

Multi-Genre Creative Writing Workshop

Chuck Carlise

This course will be generative in nature, introducing students to the fundamentals of poetry and prose writing and challenging them to write often and grow accustomed to taking risks. The class will be reading intensive and discussion-heavy, with a significant interdisciplinary component (using music, art, and performance to help inform readings and assignments). Students will write new work for nearly every class, and also keep a writer's journal, punctuated by weekly assignments (see below). At the end of the course students will submit a portfolio of work, including at least two revised pieces, and headed by a critical introduction characterizing their own work. Readings will serve as models for writing assignments, as well as serving the dual purpose of introducing students to both the contemporary literary scene and the historical traditions in which that scene developed. The class can be conducted with a course reader or (with slight changes in reading assignments) with anthologies.

The Class:

WEEK ONE : Introduction / Self & the World

Journal Assignment: Details

Reading: Shikibu, "[Why hadn't I]"; Ashbery, "The Cathedral Is"; Clifton "Adam Thinking" and "Eve Thinking"; Snyder, "Why Log Truck Drivers..."; Ginsberg, "On Neal's Ashes"; Wenderoth, "Moon River";

Reading: Keats, "This Living Hand"; Stevens, "The Snow Man"; Clifton, "Homage to My Hips"; Merwin, "Some Last Questions"; Plath, "Lady Lazarus"; Dobyns, "How to Like It"; Addonizio, "The Singing"; Hayes, "Blue Terrace"

***Assigned: Three Brief Poems**

***Assigned: Self-Portrait**

WEEK TWO Music & the Line / No Ideas but in Things

Journal Assignment: Lineation

Reading: Dickinson, "[I like the look of agony]"; Stein, from *Tender Buttons*; Hughes, "Weary Blues"; Grahn, "Carole and"

Reading: W.C. Williams, "Spring and All" and "Between Buildings"; Larkin, "High Windows"; Atwood, "Variations on the Word Sleep" and "Variations on the Word Love";

***Assigned: Abstract Poem**

WEEK THREE Voice / Discourse

Journal Assignment: Observations Minus Metaphor

Reading: S.Brown, "Memphis Blues"; Murray, "The Cows on Killing Day"; Dacey "Form Rejection Letter"; Harvey, "Pity the Bathtub"; Oeding, "To the Next Person Who Doesn't Like Me"

Reading: Whitman, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"; Sexton, "With Mercy for the Greedy"; Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas"; Flynn, "Cartoon Physics 1 and 2"

***Assigned: Instruction/Argument Poem**

***Abstract Poem Due today**

WEEK FOUR Form / Letter

Journal Assignment: Pulling the Trigger

Reading: Shakespeare, "Sonnet 150"; Wordsworth, "London 1802"; Stevenson, "A Wedge of Light"; Chappel, "Narcissus and Echo"; Addonizio, "The Sound"

Reading: Yeats, "Adam's Curse"; Stone, "Curtains"; Monette, "No Goodbyes"; White, "Making Love to Myself"

***Assigned: Letter Poem**

***Assigned: Formal Poem**

****Workshop Poems Due Today***

WEEK FIVE Workshop

Journal Assignment: Digging In

Workshop

WEEK SIX Response to the World / Lyric Essay

Journal Assignment: Erasure

Reading: Auden, "March 1, 1939"; Doty, "Tiara"; P.Smith, "Skinhead"; Zaprunder, "For John McCain"

Reading: Goldbarth, "Into That Story"; ***optional*:** Flynn, "The Ticking is the Bomb"; Elliott, "The Score"; Nelson, from *Bluets*

***Assigned: Lyric Essay**

WEEK SEVEN Confession / Reminiscence

Journal Assignment: BYE WEEK!

Reading: Hoagland, "My Country"; Hayes, "Talk"; Reufle, "Snow"

Reading: O'Brian, "How to Tell a True War Story"; Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant"

***Assigned: Secret Poem**

***Assigned: Personal Narrative**

WEEK EIGHT Distillation / Workshop

Journal Assignment: Action = Emotion

Reading: Laux, "Fast Gas"; Collins, "This Much I Do Remember"

****Workshop Stuff Due Today***

WEEK NINE Character / Dialog

Journal Assignment: Evesdropping

Reading: Treadway, "Shirley Wants Her Nickel Back"

Reading: Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"; Carver, "Why Don't You Dance?"

*** Assigned: Character Sketch**

***Assigned: Scene with No Narrator**

WEEK TEN Perspective / Finding the Story

Journal Assignment: Directions to Your House

Reading: Olson, "I Stand Here Ironing"; Minot, "Lust"

***Assigned: Scene from Four Perspectives**

**Scene with No Narrator Due today*

WEEK ELEVEN Situation / Objects

Journal Assignment: Attraction

Reading: Butler, "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot"

Reading: O'Brian, "Things They Carried"

WEEK TWELVE Someone Else's Story / Choice & Withholding

Journal Assignment: Six Word Stories

Reading: Dobyns, "Kansas"; Rekdal, "The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee"

Reading: Ordan, "Any Minute Now Mom Should Come Blasting Through the Door"; Camoin, "Things I Did to Make It All Happen"; Matthews, "A Questionnaire for Rudolph Gordon"

***Assigned: Family Event**

**Workshop Stories Due*

WEEK THIRTEEN Workshop

Journal Assignment: Unpacking

Workshop

WEEK FOURTEEN Letting Go / Revising Old Pieces

Journal Assignment: Tough Choices

No Assigned Reading

WEEK FIFTEEN Discovery Day / Close-Down

Class Reading Day

[FINE]

JOURNAL EXERCISES

Week One: Details

Begin keeping a list of the gestures people perform in conversation – what they do with their faces and bodies while they are speaking, listening, and thinking about what to say next (chewing the inside of a cheek, tearing at a piece of paper, poking an ear with the tip of a car key). Gather at least fifteen.

Week Two: Lineation

It is sometimes said that the one irreducible difference between poetry and prose is the line and linebreak. Poets use the linebreak for all sorts of reasons; some poems break lines at breath pauses, others to create a visual shape on the page, others to emphasize a musical cue (like a rhyme), and sometimes the last word on a line just seems to linger for a fraction of a second while the eye moves to begin the next line.

Attached to the back of this packet are four poems, typed in paragraph prose. Choose at least THREE and lineate them based on whatever logic you feel works best for that poem (that is, you don't have to apply the same logic to each of the poems – just break the lines the way that seems best on this poem).

The poems are:

Yusef Komunyakaa, "You and I Are Disappearing"

Richard Siken, "Scheherezade"

Jeremy Glazier, "To Harcamone As Genet"

Brenda Shaughnessey, "Poet's Poem"

Marie Howe, "The Attic"

Craig Arnold, "XX"

C.K. Williams, "Fragment"

Note: You don't have to re-type them.

To indicate a line break, use a single slashmark: /

To indicate a stanza break, use a double slashmark: //

If you would indent a line, use a dash before the break: —/

Week Three: Digging In

Try to observe one of the following everyday actions and describe it in as much sensory detail as you can, preferably as it is going on: a person peeling, unwrapping, mixing, microwaving or otherwise preparing some food, then eating it; a person pumping gas, from drive-in to drive-off; a person dressing for an athletic practice or event, or a date; ten to fifteen nonsleeping minutes in the life of a dog or cat.

***Important*:** use NO similes or metaphors if you can (or as few as you can). Keep this as focused and physical as possible. Find two other everyday events like these to observe. You should have three observations by the end. At least half a page each.

Week Four: Pulling the Trigger

Select one of the following openings (or invent one of your own), and write a list of at least thirty sentences, each beginning with the same opening clause. Let the subjects of the sentences range widely – from the personal to the public, from the casual to the profound.

I believe... (or I no longer believe)

One thing I know is... (or We know, You know, They know)

I have seen... (or I see)

I am listening for...

Let there be...

Avoid an endless series of short sentences (i.e. —I know physics. I know math. I know chemistry... ||) and vary their content as much as you feel like (this can allow for striking juxtaposition). When you've written at least thirty, group them, adding and subtracting as you wish. You may just keep them in the order they came, or you may find that there is another structure that takes you somewhere.

One example is Albert Goldbarth's —Library || – feel free to refer to it if you are stuck:
(http://poems.com/special_features/library.htm)

Week Five: Pastiche

Jot down phrases as you encounter them in your everyday life – anything that seems interesting to you, for any reason. These can be lines from poems we read in class, television banter, random phrases from textbooks, status updates or tweets, phrases you overhear in conversation, phrases from your journal or earlier assignments for this class, or anything else. Take down at least fifteen, but feel free to record more.

Then take these 15+ phrases and assemble them into a poem. You can rearrange the order of the lines and add or subtract any punctuation, but DO NOT rearrange the words within the lines. It will be difficult to make simple, linear sense, but watch how intuition and association guide you.

Week Six: Erasure

We will discuss this in class.

Week Seven: BYE WEEK!

Write whatever you want this week. No journal assignment.

Week Eight: Action = Emotion

When learning to render a likeness, art students spend hours in the studio training to be attentive to every gesture: the relation of one finger to the next, the precise tilt of the head. Begin a collection of postures and/or gestures that indicate or suggest a person's particular emotional state. In other words, how does a person look or act when feeling afraid, angry, sad, joyous, frustrated, content, curious, ecstatic, stubborn, reckless? Choose a few of these (or all if you want) and begin a catalog.

Week Nine: Evesdropping

Go to a public place (a coffee shop, a bar, a performance or event, or anywhere where mass people are having individual conversations), and allow yourself to eavesdrop a little. Jot down single lines, or short exchanges that catch your ear, for any reason. Sometimes the most profound statement will come in the simplest language. Don't necessarily concern yourself with understanding what the speaker is talking about – the context is less important than the way things are said (inflection, word choice, volume, response, etc.)

Gather at least fifteen.

Week Ten: Directions to Your House

Gary Snyder once asked a group in Northern California if anyone could tell him where they live without using any modern city or street or business names (no proper names at all). Then, to illustrate what he meant, he detailed the bioregion, watershed, foliage, topography, animal life, and cultural life of the high Sierra range where he lived.

“To say, I live an hour off of Interstate 5, at the intersection of Western and Main, is to not say a thing about where you actually live,” he said. “A person who has never been to my house could say that much. In order to give the description I just gave, one would have to have spent some real time here, with their eyes open and their senses engaged. One would have to be truly living in the world.”

Pick a starting point that you know, and give articulate, detailed directions from there to your house, without using any proper names. You can still reference urban scenes and phenomena, but make sure that you are describing them instead of naming them. What do you actually see, hear, smell, feel, and experience on this route? Take your time with this.

Week Eleven: Attraction

Focus your full range of perceptual attention on a fellow human being whom you find attractive (only touching if you are allowed). The challenge here is to avoid the overused generic qualities and images (blond hair, blue eyes; tall, dark, and handsome) purveyed by our culture. In describing visual appearance in particular, strive for the distinctive, unexpected details – that is, what makes this blond haired, blue eyed person different from all the rest? All the senses should be represented (unless touching is awkward or not allowed).

Spend a fair amount of time lingering on this. I won't set a length minimum, but I'd like you to dig in.

Week Twelve: Six Word Stories

Famous for his minimalism, Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write the shortest complete story he could. Here is what he came up with:

Baby shoes for sale. Never worn.

A complete story, with backstory, characters, conflict, tragic climax, resolution, exit wound... Most of it comes via suggestion, but the questions that rise out of this (What happened to the baby? Did both parents decide to sell their baby's shoes? If not, what arguments and crushing sadness must have preceded this? What kind of person is so callous as to try to make money off their (presumably) dead infant's clothing?) are explosively rich.

In your journal, try the six-word story. Try to catch it *in medius res*, i.e. in the middle of some kind of action. Notice, the scene above isn't a static statement of a situation; it's an action that suggests a past and a future. See what you can create. Try at least three.

Week Thirteen: Unpacking

Go back through either your journal, or another piece of writing (your own or a story or article) and check for summary of action – in other words, telling that stands in for more vivid, dramatic showing. Telltale signs of summary are references to habitual action like each morning or every weekend and verbs accompanied by the auxiliary would. ("Each morning he would help her get dressed.") When you find such reference, open it up to whatever details, gestures, and scenes come to mind, and record them in the simple past or present tense. ("That morning, he squeezed an exact worm of toothpaste onto her brush for her. Then he counted out a bright assortment of her pills.") Instead of describing all Saturdays, commit yourself to a specific (even if it is imaginary) composite one.

Week Fourteen: Tough Choices

Make a list of five tough choices you have faced in the last year. Select one, and think about the "road not taken." Make a list tabulating the imaginary chain of consequences that might have followed if you had chosen the other alternative. Consider who you would be right now if you had followed the alternative path, as well as where you would be, what you would be doing.