

ENWR 312-01: Writing Poetry: Form & Technique

Instructor: Dr. Susan B.A. Somers-Willett
Class information: DI 432, M 11:30-2:00
Blackboard site: <http://bb9.montclair.edu>
Spring 2010

E-mail: susan@susansw.com
Office: Dickson Hall 316
Office hours: M 2-2:30 and 4-5:30 drop-in;
W 4:30-5:30 by appointment

COURSE POLICY STATEMENT

Course Description

This course is designed to introduce students to craft of writing poetry in a workshop environment. With the understanding that poetic form is different from formalist verse, we will explore writing poetry through a variety of traditions as well as learn some basics of prosody. Forms and traditions we will practice include the sonnet, the litany, the ballad, the blues lyric, free verse and organic form, ekphrasis, writing in a persona, performance poetry, and hip-hop. We'll also discuss specific aspects of poetic craft such as diction, metaphor, resonance, stanza, and the line. After revising your writing, you will create a final portfolio with an artist's statement reflecting on your process as a writer and the strengths and weaknesses of your writing. Your attendance and participation are crucial to your success in this class. **Prerequisites: ENWR 200 and departmental approval.**

Satisfies: 2 (Writing), 3 and TE 3b (Poetry)

Required Texts (available at the MSU Bookstore)

An Exaltation of Forms, Eds. Annie Finch and Katherine Varnes
Writing Poems, Michelle Boisseau, Robert Wallace, and Randall Mann

Grading Policy

60% Final portfolio with an artist's statement/self-evaluation
25% Weekly in-class critiques (written and spoken)
15% Attendance, participation, and exercises

Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty is defined by the university as "any attempt by a student to submit as his/her own work that which has not be completed by him/her or to give improper aid to another student in the completion of an assignment, i.e., plagiarism" (please view the entire policy at <http://www.montclair.edu/deanstudents/regulations1.html>). This can include "double-dipping," or using one piece of writing to satisfy the requirements of more than one course. Since our focus in this course is literary production, work you turn in for this class is to be new, original writing created specifically for this workshop (except in the case of revision exercises). Please ask if you have any questions about this policy.

In-Class Workshop Etiquette

The purpose of our workshops is not to "fix" poems but rather to help the author discover his or her poem through process. In this regard, our comments in workshop should aim toward the neutral, descriptive, and interrogative—in the words of Janet Burroway, not *What I like* but *What this piece is like*. Only then can we critique whether or not the writing is successful in what it wants to achieve and offer constructive criticism to guide the poem in that direction.

As members of a workshop, our goal should be to find a balance in the tenor of our comments; too much praise can be just as poisonous as too much criticism. Finding this balance is the most difficult part of a workshop, but it also can be the most rewarding.

As authors, it is our responsibility to not just to listen to but to *hear* how our readers describe our writing in a non-defensive way. This openness is part of the process of the poem, and entertaining the suggestions of others—even as they may seem to counter our own senses—may be just the thing that gives the writing flight.

In order to encourage this openness, we will for the most part follow the gag rule in workshop: While a piece of writing is being discussed in class, the author should remain silent. There are exceptions to this rule, however, which we will inevitably discover together. As poet Dean Young says, “Poems are birds, not birdcages,” and if they have strong enough wings they deserve to stretch them.

Of course, in all things you are expected to behave with maturity and respect for others. If you exhibit behavior that is threatening or that disrupts the learning experience, disciplinary action will be sought according to university policy.

Using Blackboard 9

Please note that we will be piloting Blackboard 9 in this course and you will be responsible for completing assignments via this new (and much more versatile!) workspace. **To access this site, you need to type in (or bookmark) the address <http://bb9.montclair.edu> and login using your Web ID.** No content for our course will be posted on the old Blackboard 7 interface, where your other courses reside. It is up to you to remember to access our course via the new interface.

Posting and Responding to Poems via the Blog

We will be using a new blog feature on Blackboard 9 to provide written feedback on poems outside of class. Like all things in the BB9 environment, this is an experiment, but it is my hope that this feature will be a more convenient, green, and accessible method of distributing written comments to each other.

To post a poem, login to BB9 (<http://bb9.montclair.edu>) using your Web ID and access our course under the **“Courses”** tab. Then click on the **“Blog”** command in our course menu and then on the name of our course blog, **“Workshop Poems.”**

In the blog, I will create an entry each week containing a writing prompt. To post a poem, click the button **“Create Blog Entry”** with the poem title as the entry title. Cut-and-paste your poem from Word or other program and also **attach the poem as a file** in your entry (this helps with tricky spacing). To comment on your classmates' poems, click the "comment" button after each of their entries and respond. Repeat this cycle every week.

Remember that you should craft your responses to poems before each class meets, not during or after workshop. In the neighborhood of 2-5 sentences is appropriate. In your comments, remember to balance praise with criticism. Most important will be your suggestions on how the poem can move forward in revision and become more successful.

Finally, feel free to respond to one another in the comments, but remember that we will be discussing many poems in workshop too, so a lot of back-and-forth is not necessary. Above all, please respect each other when commentating (no flame wars, please!). We will contradict each other and not always agree about the best way to revise a poem. Sometimes that disagreement is very enlightening to us as writers, and ultimately it is up to each author to determine what's best for his or her poem in revision.

Deadlines

These workshop drafts, as all assignments, **are due at class time on the date posted** (not that afternoon or evening). Because assignment deadlines are posted with ample advance notice, extensions for assignments will not be granted.

Please pay special attention to when poems are due, for if you do not submit your poems by the deadline each week, you will not receive full credit for that week's assignment and you may, at the discretion of the instructor, miss your turn at workshop. Posting a poem after the submission deadline also does not guarantee that you will receive feedback from everyone in the class. **Please do not e-mail your poem to the entire class after it is due.** This not only creates headaches for each of your class members, it is disrespectful and taxes your classmates' time and resources.

If you are absent on a day when an assignment is due, you are still responsible for meeting that deadline. You can accomplish this by simply posting your poem on the Blackboard blog by classtime. You are also responsible for picking up any handouts that you missed before our next class meets. These will be available in a box outside my office located at Dickson Hall 316.

Attendance and Participation

Attendance and participation are required in this course, and both will affect your grade. Missing **more than two classes** constitutes missing a significant part of the course and will affect your final grade. Should you miss class, you are responsible for meeting all assignment deadlines, contacting a member of class in order to keep up with readings and assignments, and notifying the instructor in advance of your absence if possible.

Final Portfolios

Please save all drafts of your writing for this class (including reviews, drafts of poems, and statements of poetics). You will be asked to include them in your final portfolio.

Information for Students with Disabilities

Both the university and I are committed to keeping this classroom and course material accessible. If you have a learning or physical disability, please inform me at the beginning of the course either after class or in office hours. In the rare case where a class assignment is not accessible, an alternative assignment requiring the exercise of equal skill and knowledge can be arranged.

Grading Policies

The purpose of having a full range of grades (A through F) is to represent true levels of academic achievement. Although I'm sure everyone would like to make As or Bs on their class assignments, chances are that not everyone will receive them.

When receiving graded assignments, it may help to keep in mind these descriptions of different levels of student achievement:

- F – Represents failure (or no credit) and means that work was either completed at a level not worthy of credit, or not completed at all.
- D – Achievement worthy of credit, but which does not meet assignment/course requirements fully.
- C – Achievement that meets the assignment/course requirements in every respect and shows adequate understanding and application of the course material.
- B – Achievement *significantly above* the level necessary to meet assignment/course requirements. Such work demonstrates good application of instructional material and makes some successful and original connections beyond it.
- A – achievement that is *outstanding and unique* relative to the assignment/course requirements. Such work demonstrates clear and accurate independent thought and goes well beyond the application of instructional material to make new scholarly or creative connections and understandings. The student's voice is polished and clearly original.

Please remember that a "C" is not a bad grade, merely an average one; that Bs represent good, above-average work; and As represent excellent work that achieves the very best in undergraduate thinking and writing. Also remember that in paper-writing assignments, length is independent of quality; a long paper does not necessarily indicate a good paper.

I will occasionally retain copies of student writing to serve as samples in future semesters or for a teaching portfolio. Please be assured that if I choose your paper as a sample, I will remove any identifying information from it and use it for instructional or administrative purposes only. If you prefer that your writing not be used for this purpose, please let me know.

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Abbreviations: WP=*Writing Poems*, Boisseau *et al*
EF=*An Exaltation of Forms*, Finch and Varnes
BB=Reading posted on Blackboard

SYLLABUS (subject to change)

WEEK 1: Introduction

M 1/25 Class intro and discussion of policies
In-class reading and discussion: Gioia/Kennedy, "What is poetry?"; Pound, "In a Metro"; Gernes, "Yellow Balloon"; Somers-Willett, "Self-Portrait as I-10"; Graham, "Self-Portrait as the Moment between Them"
Poem 1 assigned: Self-Portraits

WEEK 2: Prosody and Sonnets

M 2/1 ***Bring a laptop computer to class if you have one**
Poem 1 due: Self-Portrait—bring an electronic copy of your poem to class (either saved on your laptop or on a memory device)
Blackboard 9 Intro
Read: WP Diction, Syntax, Pruning (5-12) and Ch. 3 Making the Line I (44-60 only);
EF "The Sonnet" (297-307); sonnet handout (BB)

WEEK 3: Metaphor

M 2/8 **Poem 2 due: Sonnet**
Workshop: Self-Portraits
Read: WP Ch. 7 Metaphor (136-59)

WEEK 4: Lists and Litanies

M 2/15 **Poem 3 due: Metaphor**
Workshop: Sonnets
Read: EF "The List Poem" (359-65) and "A Wand Made of Words: The Litany Poem" (242-246); Szmborska, "Vietnam," (BB); Somers-Willett, "What's Left" and "Women of Troy" (BB); Notter, "Jubilate" (BB), Collins, "Litany" (BB)

WEEK 5: Stanza and the Line

M 2/22 **Poem 4 due: List or Litany**
Lineation exercise and discussion of stanza forms
Workshop: Metaphor
Read: WP Ch. 4 Making the Line II (69-88)

WEEK 6: Repetition and Musicality: Villanelles

M 3/1 **Poem 5 due: Line and Stanza**
Workshop: Lists and Litanies
Read: WP Ch. 5 Sound and Sense (89-102 only); EF Kumin, "Gymnastics: The Villanelle" (314-321); Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle" (BB)

WEEK 7: Radical Revision

M 3/8 **Poem 6 due: Villanelle**
Workshop: Line and Stanza
Read WP Ch. 11 Devising and Revising (231-249 only)

WEEK 8

M 3/15 **No Class- Spring Break**

WEEK 9: Free Verse and Organic Form

M 3/22 **Poem 7 due: Radical Revision**
Workshop: Villanelle
Read: EF "Free Verse" (73-80) and "Organic Form" (325-33)

WEEK 10: Persona and Ekphrasis

M 3/29 **Poem 8 due: Free Verse/Organic Form**
Workshop: Radical Revision
Read: WP Persona (165-68); Bishop, "The Fish" (BB); Yellin, "Nighthawks" (BB); Trethewey, "Vignette"; Komunyakaa, "Facing It"; Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo"
Lecture on ekphrasis, photos assigned

WEEK 11: Ballads and the Blues

M 4/5 **Poem 9 due: Ekphrastic Poem**
Workshop: Free verse/ Organic form
Read EF "The Folk Ballad" (167-79) and "The Blues" (188-97)

WEEK 12: Tyehimba Jess

M 4/12 Read: Jess, *leadbelly*
Jess reading TBA

WEEK 13: Workshop

M 4/19 **Poem 10 due: Ballad or Blues**
Workshop: Persona/Ekphrasis

WEEK 14: Workshop

M 4/26 Workshop: Blues Poem

WEEK 15: Closing Session

M 5/3 **Portfolios due;** Course wrap-up