

Introduction to Creative Writing

Hartwick College
ENGL 213-A (3 Credits)
Fall 2017

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and by appointment

Men, like poets, rush "into the midst," in media res, when they are born; they also die in mediis rebus, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.

—Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

Required Texts

Hayes, Terrance. *Hip Logic*. Penguin, 2002.
Johnson, Denis. *Jesus's Son: Stories*. HarperPerennial, 1993.
Koch, Kenneth. *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. Touchstone, 1999.
Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories*. Mariner, 1999.
Mullen, Harryette. *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. U of California P, 2002.
Saunders, George. *Tenth of December: Stories*. Random House, 2014.

Additional readings will be available on the course's D2L website. See the calendar below for a schedule of these readings and the endnotes for bibliographic citations.

Recommended Materials

I *highly* recommend acquiring a *folder* dedicated exclusively to this course.

Catalog Description

The course will approach reading as a way to develop the imagination of the writer of both poetry and short fiction. Students will read widely in both genres, write poems and short stories in response to the readings, and participate in workshop discussions of their writing. The class will also consider relations between poetry and fiction, in terms of both their historical development and contemporary practice. Several short analytical essays on the assigned readings as well as students' original poetry and fiction will be expected. (EL)

Course Description and Purpose

Introduction to Creative Writing is a primer for the exploration of some of the basic elements of different kinds of creative writing. We will be covering both poetry and short fiction, with a focus on learning the formal elements necessary for successful writing. Throughout this course you will be asked to engage various aspects of writing, including studying the craft of writing, reading the work of published writers, and composing work of your own. It is essential for a writer to develop ways of thinking and talking critically about the work of others, so you should be prepared to do a substantial amount of reading during this semester. This reading will prepare

you to analyze and assess other students' writing, and to evaluate your own compositions. The primary focus of this class will be on learning *craft*, the “nuts and bolts” of writing, the techniques, choices, and strategies that will allow you to improve your own writing. You will be paying careful attention to the effective use of image, metaphor, line-breaks, sound, shape, voice, et cetera, in poetry, and dialogue, plot, character, setting, tension, et cetera, in fiction. This focus on *form* will give you a better understanding of the various writers we will be reading and help you effectively use these elements in your own writing. Above all, writing is an art and, like any art, it requires a knowledge of the tools and conventions of its forms combined with a will to create, explore, experiment, and push boundaries. I fully expect that you will also have some fun.

How This Course Works

The main concern of this class is *your* writing, and because of that, though we will be extensively reading and critically writing about the work of professional writers, you will be asked to bring in a substantial amount of your own work. The class will be divided into two sections. The first half of the class, until the beginning of October, will be devoted to poetry. You will be expected to write a poem every week. During the second half of the class you will compose one piece of flash fiction (which will function as a formal segue) and two short stories (of at least eight pages in length). I will often give specific assignments regarding your writing, but for at least the first poem or so, I would simply like to see where you are at.¹

The primary way we will be focusing on your writing will be during class in a traditional writing workshop. If you look below on the calendar, most Tuesdays will be devoted to covering the assigned reading, and most Thursdays will be devoted to workshopping student writing.² It is rare for me to deviate from a course calendar, so come ready to discuss the various texts expected to be covered or workshopped each day.

Workshops will be run in a more or less a traditional manner. Each student will have about 25 or so minutes devoted to their work by the class at least once per unit. After the class

¹ Though I will not generally put limits on what you can write about in this class, a couple disclaimers are necessary.

First, it is a widely shared convention of creative writing programs in the United States that students are asked to write *literary* fiction rather than *genre* fiction, and it will be the same in this class. The writing you submit for workshop will be predominantly realism rather than fantasy, stories and poems set in our world rather than stories set in some imaginary world or stories that use the conventions of an established genre (e.g., romance, Western, detective, et cetera). There are many reasons for this widely held institutional convention against genre writing, and I would be happy to speak about the reasons for creative writing's privileging of literary over genre fiction with students at further length if they have any questions or concerns (including about what might be unfair or seem overly restrictive about this convention). If students are curious about where this convention came from and why it might exist, I would urge them to read Mark McGurl's important and enlightening book, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009), which covers the rise of creative writing as an institutionalized, academic *discipline* in the US during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Second, creative writing classes are sometimes inaccurately presumed to be places to work through personal issues rather than spaces in which to rigorously study the practice of an *art*. Obviously students will be drawing upon their own experiences, but they should keep in mind that this is principally a course on *craft* and *form*. Consequently, I urge students to try to stay away from overly sentimental issues (e.g., a recently deceased grandparent) or subjects that often result in cliché (e.g., stories about high school). Though powerful writing about such subjects can be and obviously has been produced, these subjects can lead students away from the primary focus of this class: learning and practicing the basic formal elements of creative writing.

² So that everyone can be workshopped at least once per unit, please note that this schedule is subject to change depending on how many students are enrolled. If enrollment goes up before the add/drop deadline, we will also be holding workshops on some days that we are currently scheduled to discuss the assigned reading. If this is the case, I will be handing out an updated syllabus with a new calendar that will reflect any necessary changes.

roster has been solidified, I will hand out a workshop schedule and I will assign a primary reader for each student. The primary reader will be principally responsible for responding to their assigned writer's work. This means that the primary reader should write extensive notes, comments, and critiques on *each* piece of writing from this student, along with writing a 1–2-page reflection on that student's writing each time they are workshopped and at the end of a unit (more details below). The primary reader will also be responsible for opening up the conversation about that person's writing: making initial comments and asking a few key questions that will lead into a productive class discussion. In addition, each student will be expected to write brief comments on *everyone's* writing—all of it—though these comments do not need to be encyclopedic.

In workshops, students will read their work or sections of their work aloud followed by a group discussion of the writing and the issues of craft presented by the piece. During workshop, the student whose work is being discussed will remain silent until the end, at which time they will be able to ask questions (note: not provide explanations). Though we will of necessity be honest and forthright in the criticism of our peers' work, all members of the workshop should strive to make their criticism *generous* and *constructive*. Comments during workshop should look not only to improve the work but to better situate it within a student's larger project as a writer. Rather than “nitpicking” about small things, I will always be more interested in the bigger ideas at stake and the specific issues of craft and form in a student's writing, so please be aware of this and *always* be respectful of your peers in whatever discussion we are having.³

Learning Outcomes

In addition to the basic skills of literary analysis, students in this course will: 1) learn to identify conventional creative writing techniques; 2) learn to read as writers and use this knowledge to more successfully write and discuss works of creative writing; and 3) learn to produce works of creative writing that demonstrate an understanding of literary and formal conventions while also articulating a personal artistic vision.

Other Course Requirements and Assignments

Texts—As this course is structured around the knowledge that becoming a strong, careful reader is essential for beginning to develop as a creative writer, students will be required to have read and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts for each class meeting, including the writing of your peers. This also entails that students bring the texts to class, whether the book, *printouts* of the .pdfs from D2L, or copies of your peers' work. Additional readings for the course (see below) can be found under the “Readings” section of D2L. *Failure to bring the assigned text(s) to class will count as an absence.* Please do not let the “creative writing” nature of this class fool you: this course asks students to *read* quite a bit and *very* carefully. Our meetings and discussions will depend upon the rigorous, intelligent, and frequent involvement of each and every participant of the class, and this involvement is simply not possible if students do not come to class prepared. All students *must* obtain the edition of the texts specified above. Unless individual arrangements are made with me, electronic versions of the texts will not be permitted. Students should expect to read approximately 50–100 pages per week.

³ In general, I prefer trying to figure out what a piece *is* saying, what it *means*, what *work* it is doing, what it is *accomplishing*, et cetera, before beginning the activity of saying what a piece should be doing differently.

Portfolio—Submitted during the week of final exams, the portfolio will represent the culmination of your work throughout this semester and will make up the most significant portion of your grade. Your portfolio should include all the original poems and stories you wrote with my comments on them, four newly revised poems, and one newly revised story. The writing in the portfolio should consist of what you feel best represents your work in Introduction to Creative Writing. These four poems and single story should display an awareness of the various issues that were discussed in class, thoughtful revisions based on comments provided during workshop and in written feedback, and the final drafts should be polished, finished writing. The writing submitted in your portfolio should also display a firm grasp of the conventions and craft of creative writing that we discussed throughout the semester. More details about the expectations for your portfolio will be provided later in the semester.

Individual Writing Assignments—Throughout the semester you will be asked to complete a number of individual writing assignments: poems, flash fiction, and short stories. These assignments will not be graded, though they will be returned to you with my comments after your workshop and at the end of a unit. For reasons of logistics, individual writing assignments—poems, flash fiction, and stories—will not be accepted late. Failure to turn in a poem or piece of flash fiction will cost a student 5% off their final portfolio grade; failure to turn in a short story will cost a student 20% of their final portfolio grade. (So, for example, if a student did not turn in a poem and a short story, the highest possible grade they could receive on their portfolio would be a C [75%.]) Due dates for poems, flash fiction, and short stories are below. The assignments will follow. All individual writing assignments *must* be handed in as hard copies in class to me *and* to your primary reader; they *must also* be uploaded to D2L (that way, if you have to miss class, you will still receive credit for turning in your assignment on time). There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically upload your poems and stories.

D2L Uploads—So that it is easy for *all* members of the class to easily find someone’s writing on D2L, please save all files in the following format: Last Name, First Name--Assignment #. So, for example: Fest, Bradley--Poem 1.

Workshop—Each day a student is workshopped they will be able to decide what pieces of writing they would like to discuss. So, one class prior to being workshopped, each student should make enough copies of up to three poems or one short story to distribute to each member of the class (up to 20, though this number will change). Each member of the class is responsible for reading and commenting on each piece of writing a student distributes for workshop. If a student misses a class in which writing was distributed, each piece of writing should be available digitally on D2L.

Essays—Students will be asked to write two essays of 3–4 pages during the course of the semester: one at the culmination of our unit on poetry and one at the end of our unit on fiction. These papers are designed to allow you to reflect upon our discussions of the readings and the issues of craft we will explore, and should demonstrate thoughtful, critical engagement with the writing of others. All papers should be proofread and polished. They should be typed, double-spaced, in 12 point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins, and should accord to MLA

guidelines for citation and format.⁴ Students who do not follow directions or fail to meet the basic requirements of an assignment—e.g., not meeting the page requirement,⁵ failing to format a paper correctly, or failing to upload a paper to D2L—will automatically cost that student a *minimum* of 5% of their grade (so B- → C+, B → C+/B-). Papers will be assessed primarily on the *strength of their argument, the quality of their idea, and the rigor of their analysis regarding elements of form, style, and craft*. Due dates for these papers are below. The assignments will follow. All papers *must* be handed in as hard copies in class *and* uploaded to D2L. There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically upload your essays.

Responses—For each class in which we will be workshopping students’ work—up to three students in a given class—all members of the course will be responsible for writing marginal comments on their peers’ work and must write a brief paragraph about what they thought that piece was doing well and their thoughts on how to improve it. Make sure to read and comment on your peers’ work prior to coming to class. Though I will not be formally checking on the comments that you provide to your peers, believe me when I tell you that it will be clear to me who is providing thoughtful, detailed, constructive comments and who is shirking their duty. If it is clear students are failing to provide comments on *everyone’s work, every week*, their participation grade will be negatively impacted and significantly so; if necessary, I will begin collecting comments.

In addition to comments on your peers’ work, each member of this class will be a primary reader for another member of the class. Primary readers are expected not only to introduce and guide workshop discussion about their assigned writer’s work, they should also provide thoughtful and *substantial* comments to that writer. Each day a primary reader’s writer is workshopped, the primary reader should not only make marginal comments directly on the page, but write a 1–2-page letter (double-spaced), addressed to the writer, about that person’s work so far. Each primary reader will also write up a 1–2-page response at the end of a unit (one for poetry, one for fiction) reflecting on that student’s work as a whole.⁶ These comments will be given to the writer *and* submitted to me as hardcopy (you will not upload these to D2L). These responses will receive a completion grade (so full credit if you do them; no credit if you fail to do them or if they are in some way unacceptable—i.e., the response is cursory, incomplete, rushed, mean-spirited, insulting, et cetera). Please consult the handout on Responses, provided next week, for further details.

Quizzes—Students will often be given unannounced short quizzes on the assigned material. Students who have done the reading will, for the most part, find these quizzes quite manageable. Students who fail a quiz will lose two percentage points off their total final grade. If you do the

⁴ I would *highly* recommend that students purchase the indispensable 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook* (2016). For a good website on MLA style visit <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. I urge students *not* to rely on EndNote or software found in Microsoft Word or online to format your “Works Cited” pages, for your citations will more often than not be incorrect, especially since MLA style was recently updated and older software may not reflect recent changes. Students should also note that each text for the course has been correctly cited in MLA format either in the “Required Texts” section above or in the Endnotes below (in other words, there is no excuse for incorrect citations).

⁵ 3–4 pages means that the paper must be *at least 3 full pages* (i.e., not 2 ½ or 2 ¾ pages). Students will not be penalized for going over the page requirement (within reason).

⁶ For a total of 4 total responses, though this number might vary slightly for individual students. See handout.

math, multiple failed quizzes could dramatically lower your grade. Unless otherwise informed, all quizzes are open book.

Participation—As we will be engaged with critically reading texts and discussing each other’s work frequently in class, an absolutely crucial part of this class will be student participation. Though I will lecture from time to time, the class is conceived as a collective inquiry into the subject matter and class time will primarily be based around discussions that privilege students’ thinking and writing. I am quite excited to delve into the material, as I see it as both quite challenging and, in all honesty, quite fun. But this class will be a two-way street and will require the input of all its participants. I am completely aware that some students may be more vocal than others, but if I see a student consistently attempting to add to the discussion, I will take this into consideration. I have a habit of a rambling a bit, so please help me with this by asking questions of me if you are unclear. Asking questions can be an excellent way of participating. Since this class will rely heavily on student participation, your attendance is a necessity. More than three absences can be grounds for failure, in which case you may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances. Also, anyone observed using their mobile phone or another digital device during class, whether I call attention to it or not, will be marked absent for the day. Phones will not be tolerated in this class, and the use of laptops or tablets in this course will not be permitted unless special arrangements are made with the instructor.⁷

Grading

Participation: 20%

Primary Reader Responses: 5%

Essay 1: 10%

Essay 2: 15%

Portfolio: 50%

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism is a serious and intellectually inexcusable offense, and it will simply not be tolerated. It will result in an immediate zero for the assignment and I will file a formal charge with the Office of Academic Affairs; plagiarism could also result in more serious action, including a student failing the class completely and being suspended from the College. *Plagiarism includes: lack of proper citations when quoting from someone else’s work, representing someone else’s work as your own, and knowingly allowing one’s work to be submitted by someone else.* This should ultimately be a fun and stimulating class, and there is absolutely no reason for you not to take advantage of being able to do your own work and discuss it in an academic environment. Violations of Hartwick’s Academic Honesty policy are not limited to plagiarism—for example, cheating and submitting a paper to more than one class would constitute violations—so students should familiarize themselves with Hartwick College’s policy on academic honesty at: <https://www.hartwick.edu/academics/student-services/academic-affairs/academic-policies/>.

⁷ On how information is more fully retained if notes are taken by hand rather than on a computer, see Meyer, Robinson. “To Remember a Lecture Better, Take Notes by Hand.” *Atlantic*, 1 May 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/05/to-remember-a-lecture-better-take-notes-by-hand/361478/>.

Academic Adjustments and Modifications

Hartwick College is committed to upholding and maintaining all aspects of the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. If a student with a disability wishes to request academic adjustments, they should contact Erin Braselmann, Director of AccessAbility Services, at braselmann@hartwick.edu, or AccessAbilityServices@hartwick.edu. AccessAbility Services is located on the 5th floor of Yager Hall in the Center for Student Success. Any information regarding a student's disability will remain confidential. Requests for academic adjustments should be made as early as possible. Students must present me with an updated Academic Plan Letter for the 2017–2018 academic year in order to be eligible for academic adjustments.

The Writing Center

Located in Clark Hall 230, the Writing Center offers events, courses, and one-on-one tutorials for students. Tutors can help you with your writing for classes or any writing project, and can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a tutor once or regularly over the course of the semester; the Writing Center will also respond to queries via email. In some cases, I may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can seek assistance on your own. Their services are free. You can browse the services at <https://www.hartwick.edu/academics/student-services/writing-center/>, or make an appointment by emailing wcenter@hartwick.edu or calling (607) 431-4910.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a College e-mail address (username@hartwick.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the College for official communication with students. I will also communicate with students via their hartwick.edu address. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to communications from either the College or from me in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to communications sent to their Hartwick e-mail address.

Special Assistance

Hartwick offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties. The Counseling Center is located in the Perrella Health Center and offers psychological services and sexual assault services. Appointments can be made Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm, by calling (607) 431-4420 or emailing counselingcenter@hartwick.edu.

Statement on Classroom Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion, or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

Calendar⁸

- 8.29 Syllabus
Introductions
- 8.31 **Poem 1 Due**
Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days* (pp. 13–26, 210–11, 229–31, and 293–94)
- 9.5 **Poem 2 Due**
Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days* (pp. 27–70; also read through a few poems in the back of the book and select one you find particularly interesting)
- 9.7 Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days* (pp. 71–123)
Workshop
- 9.12 **Poem 3 Due**
Terrance Hayes, *Hip Logic* (pp. 1–45)
- 9.14 Workshop
- 9.19 **Poem 4 Due**
Terrance Hayes, *Hip Logic* (pp. 46–90)
- 9.21 Workshop
- 9.26 **Poem 5 Due**
Harryette Mullen (pp. 1–43)
- 9.28 Workshop
- 10.3 **Poem 6 Due**
Harryette Mullen (pp. 44–85)
- 10.5 **Essay 1 Due**
All Primary Reader Responses for Poetry Due
Workshop
- 10.10 Ernest Hemingway, “A Very Short Story”¹
Selections from *Flash Fiction Forward*: Alison Townsend, “The Barbie Birthday”²; Jack Handey, “The Voices in My Head”³; Samantha Schoech, “Why You Shouldn’t Have Gone in the First Place”⁴; Dave Eggers, “Accident”⁵; Michael Augustin, “The Handbag”⁶; and Pamela Painter, “Toasters”⁷
Tadeusz Borowski, “The Death of Schillinger” and “Silence”⁸
Jorge Luis Borges, “The House of Asterion”⁹
- 10.12 **Flash Fiction Due**
Denis Johnson, *Jesus’ Son* (pp. 1–54)
- 10.17 No Class, October Break
- 10.19 Denis Johnson, *Jesus’ Son* (pp. 55–133)

⁸ Additional readings or handouts may be assigned when appropriate. For ease with citation, bibliographic endnotes to the additional readings available on D2L (anything with an endnote rather than page numbers) have been provided below in MLA style.

- 10.24 **Short Story 1 Due**
Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (pp. 1–82)
- 10.26 Workshop
- 10.31 Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (pp. 83–198)
- 11.2 Workshop
- 11.7 George Saunders, *Tenth of December* (pp. 1–108)
- 11.9 No Class, Class Canceled
- 11.14 **Short Story 2 Due**
George Saunders, *Tenth of December* (pp. 109–251)
- 11.16 Workshop
- 11.21 Workshop
- 11.23 No Class, Thanksgiving Break
- 11.28 **Essay 2 Due**
Workshop
- 11.30 **All Primary Reader Responses for Fiction Due**
Workshop
- 12.5 **8:00 am – 11:00 am**
Final Portfolios Due
Class Wrap-Up and Final Lecture

Endnotes: Full Citations (in MLA Style) for Readings Available on D2L

Epigraph: Kermodé, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2000, p. 7.

¹ Hemingway, Ernest. “A Very Short Story.” *In Our Time*, Scribner, 1996, pp. 65–66.

² Townsend, Alison. “The Barbie Birthday.” *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*, edited by James Thomas and Robert Shapard, W. W. Norton, 2006, pp. 24–25.

³ Handey, Jack. “The Voices in My Head.” *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*, edited by James Thomas and Robert Shapard, W. W. Norton, 2006, pp. 85–87.

⁴ Schoech, Samantha. “Why You Shouldn’t Have Gone in the First Place.” *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*, edited by James Thomas and Robert Shapard, W. W. Norton, 2006, pp. 90–92.

⁵ Eggers, Dave. “Accident.” *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*, edited by James Thomas and Robert Shapard, W. W. Norton, 2006, pp. 101–2.

⁶ Augustin, Michael. “The Handbag.” Translated by Sujata Bhatt. *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*, edited by James Thomas and Robert Shapard, W. W. Norton, 2006, pp. 155–56.

⁷ Painter, Pamela. “Toasters.” *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*, edited by James Thomas and Robert Shapard, W. W. Norton, 2006, pp. 216–17.

⁸ Borowski, Tadeusz. “The Death of Schillinger” and “Silence.” *This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentleman*. Selected and translated by Barbara Vedder, Penguin, 1976, pp. 143–46 and pp. 161–63.

⁹ Borges, Jorge Luis. “The House of Asterion.” *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, Penguin 1999, pp. 220–22.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jake Wolff for the language used in the “Learning Outcomes” section of this syllabus.