

INTRODUCTION TO CREATIVE WRITING; 285

Tuesday & Thursday, Simpkins 308
285 003 2:00-3:15
Professor Erika Wurth, office # 309

The texts required for this course are: my packet; purchasable at the campus bookstore. We will be looking at selections from: Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, *Writing Down the Bones*, *The Practice of Poetry & Creating Fiction* and a few essays from other sources. I will also hand out a short glossary of helpful poetic/fiction terms, poetry by Hughes, Williams, Plath, Cummings, Ginsberg, Olds, Lee, Alexie and Cisneros, fiction (short stories) by O'Connor, Hemingway, Salinger, Carver, Oats, Baldwin, Diaz, Lahiri and Alexie and non-fiction by Burd, Sedaris and Kothari.

My office is located in Simpkins 109 and my office hours are Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday, 12:00-2:00 (although I'm occasionally in the English department during the week at different times) and my email is et-wurth@wiu.edu. Please feel free to come in (or email) with any questions or if you just want to chat – also try to reserve this time for any questions pertaining to your grade or questions specific to your particular projects.

The reading list for the course appears long but **don't panic**- we'll be doing only one poem or short story/non-fiction essay for each author. I will have pop quizzes to make sure that you're doing the reading, but they'll be ridiculously easy, & there just to make sure you're doing the reading.

*The first day of class we'll go over the syllabus & I'll take questions & we are going to do an exercise on cliché.

*The second day I want you to read Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet" & study the glossary of poetic/fiction terms & I want you to bring in a **typed, one page "paper" about what your creative interests are, who you like to read, what you're expecting out of this class & what you think about writing & writers in general** & we'll discuss.

I believe in writing from example (if you don't read, you can't write) & I want to familiarize you with some of the history of contemporary writing through a few essays on writing & through a short selection of poetry & fiction/non-fiction from (mainly American) modern & contemporary writers.

*On the third day I want you to read "First Thoughts," "Writing as Practice," "Thoughts on the Gifts of Art" and "Everything I Know About Writing Poetry."

*On the fourth day read the poems by Hughes, Williams & Plath.

*On the fifth day read the poems by Cummings, Ginsberg & Olds.

*On the sixth day read Cisneros, Lee & Alexie and on that day, I'll pass around a sign up sheet so that we can schedule who will present their poetry on what days for the next few weeks.

*On the first day after we're done with poetry, I want you to read "Going to See the Elephant: Our duties as Storytellers."

*On the second day read the stories by O'Connor, Hemingway, & Salinger.

*On the third day read the stories by Baldwin, Carver & Oats.

*On the fourth day read Lahiri, Diaz & Alexie.

* On the fifth day read the non-fiction introductory essay by Iverson, and the three non-fiction essays by Burd, Sedaris and Kothari & I'll pass around another sign up sheet. The next day will be spent on in class Fiction/non-fiction exercises and after that, workshop.

For **poetry**, I want you to write two pieces for workshop & **fiction/non-fiction**, you only have to write one piece to be workshopped. Please bring in typed copies of your feedback, at least a half page, for me and for the author. If you don't, this will result in an F for the course.

Ask yourself, when we're looking at either the work of others in the class or of the selected writers, not only what do these poems/stories mean but what are they doing & how are they doing it? What's appealing/not appealing & how are they achieving the effects that make them (hopefully) pleasurable to read? How do they sound? What are the images? What is their form? What is the content & why?

Specifically, as to when we workshop with each other in class, remember, you want to be honest, but it's important that you're not a jerk. Be specific – when you make a comment, show evidence for that comment in the text (don't use generalizations). Additionally, think about what the poem or story wants – rather than what you think it ought to be & aid in that vision. As to when your work is being workshopped, be open. Don't explain or apologize. It is important that we develop a community in this class that fosters the ability to be comfortable enough to risk with one another in our work and in our feedback. Keep in mind that feedback is not to be taken as a personal attack. It's to be taken as a way to improve your work. When writing feedback, the focus in poetry should be on sound, image & metaphor and in fiction plot, P.O.V. & characterization, which I will go over in class. Remember, you're the ultimate judge of your own work but you can't be your own audience so listen carefully to what others have to say.

Basic Workshop format: Please bring in enough copies of your two poems or story for the entire class **THE CLASS DATE BEFORE** the date you're assigned to workshop. If you do not do this, this will result in an F for the course. We'll be doing up to three poems/stories/essays a day – so we need to be efficient with our time: if it's a poem, read it aloud, a story/essay, read a small section. Then, quiet! Let the class workshop the piece (& class, don't ask the writer any questions during this time). After the class has finished critiquing, the writer can then ask or be asked

questions. Please respect me and other members of the class. And don't talk continually to somebody else while I'm talking or while the class is having a discussion (if I have to tell you not to talk, this will effect your participation grade).

As to the writing of the poems, stories or essays we will be doing writing exercises in class in order to help you in the process of writing something for workshop. For poetry, we will focus on **sound, image & metaphor**. For fiction/non-fiction: **characterization, plot and point of view**. For the pieces you'll have workshopped, I want you to utilize these practices and your work needs to be edited for basic grammar issues before you turn it in. If you're really stuck, see me – we all have writers block at some time or another.

As to the two poems that I want you to turn in, I have only two rules: the first is that they do not rhyme (trust me on this one, NO ONE does it anymore). The second is that they must not be on the subject of love (we're trying to avoid cliché, right?). As to the fiction/non-fiction piece the rules are that they must be 4-8 pages long and cannot be genre fiction or if you do non-fiction, exclusively autobiographical (in other words as to fiction, anything that fits easily into a genre – detective/mystery, romance, sci-fiction – nor should you try to be LITERARY i.e. Hemingway, for example. Just write about life – made up or real). The stories/essays should be in Times New Roman, 12 font. The poems should be single-spaced, the fiction/non-fiction, double-spaced.

We will be discussing some of the history and biography behind the texts and we will also explore issues of gender, race and sexuality. If this is uncomfortable for you, you may consider taking the course at another time.

I do take attendance and after missing three classes your grade will lower with each subsequent absence. I do not need or want any doctor's notices, stories or excuses of any kind if you have not missed four classes (simply email me or talk to me if you need to get the missed assignment). And if you have missed more than three, I still don't want them because that is what they're there for. If you have a truly special problem and still want to attend, please talk to me and maybe there's something we could work out. As concerns tardiness, basically, if you're late so much that I begin to notice it, your grade will lower (I would say after four). Also, please do not ever get up and leave before I've dismissed class. I never keep people over the assigned time limit, so if you need to leave early, tell me before class begins.

Your grades are mainly dependent upon your work but attendance, feedback and especially participation affect your grade. Participation is why we're here and it's what makes a class effective. I don't expect you to be Shakespeare, just occasionally raise your hand and speak. Participation can change your grade and it's also a way to make up for missing over the allotted amount of classes or if you've messed up on a quiz. If your only goal in my class is to receive an "A" – you may want to drop. There are only two ways to earn an A in my class; the first is to do very well on quizzes and attendance & receive an A on your work, the second is to

do well on quizzes and attendance & participate nearly EVERY DAY & more than once per class period. A grade of A is supposed to reflect excellence, therefore, I must reflect that in my grading policies. The great majority of my students receive a grade somewhere in neighborhood of a B & very few receive an A.

Your final will be turning in a portfolio containing the work that you've presented in class and revisions after that piece has been workshopped. Also include the one page piece that you turned in the first day (I'll hand it back) & a **one page piece that reflects if your goals have changed & why**. Because grading a creative piece is a truly sticky process, your grade will depend heavily on how much time you've put into the work before and especially after it's been workshopped - I want to see that you've processed your work & thought about it carefully rather than wrote something down haphazardly & changed two words after workshop. Your grade will also be heavily weighted by your quiz scores, attendance & as I said in the last paragraph, especially, by participation.

As for plagiarism, don't do it. I can't emphasize this enough. It isn't worth it as I don't expect that your work will be in the Hemingway category - at least at this point. It is so easy to spot plagiarism and the consequences are dire. At the least I have to fail you and in the worst case scenario you can be expelled. You must do your own work. Any act of plagiarism will result in at least an F grade in this course. If you have any doubts about whether or not you are using your own or others' writing ethically and legally, ask me. Work cannot be handed in for credit that is or was written for another class either here or elsewhere, even if it is much revised. Work you did in high school is best left there. The whole idea is to give you new occasions to write, for you to discover fresh ways to imaginatively deal with the world around you. Please submit work written only during the current term. Western Illinois University's official Academic Integrity Policy is found at <http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php>. Please read it, in its entirety. If you're having a problem, please come and see me.

** If you have a learning difference that requires accommodation or if, for any reason, you feel you need extra help in learning the material or demonstrating that you understand the material, please contact me.*

*** Recommended books:** *The Midnight Disease, On Writing, Letters to a Young Poet, Writing Down the Bones, Bird by Bird and Creating Fiction and The Art of Writing; Notes on Craft for Young Writers*

