

ENGLISH 105X: Creative Writing for Non-Majors

University of Southern California

Alfred Brown IV

Fall 2018

Wednesday | 2 – 4:20pm | WPH 200

Course Contact Information

Office Hours: Wednesday | 12-2pm

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Course Description

This course will provide an opportunity for non-majors to analyze, compose, and critique creative writing across three major genres: fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. To better guide our own writing process, we will spend considerable time contemplating both significant published literary works themselves *and* the creative processes their authors employed to create them. These initial studies will help distinguish the form and content of the three modes we endeavor to undertake ourselves, and prepare us for the composition of our own manuscripts. While the semester will begin by clearly demarcating the boundaries of each mode and practicing their forms, we will move towards a more fluid creative process which will require a more complex—and (possibly) *more original*—written response to the world around us. We will attempt to answer not only what creative writing has been, but how best we can approach it going forward.

This course will develop your ability to read critically and write creatively. Particular emphasis will be placed on effective and efficient communication in both written and oral form. Much of the class is run as a formal workshop where original manuscripts written by peers will be read and discussed in front of the author. You will be required to respond to all peer manuscripts both via prepared written critiques and orally during our in-class discussions. As such, we will also learn the invaluable skill of how better to offer constructive, meaningful criticism and work as a team to fortify peer work. When successful, this course will require you to grow not only as a writer, but as an editor, a speaker, and (perhaps most importantly) as a listener—all cornerstones of effective communication creative and otherwise.

Finally, this course will force you to contemplate writing in a broader context. Our forays into other art forms and mediums will be used to parallel, undermine, question, and champion the

role creative writing has in our modern world, and wonder what effect it will have on the future of our contemporary culture.

Course Objectives

Students who complete this course successfully will:

- implement an effective creative process to create affective prose and verse manuscripts
- analyze and discuss literature with greater facility and precision
- edit and critique writing with increased clarity and purpose
- expand command of grammar, diction, and other writing mechanics
- seek new and original approaches to written language which better communicate their ideas, emotions, and/or experiences.

Required Texts and Materials

All course reading will be made available either on Blackboard or via in-class handouts. Readings should be **completed, digested, and annotated** prior to arriving in class.

Each student will be responsible for printing a **paper copy** of their manuscripts **for each student and the professor**, due in class **one week prior to the date they are slated to be discussed**. Manuscripts **must also be uploaded to Blackboard** one week prior to the date they are slated to be discussed.

Students should also procure loose leaf, college ruled paper and a pen or pencil. These will be used for weekly in-class writing assignments. It should be noted that computers, cell phones, and other technology will not be permitted in class, and may not be used as a substitute for analog writing instruments.

A Note on Technology

Our classroom will provide refuge from the constant addictive glow of technology. This is not a stubborn attempt to be antiquarian, nor is it a feeble attempt at critiquing our modern culture. Computers and cell phones are a vital and interesting tool that have vastly changed both the world-at-large and the writing process in particular. That said, the tactile input of analog writing instruments and the marginalia these instruments will encourage during our discussion of work are a vital component of our learning process. Handwriting will require us to contemplate more thoroughly our word choice, and will help us be more deliberate in our communication. Further, we aim to quell our boredom and anxieties not with the immediacy of a push notification but, rather, by exercising the full gamut of our imaginations. Taking away the

temptation of knee-jerk swiping will force us to contend more fully with the full breadth of our imaginative mind.

You will be reminded only once to put a phone away before you are asked to leave the class.

Assignments

- **READING** — you will be assigned two types of reading every week. First, you will be given an exemplary piece of writing by a published and (usually) highly-celebrated author. You will also be responsible for reading the four manuscripts written by your peers.
- **ANALYSIS / EDITING** — you will be required to analyze each published piece of writing. This means that you should mark-up the page with questions, comments, and concerns it raises in you. Finish by writing a few short sentences that summarize your understanding of the piece. You will also be required to produce line edits and a final commentary on each peer manuscript, **except during the week that you are writing your own manuscripts** (explanation to follow in class). The line edits should be done in pen on the manuscript itself. The final commentary should be no less than **500 words** and can either be handwritten on the manuscript itself or typed, printed, and attached to the manuscript with a stapler.
- **WRITING** — you will be required to complete brief weekly in-class writing exercises, two short critical essays, and four creative manuscripts.
 - A. In-class writing assignments — these weekly assignments will be aimed at stretching your imagination and stimulating your creative process. Some will be read aloud in class, some will be turned in, and some will simply be a tool offered to help you develop an engine for written communication. These will be raw, unedited texts and, as such, will be graded simply on the basis of their completion.
 - B. Two (2) short critical essay — you will be assigned two short critical essays, each **not to exceed 1,000 words**. Do not overthink these prompts. They are flexible and open-ended by design, and intended to give you free reign to think on the page. You will be graded on the efficacy of your argument, and on how intimate your writing suggests you've become with your chosen object/text.
 - For your first short critical essay, you must select a text, artwork, or other object (really, *anything*) from the world and explain why it **is** or **is not** a story. Your analysis should guide the reader through the defining

characteristics of a “story” as you envision it, and use evidence to support how your chosen material does or does not adhere to this definition. Think about the objective of a “story” and how your text/object does or does not achieve this objective.

DUE DATE: SEPTEMBER 12

- For your second short critical essay, you must select a text from our readings and explain why it **is** or **is not** a **GOOD** story (or poem, should you so select). Your analysis should clearly articulate the qualitative difference between a “good” and “bad” story/poem, and use textual evidence to support your assessment. Though this critical essay concerns your own personal opinion, you should still clearly characterize and assess the story/poem based on its form and content. Remember, you must not necessarily *like* the text in order to think that it is “good.”

DUE DATE: NOVEMBER 28

- C. Four creative manuscripts — you will be required to compose four different creative manuscripts throughout the semester: one piece of fiction, one piece of non-fiction, one (or a few shorter) piece(s) of poetry, and one piece of your own choice/genre designation. There will be no minimum or maximum page requirement for your work. Instead, length should be commiserate with the objective of each piece. That said, consideration should be given to your fellow peers who will be responsible for reading four manuscripts per week. Efficient written communication will be encouraged throughout. Your work will be graded on both form and content, and the degree to which readers are affected by their intersection.

DUE DATE: TBD ON FIRST DAY OF CLASS.

Class Procedure

Class will generally be divided into two main sections. In the first, we will perform an in-class writing assignment and discuss that week’s published text(s). These discussions will be aimed at developing the quality of both your creative process and the manuscripts this process yields, and will be paralleled with other texts, artworks, and cultural touchstones.

The second section of class will be devoted to workshopping your manuscripts. For many of you, this will be the first time you present work for critique in a formal setting. As such, it is important to remember a few ground rules:

1. All comments, written or verbal, should be made in a constructive, dispassionate effort to stimulate more e/affective drafts of the manuscript.

2. Authors should take copious notes throughout the discussion of their manuscript, but should avoid talking and/or commenting if at all possible. If clarity can be reached by directly asking the author a question, they may respond.
3. Direct attacks, aggressive, and/or destructive comments impede qualitative conversation and will not be permitted. The objective at all times is to improve the manuscript.
4. Honesty can sometimes be difficult to offer and hear. Remember that this is a sensitive process, but one in which we all benefit from most closely representing our true opinions. Thick skin is required by all parties.
5. At the end of the discussion, the author may ask quick questions of the group that have yet to be fully explained or understood. This, however, should avoid a defense and/or justification of the manuscript.

Manuscript Formatting

All manuscripts and essays should use MLA formatting. Margins should be set at 1" on all sides. Font should be set at 12pt. Times New Roman, and should be 1.5 spaced (to save some trees). All pages should be numbered and include a header in the top right that has the author's last name. The top left of the manuscript's first page should contain the following information in single-spaced:

Manuscript Title
 Author First and Last Name
 ENGL 105X: Introduction to Creative Writing
 Date
 Assistant Lecturer Alfred Brown IV

Optional Field Trips

Class members will have the opportunity to attend two optional field trips. The date and time of these field trips will be discussed and agreed upon in class. While in no way mandatory, these trips will provide invaluable opportunities to experience unique uses of creative writing that are reshaping its role in contemporary society. These examples will intersect all three genres we study, and will open up new avenues for your own creative process.

Class Schedule

The following schedule should be used as a **rough guide** for our semester. As the needs of each class differ from the next, certain texts may be substituted, forgone, or truncated as per

the assistant lecturer's prerogative. The final readings will be determined and distributed in class or made available on Blackboard. Absence won't be an excuse for failing to keep step with changing assignments. Stay in close communication with the assistant lecturer and your peers if you anticipate any absence!

- Aug 22: **Topics:** Class Introduction, The Fundamental Necessity, Not-Knowing
Readings (in class): Syllabus, "Not-Knowing" by Donald Barthelme
- Aug 29: **Topics:** Form vs. Content, How to Begin?
Readings: 4 fiction manuscripts (A), "I Bought a Little City" and "The Glass Mountain" by Donald Barthelme
- Sept 5: **Topics:** Plot and/or Meaning, Quotations
Readings: 4 fiction manuscripts (B), "Ernest Hemingway, The Art of Fiction No. 21" interviewed by George Plimpton in *The Paris Review*, "The Sea Change" by Ernest Hemingway
- Sept 12: **Topics:** Deft Sentences
Readings: 4 fiction manuscripts (C), "An Interview with Lydia Davis" by Sarah Manguso, "A Mown Lawn" and "Grammar Questions" by Lydia Davis, "What's a Story?" by Leonard Michaels
DUE: FIRST CRITICAL ESSAY
- Sept 19: **Topics:** Stranger than Fiction
Readings: 4 non-fiction manuscripts (A), "Defoe, Truthteller" by Nicholson Baker
- Sept 26: **Topics:** A, He, I, and You
Readings: 4 non-fiction manuscripts (B), "Writing About Myself" by Leonard Michaels
- Oct 3: **Topics:** How vs. What
Readings: 4 non-fiction manuscripts (C), "God" by Amy Leach, and an excerpt from Bluets by Maggie Nelson
- Oct 10: **Topics:** Tell It Slant
Readings: 4 poetry manuscripts (A), excerpt from The Hatred of Poetry by Ben Lerner, and selections from Emily Dickinson
- Oct 17: **Topics:** Formerly Formally
Readings: 4 poetry manuscripts (B), selections from Sir Philip Sidney, Shakespeare, John Keats, Walt Whitman, and Robert Frost
- Oct 24: **Topics:** That is not it at all...
Reading(s): 4 poetry manuscripts (C), "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot
- Oct 31: **Topics:** Hybrid Moments
Reading: "The Harvest" by Amy Hempel, excerpts from David Markson's This Is Not A Novel, and selections from Sophie Calle's oeuvre
- Nov 7: **Topics:** Workshop Group A
Readings: 4 final manuscripts (A)
- Nov 14: **Topics:** Workshop Group B

- Nov 28: **Readings:** 4 final manuscripts (B)
Topics: Workshop Group C
Readings: 4 final manuscripts (C)
DUE: SECOND CRITICAL ESSAY

Class Participation

Due to the highly interactive nature of our workshop setting, all students will be expected to remain active and engaged in all class discussions. Additionally, each student needs to stay on top of their written assessments of peer manuscripts. Treat each manuscript with the same respect you would like yours to garner.

Course Grading

Your grades will most closely reflect the overall effort you put into your reading, editing/ critiques, and writing. The grading process takes into consideration the fact that this is an introductory course. While consideration is given to the quality of the work produced, the subjective nature of assessing creativity lends itself to champion students who rigorously engage with the creative process in ways that show growth, not mastery. That said, grades will be based on the following distribution and scale:

Assignment	Percentage
In-Class Writing	5%
Participation / Edits	10%
Critical Essay 1	10%
Critical Essay 2	10%
Fiction Manuscript	15%
Non-Fiction Manuscript	15%
Poetry Manuscript	15%
Free Choice Manuscript	20%

Grade	Cutoff
A	90%
B	80%
C	70%
D	60%
F	< 60%

Required University Addenda

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html.

Statement 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 (see <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 (at <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 (see <http://equity.usc.edu>) or to the Department of Public Safety (see <http://capsnet.usc.edu/departments/departments-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 provides 24/7 confidential support (see <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm>), and the sexual assault resource center webpage describes reporting options and other resources (see sarc@usc.edu).

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 which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students (see: <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>). The Office of Disability Services and Programs provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. (See: http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html). If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology (see: <http://emergency.usc.edu/>).