

ENGL 3331 | Beginning Creative Writing: Poetry

The ultimate guarantee of the vitality of art is its ability to surprise—that is, to manifest an agency distinct from either its creator or its consumer.

—Eve Sedgwick, "The Weather in Proust"

Course Description

In this course we will work to deepen and expand our understanding of what poetry is and what it can do. Whether you are brand new to poetry or have been writing it for years, this class is designed to give you new tools and approaches for writing and thinking about poems.

Each week you will write a poem based on a prompt. These are intended to be low stakes ways to regularly generate new writing and to explore particular elements of craft. Some of these weekly poems will be developed further and turned into workshop poems. Each student will workshop twice during the semester: first a single poem, and second a short set of poems. Poems that are workshopped will then be revised further and submitted in a portfolio at the end of the semester.

Each week we will read a range of poems and short essays. For the first half of the semester we will focus primarily on elements of craft (image, line, music, form etc.) and we will discuss them by looking at a wide range of poems. In the second half we will focus in more depth on a handful of specific poets. We will also take two trips this semester: one to the art museum when we will talk about ekphrasis, and one to special collections in the library when we will talk about archival poetry.

By the end of the semester we will have honed our skills at the craft of poetry, yes, but also expanded our understanding of what poetry is and why we write it. Everyone should leave this class with new ideas about their own poetry and about what it means to write poetry in the contemporary world.

Course Objectives

- Generate poems and develop skills to develop your poems further.
- Develop an understanding of what it means to be a citizen of a workshop, and to build a community that helps all its members grow as poets.
- Learn to contextualize your poetry within a poetic history.
- Expand your knowledge of poetic tools and techniques including imagery, metaphor, and diction.
- Develop your ability to use the poetic line to dramatic effect, to use enjambments thoughtfully, and to consider how stanza can impact a poem
- Learn more ways to use the page as a space for giving poems form
- Understand the difference between concrete and abstract language and understand how to use both effectively

- Appreciate and learn from a wide range of poems that both do and don't speak to your personal and stylistic interests

Course Structure

For the first half of the semester we will focus each week on a different element of craft or poetic consideration. These include image, metaphor, abstract and concrete language, line, form, public and private in poetry, ekphrasis, and the archive. For the second half of the semester we will look at a larger selection of work from specific poets including Elizabeth Bishop, Vieve Francis, Timothy Donnelly, Eileen Myles, José Garcia Villa, Harryette Mullen, D.A. Powell, and Etel Adnan.

One day a week will be dedicated to reading and discussing published poems and essays. The second day will be dedicated to workshopping poems that we produce, as well as short generative exercises.

Assignments

Weekly Poems: (15%) Each week you will compose a poem in response to a prompt or a generative in-class exercise. Sometimes the poem you produce will excite you and you'll spend hours that week tweaking language and form. Sometimes the poem you produce will feel derivative and uninspired and you will be bored by it. Most of the time it will fall somewhere in between: a really striking image in a poem that doesn't quite know what to do with that image, a poem with a delightful sense of music and play that ends up spinning out of control. All of these possibilities are great! Even the derivative and uninspired (assuming that's not a regular occurrence). The purpose of these weekly poems is twofold: 1) Regularly generating new work, and 2) Trying your hand at practices, techniques, and approaches to poetry that are new/different for you.

Workshop Poems: (15%) Everyone will workshop twice over the course of the semester. The first time you will workshop one poem that you will submit to the class for feedback. The second time you will workshop a collection of four poems (8 pages max) that you will submit to the class for feedback. Workshop poems should develop out of the weekly poems that you produce. **Workshop poems are not finished products** and you're not being graded here on quality in any way. In fact, the whole purpose is that the poems will receive feedback from your peers and from myself so that you can continue to work on them. That said, these should be poems that you are invested in and excited by, and they should be poems that you have spent time working on and thinking about.

Workshop Feedback: (20%) Each workshop you will provide feedback to everyone whose poems are being discussed. You will receive more detailed instructions for how to approach each round (the single poem and the collection of four poems) but the general thrust is that you will be providing thoughtful, generative (not corrective) feedback through *critical description*, which asks you to describe what you see the poem doing, how it's doing it, and why it's doing it prior to offering any judgment, praise, or advice.

Post Weekly Question: (10%) Each week you will post two discussion questions on BB based on that week's reading. These aren't questions that "have an answer." These are questions that could be used to generate a conversation. **Weekly questions are due on Sunday night and are posted to blackboard.**

Live Reading Write-Up: (10%) Everyone must attend one poetry reading this semester and do a 2-page write up on it. A list of readings in Houston will be posted on blackboard. If there is one that you know of that I left off, please let me know and I'll add it.

Final Portfolio: (30%) At the end of the semester everyone will submit a portfolio that includes the first draft of your weekly poems, five poems that have gone through meaningful revision, and an artist statement/reflection.

Readings

All readings are on BB, mostly through a link. You are not required to purchase a textbook for this class. However, here are some recommended books:

Mary Oliver - *A Poetry Handbook*

Ted Kooser - *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*

Terrence Hayes - *Watch Your Language*

Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb et al. - *The Craft of Research* (any edition)

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In this room your voice is a kindness and we are grateful to you for it.

Selected Readings

Selected Poetry Readings: Audre Lorde - "Power", Maurice Manning - "Ars Poetica Shaggy and Brown", Archibald Macleish - "Ars Poetica", Ross Gay - "For Some Slight I Can't Quite Recall", Francisco X. Alarcón - "L.A. Prayer", Wallace Stevens - "The Snow Man", Lucille Clifton - "The Gift", Ellen Bryant Voigt - "The Hen", Marcelo Hernandez Castillo - "Cenzontle", Jack Gilbert - "Machiko Dead", Solmaz Sharif - "Personal Effects", Frank O'Hara - "The Day Lady Died", Terrance Hayes - "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin", Layli Long Soldier - "38", WH Auden - "The Shield of Achilles", Anne Boyer - "Animal Model of Inescapable Shock"

Selected Essay Readings: Elisa Gabbert - "The Shape of the Void: Toward a Definition of Poetry", Rebecca Hazelton - "Learning the Poetic Line", Kim Addonizio - "Simile and Metaphor", Audre Lorde - "Poetry Is Not A Luxury", Crista Siglin - "Ekphrastic Poetry", Natalie Harkin - from *Archival Poetics*, Susan Stewart - "The Sand Castle"