

English 302
Writing Narrative
University of Southern California
Spring 2018

Wednesday, 2-4:20 PM
THH 203

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Office Hours: Wednesday, 4:30-6:00 PM, and by appointment

Course Description:

How do we write about the world? What is the balance between memory and imagination, between truth and the creativity required for art? These are the key questions faced by every writer of narrative, and they will be at the center of our work throughout this class. Although primarily a workshop — and it is the instructor's intention that each student have the opportunity to be workshopped twice during the semester — the class will also use select assigned readings to frame a discussion of the larger issues involved in narrative writing, from structure and point-of-view to empathy and betrayal, as well as the essential tension between facts and interpretation, and the inherent subjectivity of the stories we tell. During the semester, students will write one piece of fiction and one of nonfiction, each of 10-15 pages in length. Our discussions will include a consideration of genre and how (or whether) it is important, especially in regard to an imaginative sensibility. For this reason, we will also spend some time looking at narrative poetry, to get a sense of how the genres talk to one another, the ways in which they overlap.

Required Texts:

Ron Carlson, *Ron Carlson Tells a Story*

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

Edward Hirsch, *Gabriel*

Lex Williford and Michael Martone, eds., *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*

Tom Perrotta, ed., *The Best American Short Stories 2012*

Handouts

Course Requirements:

- 1) **Attendance:** You are expected to attend every class meeting and to be on time and attentive, both to your fellow students and to the work under review. If you have to miss a class, you must contact the instructor by email beforehand. A portion of your grade will be based on attendance and punctuality.
- 2) **Readings:** Please read the assigned materials, per the class schedule, prior to coming to class. A portion of your grade will be based on your participation in class in the discussion of these materials.
- 3) **Writing:** Each student will be workshopped twice during the semester, on a schedule to be determined at the first class.
- 4) **Comments:** You are expected to read your classmates' work, and to hand in two pages of typed comments, one copy for the writer and one for the instructor. You are also expected to make margin comments on the manuscript. Comments are due the day each submission is workshopped. We will discuss workshop etiquette during the first class meeting.

This syllabus is, as the saying goes, written in water, which means that it is subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

Grading:

1. Class participation (15%): This means active participation in class and workshop sessions, meeting deadlines, completing and turning in other assignments, and participating in discussions of assigned readings.
2. Comments and writing exercises (25%)
3. Fiction manuscript. (30%)
4. Nonfiction manuscript. (30%)

Class Schedule:

Week 1, January 10:

Instructor and student introductions.

Syllabus overview and course logistics and expectations.

General discussion: The art of editing.

In class writing exercise

Week 2, January 17:

Read for class: Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*: <http://www.online-literature.com/franz-kafka/metamorphosis/1>

First writing assignment due: Character exercise.

Week 3, January 24:

Read for class: Carlson, *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, pp. 1-52

Second writing assignment due: 2-3 page narrative that begins with some element of the fantastic.

Week 4, January 31:

Read for class: Carlson, *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*, pp. 53-112

Workshop.

Week 5, February 7:

Read for class: From *Best American Stories 2012*: Carol Anshaw, "The Last Speaker of the Language," pp. 1-15; also, James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (handout)

Workshop

Week 6, February 14:

Read for class: From *Best American Stories 2012*: Alice Munro, "Axis," pp. 122-137; Edith Pearlman, "Honeydew," pp. 162-173

Workshop.

Week 7, February 21:

Read for class: Rankine, *Citizen*

Workshop.

Week 8, February 28:

Read for class: Hirsch, *Gabriel*

Workshop.

Week 9, March 7:

NO CLASS

Week 10, March 21:

Read for class: From *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*: Eula Biss, “The Pain Scale,” pp. 28-42; also: Leslie Jamison, “The Empathy Exams,” http://www.believmag.com/issues/201402/?read=article_jamison

Workshop.

Week 11, March 28:

Read for class: David Foster Wallace, “Shipping Out” (handout)

Workshop.

Week 12, April 4:

Read for class: From *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*: John McPhee, “The Search for Marvin Gardens,” pp. 370-380; Brenda Miller, “The Date,” pp.381-388

Workshop.

Week 13, April 11:

Read for class: From *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*: Bernard Cooper, “Burl’s,” pp. 132-140; Amy Tan, “Mother Tongue,” pp. 514-519

Workshop.

Week 14, April 18:

Read for class: From *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*: Naomi Shihab Nye, “This is Not Who We are,” pp. 401-404; Sara Levine, “The Essayist is Sorry for Your Loss,” pp. 280-289

Workshop.

Week 15, April 25:

Final class.

Workshop.

Course recap.

University Policies on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.