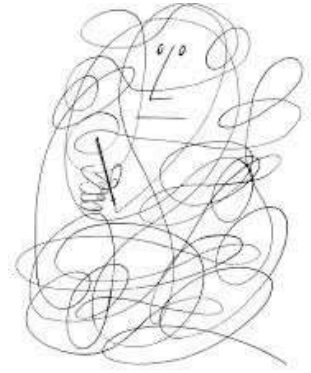


Sample Syllabi – Subject to Change Creative Writing

Summer Immersion Program
The University of Chicago

MTWRF 9am – 3pm CT. (Lunch 11:30am – 1pm)

Instructor: Benjamin Lytal



Course Description:

"What is education?" asks the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard: "I suppose that education was the curriculum one had to run through in order to catch up with oneself." When we speak of "finding your voice" or "writing your story" or "mining your material," we speak of things you already possess but that take work to realize. Creative Writing is that work. In pushing you to write more originally and persuasively than ever before, this course asks you to slow down, to pay attention to words, sentences, logic, gaps, and also to race ahead, to test new techniques and experiments and to be receptive to new sources of inspiration. Exercises will range from making simple lists to devising plots, from describing a random piece of grass to inventing an original creature. We will slow time down and speed it up. Categories like fiction, poetry, and memoir will overlap and intermingle. In this rigorous, writing- and reading-intensive course, you will be asked to write daily, both in directed exercises and personally-driven compositions, to conference one-on-one with instructors daily or almost daily, to read widely, to edit your peers, and to compose long submissions for the same peer edits. After three weeks, you will know your own writing better. Active class participation is required.

Daily Rhythm

Wake-up Exercise. We'll begin the day with a short writing exercise.

Studio. Time for a substantial writing assignment, to be processed later.

Regroup. Before lunch we'll debrief, do another exercise, or discuss reading.

Processing. A time to share work, edit each other, and give feedback.

Afternoon Lesson. Texts will be discussed and introduced; homework explained.

Course Overview

Week 1

In the beginning days of class we'll practice the art of objective description. Then, we'll apply the lessons of empirical observation and clear writing to products of our own imagination.

At the same time we'll be discussing the fundamentals of story, discovering in ancient narratives techniques and values that will support our own new fictions.

As in subsequent weeks, we'll edit one another, learning how to give and receive constructive feedback. By sharpening your editing skills and sensitivities, you'll become a better writer.

First weekend

You will write your own original story, to be edited, revised and improved throughout Week 2.

You will read several examples of autobiographical writing as preparation for Week 2.

Week 2

We'll divide into two groups to read and examine your new stories, and each night you'll have the opportunity to revise a specific dimension of your story's craft: sentence structure, point of view, narrative tempo, and ending.

But much of this week will be spent preparing for a new project: an autobiographical piece with a form of your own devising. Throughout the week, we'll experiment with different ways to pattern, contain, and discover autobiographical material, working with poems and stories and memoirs. As in Week 1, we'll establish values of clear thinking and writing in simpler, more empirical exercises before applying these values to more searching work.

Second weekend

You will write your own original autobiographical piece, with a form of your own devising, to be workshopped in Week 3.

Week 3

This week we will process your autobiographical pieces in workshop, the traditional format for college-level creative writing classes. You'll have a day or two in which to overhaul and revise your piece before turning it in on Thursday.

We'll also have time to conduct a few self-contained experiments on topics such as poetic form and interactive narratives.

A Note on Work, Rest, and Enjoying It

You are the most sleep-deprived generation in the history of the world. (I don't know if this is absolutely true, but it's the not unreasonable claim made by a 5/20/22 op-ed in the *Washington Post*.) I know well that elite students sometimes cast sleep-deprivation in a heroic light: but this is a mistake. Missing out on sleep harms mental health. It also leads to bad writing.

Good writing seldom gets done when you are tired. Perhaps you have pulled all-nighters in school while turning out long papers and gotten A's on them—but the writing you need to do in this class is different. It's not about verbose fluency. It requires fresh ideas, nimble thinking, alert use of language, and sustained concentration.

This class is a marathon. Pace yourself. Aim for eight or nine hours of sleep—you might not always make it but it's a good goal. We'll all get tired as the course goes on—these classes are, by design, excessively intense. But we have to resist that false *esprit de guerre* that equates sleep-deprivation with true experience. If you get a good night's sleep you'll better be able to enjoy yourself and your time with your peers, you'll write better pieces, and you'll create clearer memories.

Screens

Multitasking is disrespectful and also vitiates your own experience. We live in an attention economy, which is a pretty way of saying that our attention is mined and exploited for corporate profit. Anyone—an artist, a writer—has to have a plan to intentionally limit their exposure to devices and distractions.

In our classroom, **we will be present for each other**. We will create work for each other, read and listen to each other, and respond with our full attention. **Phones should be silenced and in your bags during class time**. Laptops are useful tools for writing but during class we will almost always write on paper. (Many of us have bad handwriting but we are all capable of writing legibly if we try.) On perhaps two occasions (for a particular editing exercise and for a hypertext exercise) I will ask you to bring your laptops to class. Our default policy will be: **Laptops should not be seen during class time**. You may want to simply leave them in a secure space in your dorm.

Written homework will be typed and submitted to our Canvas page and (when needed) printed out by the instructors. Readings will be distributed on paper.

Learning Goals:

1. Writer's values. The foundation of good writing is good writing. Whatever their varied styles, the novelists, poets, and essayists we love share a strong command of language. This means mastering clarity, word choice, logic, and structure. It means having control over your prose and your poetry. The best way to learn this is by editing others and being edited yourself. We will do both, and we will read great writers as writers do—for inspiration and pleasure but also for insight into the structure and engineering of great work.
2. Process. Poesis means to make. Poets and other writers are makers. Contrary to popular cliché, literature is not straightforwardly a vehicle or self-expression. Rather, it's a process

of discovery. So how does writing get made? You will learn process—constraints, composing, feedback, revision. You will learn how to be your own best editor. You will learn how to give your ideas form—and how to follow writing where it leads.

3. Possibilities. Three weeks is not a very long time, but this course is designed to give you broad experience of exciting texts—both that you are writing and that you are reading. After this course is complete your sense of what's interesting in literature will have been stretched.

*****Some Restrictions*****

My greatest hope in teaching is not that students learn to write a certain way or learn to like a certain set of texts, but that they learn to see possibilities. And in my teaching I have noticed that the greatest obstacle to seeing possibilities is a student's attempt to recreate in their texts the appeal of visual or interactive media. You can theoretically take inspiration, of course, from anything, but for the purposes of this beginning course I ask that you do not take TV, RPGs, video games, movies, or manga as direct models or inspiration for your work. A few corollary guidelines:

- No villains. (Obviously, you can have deeply flawed characters, but “bad guys” are toys for contriving conflict.)
- Minimize violence. (Fiction that approximates levels of violence common in other media will seem weirdly heartless and grossly unrealistic.)
- You are not writing commercial entertainment.

There are exceptions to all of the above, but these are the rules that best sustain this class.

On Not Using Old Work

Some of you will have a lot of your own writing on your computer or some cloud, perhaps including drafts of novels. **I do not allow the use of previous work as workshop submissions.** You must write something new. I also discourage the use of characters or settings from previous work.

Modes of Writing and Feedback

Your writing will be produced in many different ways—in 5-minute exercises in class or during dense hours in the dorm, written standing up in a museum or during an hour of silence in the classroom, following very specific directions or jumping off from something more open-ended.

Likewise, work will be processed in different ways.

Many exercises will be just that—something done for its own sake, a kind of practice that will build muscles or stretch your capabilities. These will be discussed generally and you may get to read a bit from an exercise aloud but mostly they're for yourself.

Other exercises will be shared with peers in small groups, sometimes for written feedback. Some will be drastically changed by peers (I'll tell you ahead of time when this is the plan.). Some will be given to the instructors for letter grades and written comments; sometime the instructors will ask you to revise what you've done.

In terms of grading and credit, all work that is not handed in to an instructor will count towards your “Class Participation” grade. If I sense that you are not really trying hard or somehow not taking in-class exercises seriously, your Class Participation grade will suffer.

Most work that is handed in to an instructor will count towards your “Written Exercises” grade.

Exceptions: the fiction and the autobiographical drafts that you turn in on June 20 and 27, respectively, will receive completion grades. As long as the story is complete, the proper length, and otherwise compliant with directions, it will receive full credit.

Revisions to these pieces, (Fiction due June 24 after that week’s clinics; Autobiography due June 30 after that week’s workshops) will receive a letter grade based not on talent or the ultimate “success” of the piece but on our evaluation of your good-faith effort to revise and improve the piece after receiving peer and instructor feedback.

Grades

Class Participation	40%	(incl. discussions & class exercises)
Graded Homework & Exercises	15%	(Quality Grade)
Wkshp Edits for Peers	5%	(Completion Grade)
Fiction Submission – (due 6/20)	10%	(Completion Grade)
Revised Fiction story (due 6/24)	10%	(Effort Grade)
Autobiographical Submission – (due 6/27)	10%	(Completion Grade)
Revised Autobiographical piece (due 6/30)	10%	(Effort Grade)

Revision

We can seldom fathom how much sweat went into our favorite books. Even novelists who’ve been working for decade can generate many *boxes* of drafts. Revision, people say, is “where the writing happens.” If you think your writing will not benefit from revision you are not being a good reader of your own writing. If you are a good reader of your own writing, you will apprehend its faults and—either at the same time or at some point in the future—experience the excitement of a solution. This inspiration, that comes while you are revising, may be what being a writer is all about.

The exciting thing about this class is that revision is built-in to our class mechanics. You will always revise and polish your homework writing before turning it in, of course. But the two big Submissions will be edited in different ways in-class so that you can go back to the dorm full of ideas about how to deepen and better articulate your creations.

Class participation evaluates not only the effort you put into in-class and morning writing exercises, but also your attendance, your preparedness—how well you have studied any assigned readings, your tendency to take an active part in discussions, and the relevance and quality of your contributions to discussions. *But*, in order to get a high mark in class participation you also have to be a good listener. Don’t talk *all* the time. You should treat class as a collaboration between you and your classmates.

*****Things that can sink your grade***** Not turning in assignments and missing class can sink your course grade quickly.

Conferences

You'll occasionally meet with Ben or Marisa to edit a piece of work you've turned in or to debrief after workshop and discuss your plans for revision. In the former case, come prepared to rewrite the piece collaboratively with the instructor. Please reread your relevant work prior to any conference.

Small Groups

When this class was conducted on Zoom we did a ton of one-on-one conferences; now that we're in-person we'll move back to small groups, which are more conducive to lively engagement and honing editing skills.

Peer Editing – Clinics and Workshops

Every writer I've ever met shows her work to trusted friends and colleagues, and then revises it, before seeking publication. Start reading the acknowledgements at the end of books—you will see how greatly we each depend on other writer friends to offer perspective, correction, and new inspiration. I get many of my best ideas a few minutes after talking to other people about my work. When I was in college, I was lucky enough to be line-edited, weekly if not more often, by fellow students (in the context of student newspapers). This course is designed to teach you how to offer and receive many kinds of meaningful feedback. In closely reading one another's works, you will learn how to read your own work with sharper eyes. In discussing your work with each other, with me, and with the class at large during workshops, you will experience what it is truly like to be a writer—to struggle with language between yourself and others.

Workshops:

You should have at least one CT night to read each of your classmates' Submissions. This is how you are to process them: Read through them once. Then read again, flagging problems as you go—perhaps suggesting word changes, better syntax, logic fixes, cuts, etc., flagging wordy, garbled, or awkward sentences. Finally, write a three-sentence paragraph comprising A) one sentence that says what's unique and interesting about the piece and what his has to do with its structure, B) one sentence that assesses the gaps *and* competencies of the writing overall, and C) one sentence that suggests a big change or new idea the writer might consider in revision.

Texts

I will provide a printed coursepack containing most of our readings. I will ask you to reimburse me for its printing costs—this cost will be no more than \$20.

Read at two levels . . .

Read closely, marking

- a) places where you are confused
- b) places where language or syntax surprises you
- c) places where you get some insight into how a thing was made
- d) other lines and passages that you'd like to refer to in class discussion

And after you're done reading, rethink the piece to consider

- a) why the writer was excited to make it
- b) what structural choices they made and why
- c) what exactly happens, at the level of theme, statement, or plot

I will sometimes ask you about any or all of these things. **Come to class knowing what you'd like to say or ask about the reading.**

Policies

Formatting

Typed work should be in 12 pt. Times New Roman, double-spaced, with default margins. This is a professional convention. Some assignments may have word count limits; acquaint yourself with your word processor's word count function. All submitted work should be in PDF format—usually available under the word processor's printing menu.

Proofreading

I expect students to carefully proofread their work. Treat a submission as you would a professional document. Spell-check is never enough: watch out for missing words, unintentional grammar mistakes, bad punctuation. You should always read over whatever you're submitted *one more time* before turning it in.

Attendance Policy

Everyone is expected to attend all meetings. Tell me about any conflicts ASAP. I am required to report any absences to the Immersion Program administrators. Each absence will reduce your class participation grade (which is 40% of your course grade).

If you miss more than two days' class sessions, for any reason, you will be in danger of failing the course.

- Every unexcused absence after the first drops your course grade by 5%.

Late work Policy

Late work will not be accepted. Due to the compressed timeline of the class, I simply can't accommodate late work.

Confidentiality

Creative Writing workshops rely on trust in a safe environment, so as to facilitate open and critical exchange while protecting a boundary of privacy around the class. Students should be aware, however, that workshop instructors are obliged to share certain kinds of information with appropriate university administrators according to University policies aimed at providing a safe, non-discriminatory environment for all students, which can be consulted at: <https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/>

Accommodations

If you require any accommodations to participate in class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the University's programs or services, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services (SDS) as soon as possible to obtain an Accommodation Determination Letter. Please provide your instructor with a copy of your letter so that you may discuss with them how your accommodations may be implemented in the course. You can contact the SDS office at 773-702- 6000/TTY 773-795-1186 or disabilities@uchicago.edu, or visit the website at disabilities.uchicago.edu. SDS is located at 5501 S. Ellis Avenue.

I am committed to creating an inclusive and accessible classroom environment for all students. Students who need disability accommodations should present the necessary paperwork to me at the beginning of the quarter, or as soon as such paperwork can be arranged. For further information, visit the University's [Student Disability Services Office](#) website.

UChicago statement on Academic Honesty & Plagiarism

It is contrary to justice, academic integrity, and to the spirit of intellectual inquiry to submit another's statements or ideas as one's own work. To do so is plagiarism or cheating, offenses punishable under the University's disciplinary system. Because these offenses undercut the distinctive moral and intellectual character of the University, we take them very seriously. Proper acknowledgment of another's ideas, whether by direct quotation or paraphrase, is expected. In particular, if any written or electronic source is consulted and material is used from that source, directly or indirectly, the source should be identified by author, title, and page number, or by website and date accessed. Any doubts about what constitutes "use" should be addressed to the instructor.

In this course, students are expected to produce original work. This means that all sources used in written work (including articles, books, chalk posts) should be properly cited. The College's statement on academic integrity defines plagiarism as "[submitting] the statements or ideas or work of others as one's own," and makes clear that the penalties for plagiarism "may range up to permanent expulsion from the University of Chicago." In this class, the penalty for plagiarism will be a failing grade. In the unfortunate event that a student is suspected of plagiarism, I will follow the guidelines set forth in The University of Chicago Student Manual. Go to <https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/Policies#Honesty> for more information. If you are concerned as to what precisely constitutes plagiarism, refer to Doing Honest Work in College, which you received during your Core courses, or please ask me.