Writing Off the Subject” & “The Triggering Town” (M), Oliver: “Rain,” Akhil Sharma: “Surrounded By Sleep,” Williams “Tar” DICTION EXERCISE
Thurs. March 19 9:30-11:00 1:00-3:00	DUE: Diction poem or prose due on Moodle READ: Addonizio & Laux: “The Music of the Line” Jarman: “Children,” Plath, Ginsberg In-Class Writing: Playing with Line Breaks, and translit exercise Mock Workshop
Fri. March 20: 9:30-11:00 1:00-3:00	DUE: 6 printed copies of 1 poem (also turn it in on Moodle) READ: Prose poems/Short-shorts (Carson, Lindenberg, Kincaid, Davis, Barthelme, Edson) OVER LUNCH: Read through your group’s poems. Jot down a couple of thoughts on each. Small group workshops of poems
Mon. March 23 9:30-11:00 1:00-3:00	DUE: Short-short or prose poem. Reading Response to Rankine (1.5-2 pages, double-spaced). READ: Claudia Rankine: <i>Citizen</i> (whole book!) Show & Tell x2 Look at Erasures, Begin Collage exercise
Tues. March 24 9:30-12:00 NO AFTERNOON CLASS	DUE: Collage or erasure Madison Smartt Bell: “Modular Stories” Alexander Hemon: “Life & Work of Alphonse Kauders” Flannery O’Connor: “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” Show & Tell x2
Wed. March 25 9:30-11:00	Mapping & Place Stories READ: <i>Mapping SLC</i> (explore site and read at least 3 pieces), Lennon: “Pieces for the Left Hand,” <i>Sifting Wheat from Chaff</i> (Read intro and at least 2 pieces) Show & Tell x2

1:00-3:00	Class Visit from Melissa Wood, distinguished alumni and book illustrator.
Thurs. March 26 9:30-11:00	DUE: 6 copies of Town/Campus Story (and turn in on Moodle) READ: POV Chapter, Moore, Saunders
1:00-3:00	Show & Tell x2 Mapping/Place story small group workshops
Fri. March 27 9:30-11:00	DUE: POV experiment exercise READ: Wordsworth, Joyce, Walser, Wordsworth, O'Hara, Cardiff (all on Moodle) Show & Tell x2
No Afternoon Class	Work on Walking/Intervention projects and read Torres
Mon. March 30 9:30-11:00	DUE: Walking/Interventions (TEXT/DOCUMENTATION) READ: Torres: <i>We the Animals</i>
1:00-3:00	Show & Tell x2 Family Photos exercise: bring 2-3 family photos in which you can see detail.
Tues. March 31 9:30-11:00	DUE: GROUP A WORKSHOP STORIES READ: Thon, Day, Jackson WRITE: Preparation for Anatomy lab visit Show & Tell x2
1:00-3:00	ANATOMY LAB VISIT (Meet in West Science)
Weds. April 1 9:30-11:30	DUE: GROUP B WORKSHOP STORIES Show & Tell x2 Group A Workshops
no afternoon class	
Thurs. April 2 9:30-11:30	DUE: Groups C and D workshop stories (19 stapled, printed copies) Show & Tell x2 Group B Workshops
no afternoon class	
Fri. April 3 9:30-11:00	DUE: Groups E and F workshop stories (19 stapled, printed copies) Fiction Workshops (Group C)
1:00-3:00	Show & Tell x Fiction Workshops (Group D)
Mon. April 6 9:30-11:00	Fiction Workshops (Group E)
1:00-3:00	Fiction Workshops (Group F)

Tues. April 7 9:30 2:00-3:00	Revision Day DUE ON MOODLE: Revised Town/Campus Story PICK UP QR CODE and post in appropriate location
Wed. April 8 10:00-noon	Portfolios due. Reading and Celebration at VEL

CORNELL COLLEGE OUTCOMES

This section of Introduction to Creative Writing aims to contribute to the following Cornell College Outcomes and Educational Priorities:

KNOWLEDGE: Students will integrate and apply knowledge from a focused area of study (we will focus on building our knowledge of creative writing), as well as a broad general education, which includes disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives in the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences. Creative writing is, by nature, interdisciplinary: we must find something to write about, and writing about writing only takes one so far. During this course, we will seek inspiration from science (specifically anatomy), visual and performing art, music, film, history, and anywhere else our attention wanders. Good writing demands that we graze widely and observe deeply.

INQUIRY: Students will respond to the complexities of contemporary and enduring problems using information literacy tools, research skills. (See “knowledge, above. As writers, we will interpret “research,” and “inquiry” widely, seeking information everywhere, gaining skills in finding that information, and following curiosity where it leads.)

COMMUNICATION: is at the heart of writing. We want to tell our stories and hear each other’s stories. We want to communicate effectively, transmitting our imagined worlds into the minds of our readers.

INTERCULTURAL LITERACY: We will read texts by writers who represent a wide variety of cultural, socioeconomic, racial, sexual, and religious backgrounds. Some of these texts directly address questions of identity and culture, while others communicate about these such questions in less obvious ways. Similarly, each member of our class represents a unique combination of personality traits and cultural backgrounds. By reading and writing together, and through discussing what we find in our reading and writing, we are invited to develop intercultural literacy. That said, it is our goal to develop this literacy in an open and sensitive manner, avoiding assumptions and seeking, as writers and as humans, deeper empathy and more complex understandings of ourselves and others.

CITIZENSHIP: In this class our focus will be on “literary citizenship.” What does it mean to be a writer among writers? What does it mean to be a writer at Cornell College? In Mount Vernon? In Iowa? In the US? In the world? How can we put our stories into the world in a way that will invite readers to engage with them? And where can we find others’ stories? How can we spread literature like a luminous rash or a plague of magnolias? We will form a small literary community, and we will consider the broader literary community that surrounds us. We will complete a writing project that will target unsuspecting readers on the Cornell campus, and for one assignment we will write stories and poems inspired by our college and town.