

# Introduction to Creative Writing

## Monday, Wednesday, Friday

**Instructor:** Paul Riker  
**Office Hours:** TBD  
<https://purdue-student.webex.com/meet/priker>  
**Email:** Priker@purdue.edu  
**Course Website:** Brightspace  
<https://purdue.brightspace.com/>

### Course Description

This course acts as an introduction to the craft and practice of creative writing. Throughout the semester, you will cultivate not only your creative habits, but also your attention and generosity as a reader and writer. The course is guided by certain assumptions: that everyone carries within them work needing to be made; that you care deeply about the written word and are invested in the opportunity to be exposed to new work by published writers and by your peers; that you will take care of each other's work; and that you will take "care" to work ("care" in this case meaning rigor and respect). My hope, as your instructor, is that by the end of this course you will be prepared for a future engaged with art and will be a better literary (and, frankly, world) citizen.

In this class, you will be writing original poetry and fiction. You will practice the skills of drafting, revising, and commenting on others' creative work within a workshop setting. Creative writing is a wonderful and strange experience, and I encourage you to explore whatever interests you through your writing.

Engaging in a writing community is one of the most valuable tools available to a creative writer, but it takes real work and effort. Expect to devote several hours to prepare for this class, especially on workshop days. It bears stressing: the more you put into your writing community, the more that you (and your classmates) will get out of it. Writing is hard work! But it's worth it! I promise!

### Course Structure

There are, to be reductive, two "halves" to this course: the first "half" is poetry; the second "half" is fiction. We will, however, be engaging with prose poetry and flash fiction in the "middle" of these two units – two sub-genres that fall somewhat in-between poetry and fiction (think of these sub-genres as a "bridge" of sorts). We will begin each half by discussing specific craft topics and analyzing pieces of poetry/fiction by contemporary (mostly) writers. This will equip you with the tools and vocabulary that you'll need to discuss your peers' writing during workshop.

After we cover craft in each half, you will produce your own work: two poems, and two pieces of fiction (one "flash," one short story). You will be turning in both of your poems and your short story for "workshop" – i.e., a discussion with your peers about the work's merits and any questions/thoughts your peers have on places you may be able to take the work in revision. Workshop is not time to "criticize," or time to tear a work limb-from-limb – quite the opposite, in fact! We will, during workshop, learn to meet each work on its own terms, respect those terms, and delve deeper into any piece's execution, including its craft, its stakes, its particulars and its minutiae. Based on workshop comments, you will revise your pieces and submit them within your final portfolios.

### My Expectations for You

**On the Scarieness of Art:** Hate to break it to you, but this is an art class: creative writing is art. As such, it can be dangerous; it can be unfamiliar; it can be scary and vulnerable. Indeed, we will be encountering emotionally-

driven material informed by the varied experiences of our group. It is your duty to approach this course with the expectation that you may, and probably will, feel vulnerable in presenting your art. Your peers will also feel vulnerable. *I*, as your instructor, will feel vulnerable.

Vulnerability, though, is a gift that we give each other, and a gift that we give our art. Let's remember this. Let's be gentle and grateful, and let's be respectful and, more importantly than anything, kind.

**On Community:** "Community" has become a catchphrase, used to lump otherwise disparate people together or exclude unknowns. A creative writing class is (and can be/should be) different. While we may not have "chosen" each other, we can choose to build/shape/birth an environment and a culture in which we make space for each other's past, present, and future influences. We can be supportive, yet honest with each other, have difficult conversations, and assume that each of us is doing the best we can the resources we have available to us.

Practice patience; practice understanding – with others *and* (most importantly) with yourself. Ask yourself what your needs are and if they are being met. If anything, the creative energy that your peers will manifest in this course may provide a respite from the world outside of it.

**On Content Warnings:** Content warnings exist to protect people suffering from PTSD or trauma from re-experiencing any trauma – either in general, or by surprise (sometimes a warning is exactly that: not an excuse to disengage, but a warning, a way to signal to your brain "hey, be ready for some tough stuff.") In this class, we will read several pieces that deal with potentially triggering topics. I don't believe we should avoid difficult topics simply because they are difficult. However, **if there are certain topics you are sensitive to and can't handle reading or talking about, I would greatly appreciate if you reach out to me privately.** I have no problem with substituting a reading with a different reading if it means maintaining a safe environment for you all; alternatively, I can excuse you from class the day of the reading if you prefer (confidentially, and without explanation to your peers).

Anything you share with me will be completely private, no questions asked – you don't have to justify your need for a content warning in any way. If you ask me to avoid a subject, I will; but know that I can only avoid a topic if you reach out to me.

## Required Texts, Materials, and Technologies

All readings – poems, short stories, and various essays on craft elements – will be available via Brightspace.

Other stuff you'll need:

- A high-speed internet connection, which you will access daily for course communication through email and Brightspace access
- Access to a laptop or desktop computer with Windows Vista or higher, or Mac OS 10.6 Snow Leopard or higher
- A program that can open PDFs (such as Acrobat or Preview)
- Microsoft Office, Apple's Office suite, or open source equivalents (please save documents in .doc, .docx, or .pdf formats—no .pages files, please!)
- **Optional: A webcam with microphone or working smartphone with camera**, for virtual office hours. We will discuss more why this is "optional" in class.

- **Optional:** Access to a printer. You may find it helpful to print out and mark up weekly readings (including your peers' work!)

If you are facing difficulties accessing any of these technologies, let me know.

## Assignments & Grading Structure

Component of Course	Percent toward Final Grade
Participation & Professional Ethos	10
Drafts – Poetry	15
Drafts – Fiction	15
Author Letters & Marginalia	20
Public Reading Response	10
Final Portfolio	30
<b>Total Points for the Course</b>	<b>100</b>

Assignments are graded on a standard grading scale.

**Participation & Professional Ethos (10%):** As a member of our writing community, your thoughtful and in-depth responses to our readings, whether the readings are published texts or the work of your peers, will be the central component of every discussion. **Read the texts**, not just for pleasure, but to learn from them. Be prepared to discuss them in class *from the perspective of a WRITER*. This bears stating: **this is not a literature class**. Our discussions will be less concerned with what things “mean,” and *more* concerned with what the writer was trying to do, how they deploy various craft elements to accomplish their goals, etc. Actively involving yourself in class discussion ensures that you can lend your voice to these important conversations.

**Drafts – Poetry (15%):** You will write (at least!) 2 original poems during the first half of our course. Both of these poems will be workshopped with the rest of the class. Specific guidelines for submission/workshop will be discussed in-class.

**Drafts – Fiction (15%):** You will write (at least!) one short story, between 2,000 and 4,000 words. Like your poems, this story will be workshopped with the rest of the class. You will also be writing one “flash” fiction piece (or prose poem!), that should be between 500 and 1,000 words (although this piece will *not* be workshopped).

**Author Letters & Marginalia (20%):** You will be expected to provide 100-200 words of commentary per poem, and 200-300 words of commentary per story, to be emailed to your classmate(s) being workshopped, as well as submitted through Brightspace (so that I can grade it). You will also be expected to provide “marginalia” – i.e., in-text notes commenting on lines, word choice, etc. that you found particularly interesting in any given piece. Don’t know what this is? No fear! We will discuss these things in class prior to our first round of workshops, as well as what constitutes a “good” author letter and “good” marginalia.

**Public Reading Response (10%):** Our campus hosts a number of acclaimed writers who share their work via public readings (some in-person, some virtual); often, these readings include a Q&A element, as well. These readings provide great insight into what “working” writers are writing, as well as how “working” writers consider craft and their “situation” as a writer. **I will expect you to attend at least one such event**, and provide a 300 to 500 word “memo” responding to the reading – who the writer was, what they read, what they discussed, etc. We will discuss the logistics behind this assignment further in class (as well as what you should do if, for whatever reason, you are unable to attend a reading).

**Final Portfolio (30%):** Your final portfolio will contain the following: 2 poems, 1 short story, 1 “flash fiction piece, and your Public Reading Response memo (see above). **ALL of your pieces should be revised.** Your portfolio should *also* be preceded by a 500-1,000 word “cover letter” reflecting on your work in this course and summarizing your growth as a writer from the beginning to the end of this semester.

## **Course Policies**

### **Participation, Engagement, and Attendance**

Given that much of this class depends on your presence in order to properly discuss your peers’ work, attendance is *especially* vital for this course. Attendance, therefore, is mandatory. You are allowed, however, **four (4) unexcused absences**. Upon your fifth absence, I will lower your final grade by a full letter grade (i.e.: from an A- to a B-, for instance). Upon your sixth absence, I will lower your final grade by two full letter grades. And so on.

That being said, I understand there are often extenuating circumstances – illness, personal issues, etc. If such things emerge, please talk to me as soon as possible, and with the level of discretion with which you are comfortable.

### **Assignment Formatting Guidelines**

- All assignments must be typed and presented in a 12-point readable serif font (such as Times New Roman).
- Works of fiction should be double-spaced; poems should be single-spaced
- Your surname (last name) and the page number should be included on the upper-right corner of every page of your work
- Submit all assignments as Word .doc or .docx files – no pdfs, please!
- All assignments will be submitted through Brightspace. **No emailed assignments!!!**

### **E-mail Etiquette**

At some point during this semester, you’ll probably need to send me an email. You should be prepared and comfortable with ensuring that any and all electronic communication to me is properly formal and professional. This means:

- A subject line that is descriptive (i.e.: not just “hey” or “assignment” or “(no subject)”)
- A proper, *professional* salutation (i.e.: “Dear Mr. Riker,” “Dear Professor Riker,” etc. *Not* “Dear Paul,”)
- Full, grammatically proofread sentences
- A proper sign-off (i.e.: “Sincerely, [your name]”)

Note that these rules aren’t just to be a stickler or to inflate my own ego, but rather to get you all used to composing proper professional emails.

Additionally, while you may be up late at night working, I will almost certainly not be (I am old.) **I stop checking and responding to email at 9:30PM, every day, no exceptions.** If you email me after this time with an urgent question that needs to be answered that night, I will not see it until the next morning, point blank.

### **Missed or Late Work**

If you submit something after the due date, you will receive a **zero**, unless you arrange with me otherwise. **Clear and direct communication is the best way to avoid any penalties – please do not hesitate to email me if you suspect you will have trouble turning in any assignment properly.**

### **Respectful Conduct**

Be thoughtful and respectful of each other and of me. This includes practices such as arriving on time, thoughtfully attending to the ideas of others, working through active participation to build a fruitful classroom community, and not using your cell phone or computer for non-class activities. I reserve the right to mark you absent if I notice inattentive behavior and irresponsible use of technology during class, and I may not always openly address this behavior.

Also, I will not, under any circumstances, tolerate disrespectful language or behavior. This includes, but it not limited to: sexist, sexualizing, racist, classist, ableist, transphobic, homophobic, religiophobic, bigoted, violent, or pejorative language. Avoid using harmful words such a “crippled,” “hysterical,” “blind,” or “tone-deaf” in your writing (these terms, as commonplace as we’ve made them in our vernacular, are fundamentally ableist). If a member of this class is made to feel unable to communicate their particular humanity because of another student or students, the offending student(s) will be asked to leave.

### **On Plagiarism**

The intentional use of someone else’s work without acknowledgment is unacceptable and detrimental to not only our own art but art itself. Plagiarism will be report and will result in failure of this course.

Be mindful of plagiarizing work within class – i.e., if you would like to quote someone else’s work or utilize a passage or idea that they created, you must receive permission first. You are also expected to bring **new work** to class. This means that you **should not submit creative pieces from other courses**, unless you can prove to me, somehow, that the piece in question has undergone significant revision since your first academic engagement with it.



## Class Schedule

(Note: **This schedule is subject to change.** All required readings and assignments will be posted to our Brightspace page. As Brightspace is a living breathing document, and this isn't, **please consider Brightspace the source of truth for all readings and assignments.**)

All readings should be completed **FOR THE DAY LISTED BELOW** (i.e.: you should read and be prepared to discuss Week 2 readings *during* Week 2, Week 3 *during* Week 3, etc.).

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	<b>What Poetry Can Be</b> Walt Whitman, "O Me! O Life!" Marianne Moore, "Poetry" Danez Smith, "Dinosaurs in the Hood" Excerpt from <i>The Hatred of Poetry</i>	<b>Image</b> Kaveh Akbar, "Orchids Are Sprouting from the Floorboards" Natalie Diaz, "I Watch Her Eat the Apple" Ross Gay, "Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude" [excerpt] Essay: "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"	<b>Metaphor &amp; Simile</b> Ada Limón, "How to Triumph Like a Girl" francine j harris, "fume" Oliver Baez Bendorf, "Queer Facts about Vegetables"
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Line &amp; Stanza</b> Ilya Kaminsky, "We Lived Happily During the War" Frank O'Hara, "Having a Coke with You" Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"	<b>Sound</b> Malachi Black, "Insomnia & So On" Cathy Park Hong, "Ballad in A" Franny Choi, "We Used Our Words We Used What Words We Had" Essay: "Why Ice Cream Sounds Fat and Crackers Sound Skinny"	<b>Voice &amp; Tone</b> Matthew Olzmann, "Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem" Emily Skaja, "March Is March" Chen Chen, "I'm not a religious person but"
<b>Week 3</b>	<b>Syntax &amp; Diction</b> Jos Charles, "I. [these wite skirtes...]" Amy Woolard, "Spoiler" Brad Trumpfheller, "Do You Kiss Your Boyfriend With Those Verbs"	<b>Structure &amp; Form</b> Jericho Brown, "Duplex" Terrance Hayes, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin [I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison...]" Randall Mann, "Pantoum" <b>Poem 1 due for all</b>	<b>[Explanation of Wkshp]</b> Essay: "Shitty First Drafts"

<b>Week 4</b>	[Workshop]	[Workshop]	[Workshop]
<b>Week 5</b>	[Workshop]	[Workshop]	[Workshop]
<b>Week 6</b>	<b>Persona Poetry</b> H.D., "Circe" Fatimah Asghar, "Pluto Shits on the Universe" Caki Wilkinson, "Jocks"	<b>[Workshop]</b> Poem 2 due for all	[Workshop]
<b>Week 7</b>	[Workshop]	[Workshop]	[Workshop]
<b>Week 8</b>	[Workshop]	[Spillover Day]	<b>Prose Poetry</b> Hanif Abdurraqib, "It Is Maybe Time to Admit That Michael Jordan Definitely Pushed Off" Joe Wenderoth, <i>Letters to Wendy's</i> [excerpts] Jennifer Knox, "Hot Ass Poem"
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>Flash Fiction</b> George Saunders, "Sticks" Stuart Dybek, "Lights" Jamaica Kinkaid, "Girl"	<b>Intro to Fiction</b> Charles Yu, "Fable" Essay: Alexander Chee, "On Becoming an American Writer"	<b>Plot (Tension &amp; Conflict)</b> Alice Munro, "Wild Swans" Gabriela Garcia, "Prey"

<b>Week 10</b>	<b>Point of View (POV)</b> Celeste Ng, "Girls at Play" Diane Cook, "It's Coming"	<b>Characterization</b> Aimee Bender, "Call My Name" <b>Flash piece due for all</b>	<b>Voice</b> Dave Eggers, "After I Was Thrown Into the River and Before I Drowned" Ted Chiang, "Exhalation"
<b>Week 11</b>	<b>Pacing</b> Raymond Carver, "A Small, Good Thing"	<b>Setting &amp; Place</b> Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, "The Era" Lauren Groff, "The Midnight Zone"	<b>Scene vs. Summary</b> Weike Wang, "Omakase"
<b>Week 12</b>	<b>Showing vs. Telling</b> Laila Lalami, "Echo"	<b>Dialogue</b> Julia Elliot, "Hellion" George Saunders, "Sea Oak" <b>Short Story due for all</b>	<b>Story Forms</b> Carmen Maria Machado, "Inventory" Jennifer Egan, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses"
<b>Week 13</b>	<b>[Workshop]</b>	<b>[Workshop]</b>	<b>[Workshop]</b>
<b>Week 14</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<b>[Workshop]</b> Public Reading Response due for all (unless you've talked to me)	<b>[Workshop]</b>
<b>Week 15</b>	<b>[Workshop]</b>	<b>[Spillover day]</b>	<b>[Spillover day]</b> Final Portfolio (i.e.: <i>all</i> revised work) due