

LITR 3371: Creative Writing
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LITR 3371: Creative Writing

Can the writer isolate and vivify all in experience that most deeply engages our intellects and our hearts?

Get to work. Your work is to keep cranking the flywheel that turns the gears that spin the belt in the engine of belief that keeps you and your desk in midair.

—Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

Course Description and Objectives:

This course will introduce you to the practice of writing poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Because that practice requires a knowledge of the tradition in which we write, you will engage in intensive reading across a range of genres and historical moments. By experimenting with a wide variety of exercises and approaches, you will discover which genres and styles suit you, and which intrigue or challenge you. You will gain knowledge about creativity and writing. In addition, you will:

- ❖ gain insight into the nature of creative work, and understand why creativity is so prized
- ❖ learn strategies for brainstorming, generating, and editing powerful literary art
- ❖ acquire a working vocabulary and critical/analytical skills for giving useful feedback
- ❖ develop skills of listening with sensitivity and awareness of the difficulty of creative work, thus preparing for a lifetime of collaborative literary citizenship
- ❖ practice the discipline of writing daily and submitting work in a timely fashion
- ❖ become acquainted with the demands of the writing life, which including but are not limited to: discipline, precision, seriousness in the approach to craft and form, as well as imaginative risk, spontaneity and playfulness.

Required Texts:

Difficult Fruit by Lauren Alleyne
Bright Dead Things by Ada Limon
Earthy Delights and Other Apocalypses by Jen Julian
 Printouts of other readings and student work

Recommended Texts:

Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing
The Reckonings by Lacy M. Johnson

Required Writing:

Short Workshop	15%
Long Workshop	25%
Experiments (8 x 2.5%)	20%
Critiques	10%
Artist's Statement	10%

Other Assessment Criteria:

Participation	15%
Revision Presentation	5%

EXPLANATION OF ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Participation: The **participation grade** is determined by how well you engage with your classmates' ideas. Both quantity and quality are rewarded. To achieve maximum participation points, you should **attend** every class, **listen** closely to your peers, and when you speak, demonstrate accurate and deep **understanding of other points of view**. No one can produce interesting, powerful creative work if they isolate themselves within their own experience. When necessary, Dr. Eleftheriou will give **quizzes** on the day's reading during class, and your performance on the quiz will determine your participation for that class.

Class Discussion is a crucial part of your learning, so your success in the course depends on your *active* reading (take notes!) and thinking hard about the assigned texts. You can't learn without participating, and your grade will reflect this. Raise your hand—even if you're shy. Remember that *I want to hear what you're thinking*. And I want the class to hear you, too.

Experiments: These responses to prompts are designed expand your imaginative potential, and generate unexpected new ideas that **you can use** in your workshop submissions. Experiments will be evaluated on the imaginative and creative risks they take, and the effectiveness with which they experiment with principles explained in the reading for the day. **You have to read the assigned craft texts and apply the concepts in the reading if you want to get a good grade on your experiments.**

Also, you have to either turn in a hard copy or read it out loud. If you don't have a hard copy but want to read it out loud for credit, hand Dr. Eleftheriou a piece of paper that states the experiment number and states that you earned credit by reading it out loud. **Once** per semester, you may ask a classmate to print or read it out *for* you. If you neither turn it in, nor read it out loud, you can **turn it in on the last day of class for half credit**.

Workshop: **Workshop submissions** are the major assessment method for this course. The "short workshop" consists of two poems, each 6-40 lines long OR one piece of prose, 600-1200 words long. The "long workshop" consists of four poems, each 6-40 lines long OR one piece of prose, 1800 – 2500 words long. Please make sure you put **page numbers** on your draft, as well as an MLA heading (your name, Dr. Eleftheriou, course and date).

You will sign up for a **workshop date** on the wiki signup sheet. You are responsible for uploading your workshop piece by the Friday before your workshop date. Punctual submission is important not only for your professor, but for the whole class, who will need to read your work for their critique grade. Your lateness has a negative effect on the whole class, so there are especially harsh penalties for lateness in this course.

If you submit on time but are **absent on your own workshop day**, you get **10% off your workshop grade** and forfeit your chance to hear your peers' comments. Dr. Eleftheriou will provide written comments. No matter how good your excuse is, this penalty will be applied. Your absence on workshop day causes a disruption in the class.

If you **miss a deadline for submitting a workshop piece**, you get **50% off your grade**, and your work may not be discussed by your peers (the class will decide). When I say "Monday 11:59 pm" is a deadline, work submitted at 12:05 on Tuesday morning is **late**.

Technical difficulties are not an excuse, since you have the option to turn in a draft ahead of time, just in case. Because the assignments are extremely broad, and because the only constraint is that you may not have turned a piece in for a grade in another class, Dr. Eleftheriou **does not give any extensions for creative writing workshops**.

If you submit within three days of your deadline (i.e. by Monday), you'll still lose 50%, but Dr. Eleftheriou will provide written feedback. If you are later than that, you must **submit it on the last day of class (again, 50% off)** along with other late work. You get no feedback.

The rationale for this strict lateness policy is twofold. First, delays in submission affect the work flow of all your peers, who will either miss the opportunity to learn from critiquing your work, or will have a shortened time period to write their critique, which will be graded. Secondly, a major purpose of this course is to equip you with the habits and discipline of a working writer, who will be able to write, submit, and publish for years to come. Missing a deadline is the only thing that leads to failure; making a deadline is the *only thing* a writer *knows for sure* she must do in order to publish.

Every student will know ahead of time what piece of writing s/he is supposed to read. On the day of workshop, every student must have either a printed copy OR a digital copy available to them on a screen 7 inches (diagonal) or larger. This means kindle, iPad, and laptops are OK. Phones are not. You will **lose participation** points if you come to workshop without access to the drafts you were responsible for reading.

Critiques: You will know ahead of time which drafts you are supposed to read, and also which you're supposed to critique. When you are assigned a critique, you must bring the written critique to class on Wednesday **in two hard copies**. You will find my expectations for the critiques under the "critique forms" tab on Blackboard.

I will only award credit to critiques I receive in hand **in hard copy** on the day of workshop. **Once** per semester (as with experiments), you may ask a classmate to print out two copies of your critique and get credit even if you're absent. If you forget your second copy, give the one copy to Dr. Eleftheriou and email your critique to the writer. If you are a writer who hasn't received a critique you expected, first send a reminder to your classmate. If you get no response and really value the student's written feedback, you may ask me to intervene. However, if a student is too irresponsible to send you their feedback, chances are it wouldn't be particularly valuable, so you should probably "let it go." An important part of this class is learning what feedback to value and apply and what to dismiss.

You are responsible for identifying weaknesses in the **writing** and expressing them in kind, compassionate language. You **MUST** find a way to point out problems without being cruel or hateful. If you receive a critique that displays cruelty, offensive language, hate speech, or otherwise inappropriate or alarming statements, email me your concerns immediately. Any student who submits a critique that includes hate speech or gratuitously cruel language will be **banned** from submitting written critiques to their peers. If a student submits an offensive, hateful, or cruel critique, I will alert the class and ask that everyone throws away any critiques from this student without reading them. Learn to be tough and kind at once.

- Late Work:** As mentioned above, any late workshop submissions, critiques, and experiments can be turned in on the last day of class **in hard copy for half credit**. This even goes for workshop submissions, which should be submitted online if submitted on time. If you cannot attend on **Wed., May 1st**, you may ask a classmate to deliver your late work for you.
- Community:** This class relies on a strong classroom community. Throughout your life as a writer – whether writing becomes a therapeutic hobby or a paid profession – you will rely on other people to read your work and give you advice, alert you to publishing opportunities, and (most importantly) **read** what you’ve written. This course has thus been designed to reflect the reality of the “real world.” To be eligible for opportunities such as the “a friend can turn in your experiment or late work” rule, you need to start making connections with your classmates early on. Talk to them. Swap contact information. Offer to read early drafts (this is not cheating!), exchange favorite authors and reading recommendations, or set up writing dates to keep on track. If you do this early on, you won't have trouble finding people to print out or turn your work in for you if you need them. You can also take turns printing out each other's experiments and critiques, to save trips to the computer lab.
- Artist's Statement:** You will receive a separate assignment sheet for the artist's statement. Keep in mind that this exercise will require you to synthesize everything you've learned over the semester, and apply it to the question “who am I as an artist?” The artist's statement is **due on Blackboard on Friday, May 3**. As with workshop submissions, you may upload an early draft just in case you miss the deadline when uploading your polished draft. You can upload new drafts as frequently as you like.
- Exam Day:** Our exam period is Wednesday, May 8th at 9am. During this time, you will do your **revision presentations**, worth 5% of your grade. You will speak for 4-6 minutes and explain how you **applied principles learned in the course** to improve your work.
- Due Dates:** To keep things simple, everything that's due **online** (workshop submissions and artist's statement) is due on a **Friday**. Everything due in **hard copy** (experiments, critiques, and any late work) is due on **Wednesday**, in class. All **late work** is due in hard copy (for half credit) on the last day of class, May 1st. You may ask a classmate, friend, or relative to deliver your work to the classroom if you can't make it.
- Communication:** If you have a specific question about an assignment, the syllabus, a policy, your writing, or a new strategy you are trying to employ, you may email Dr. Eleftheriou. When you compose a professional email, please apply an appropriate salutation such as “Hi Dr. Eleftheriou,” “Dear Professor E.,” or “Hello Dr. E.” Then, refer to a specific difficulty you're having. Many issues are inappropriate for email. If you have **a question about your grade** or other sensitive issue, please use email or time before/after class to set up an **appointment**, or ascertain that office hours are not already booked up, and speak to Dr. Eleftheriou about the issue in person. Also, **please check your syllabus** before asking a question that's answered there. Dr. Eleftheriou wrote it, but didn't commit it to memory!
- Homework:** Homework for each class period, including both reading and writing, should take no more than six hours. If you spend more than six hours on a day's homework, consult Dr. Eleftheriou for helpful reading strategies, or make an appointment with the UHCL Writing Center, where you can learn methods for more efficient study.

Feelings: Your other university courses differ from creative writing class in many ways, but one of the most significant is the way creative writing affects our feelings. While learning the about a complex microorganism, an intricate mathematical model, or a pedagogical tool, you may feel frustration, excitement, fascination, boredom, or hope. However, reading about a child being beaten by his teacher, a father who is starving himself, or a plane that crashes (whether real or fictional) can affect you more intensely. Reading the published work or your peers' assignments may make you sad or terrified, or provoke a grief you don't feel equipped to handle. Similarly, receiving feedback can be distressing – even when your peers are trying to be kind. Because our writing is so deeply personal, criticism of our work can feel like a personal attack. Talk about these feelings to each other and me.

Please also use the resources available to you in order to manage these emotions. The counseling center at UCHL can provide free services and/or refer you to a counselor in the community. **If you find yourself getting overwhelmed by a reading or class discussion, please stop reading or leave the room**, no questions asked. Later, talk to a counselor about how to tailor your participation in the class, and let your professor know what new accommodations you need.

OTHER POLICIES

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism Policy: All UHCL students are responsible for knowing the standards of academic honesty as detailed in the Student Life Handbook for the University Academic Honesty Policy. Briefly, plagiarism is using another person's **words** and **ideas** as though they were your own without naming a source. If you are paraphrasing from an outside source—explaining someone else's ideas using your own words—you *must still acknowledge and cite the source*. Plagiarism is not restricted to the use of published work; the **passing of another student's work as your own**, turning in **any work that you submitted for another class**, or having another person write your paper is also a case of plagiarism. If I suspect unacknowledged dependence on outside sources, I will investigate it thoroughly; a paper found to contain any plagiarized material will receive a "0" and is sufficient grounds for failing the course. Also, note that the syllabus explicitly permits you to use writing submitted as an experiment in a workshop submission. This is an exception to the general self-plagiarism rule, which prohibits students from resubmitting work they already got academic credit for. You may use writing you did a long time ago, as long as you never earned credit for it in high school, community college, university, etc.

Disabilities: The University of Houston System complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, pertaining to the provision of reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids for students with a disability. In accordance with Section 504 and ADA guidelines, each University within the System strives to provide reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids to students who request and require them. Please contact your University's student disability services center. If you have a disability and need a special accommodation, consult the Coordinator of Health Disabilities Services, SSB 1.301, telephone 281-283-2627, and then discuss the accommodation with me. For this class, accommodations for **ABSENCES** are especially important.

6 Drop Rule Limitation: Students who entered a Texas public college or university for the first time in fall 2007 or later should be aware of the course drop limitation imposed by the Texas Legislature.

Dropping this or any other course between the first day of class and the census date for the semester/session does not affect your 6 drop rule count. Dropping a course between the census date and the last day to drop a class for the semester/session WILL count as one of your 6 permitted drops.

Emergency Hotline Number for University Closures: 281-283-2221

SCHEDULE

January 23rd

Bring *Bright Dead Things* and *Earthly Delights* to class. We'll read "What It Looks Like To Us and the Words We Use," "I Remember the Carrots," and "Attachment."

January 30th

Read *Cambridge* Chapter 1, "Introducing Creative Writing" and Chapter 2, "Creative Writing in the World." Finish Part 1 of *Bright Dead Things*.

Watch any reading or interview by Ada Limon on YouTube. Be prepared to talk to the class about what you learned about the poet, and/or how hearing her poetry out loud felt different from reading them on the page.

Gather and bring to class three little-known facts. Find these facts in local news stories, in an encyclopedia, or in a conversation with one of those people in your life who just knows weird, interesting facts. They can be event-facts or scientific facts. Try to cover three different categories from the following: quirky and weird; useful but little-known; politically important, joy-producing/heartwarming; terrifying. Just write them down by hand and bring them to class for an exercise.

Experiment 1:

In the "Why We Write" Section of *Cambridge*, Morley describes the sensation of the writing process. Which parts overlap with your own experience of art? Which activity has, in the past, given you such an experience? It could be making visual art, acting, or playing a sport. Write about how what you feel while doing this activity connects to what Morley describes as the writing experience. (100-150 words).

Also, write about what your personal goals are for this semester. What do you want to learn about writing? What skills do you want to improve? What writing do you want to have produced and polished by the end of the semester? (200-300 words).

Finally, write one poem, 6-40 lines long based on any **object** or **image** you found in today's reading – for example, pirate ships, a carrot, a bathroom mirror, white oaks, Spanish moss, spider webs, obsidian shards, or a woodpecker. The only two requirements are that you (1) "steal" an image from Limon and put it in your poem and (2) have in the poem a "turn," as discussed in class.

February 6th

Read *Cambridge* Chapter 5, "Processes of Creative Writing" and Chapter 8, "Writing Poetry," Part 2 of *Bright Dead Things* and the Poetry Checklist (Starkey 48 & 52).

Experiment 2: Write **two poems** based on the facts you got from class. Try to apply the principles you learned from Chapter 8. Also, write from an unexpected perspective. For example, if it's a burglar breaking into the house of a rich guy, choose the perspective of the homeless woman outside the house, or the sister-in-law of the policewoman who showed up to the crime scene. Also, take four lines from last week's poem. If they were rhymed, **rewrite them in free verse**. If they were unrhymed, choose a rhyme scheme (aabb or ababa). If you feel adventurous, try both rhyme schemes and decide how each scheme affects the lines differently. Try to convey the same ideas but if rhyming forces you to change a lot, that's OK.

February 13th

Read *Cambridge* “Chapter 6: The Practice of Fiction,” “Castle Links Creek,” and “We Are Meant for Greater Things.” Also, read the handout of Starkey’s Short-Short Stories. Keep in mind that for the short workshop, you’ll have the option of writing a short-short story, a piece of short-short nonfiction, or two poems.

Experiment 3: Invent and describe a basic conflict (50-100 words). Write the first three sentences in first person, and then in third person. Finally, choose first or third and complete the short-short story (250-1000 words).

February 20th

Read *Cambridge* “Chapter 7: Creative Nonfiction.” Read several short-short essays on Brevitymag.com and choose two that you really like. Bring the title to class and be prepared to read them out loud, and **explain how they illustrate the principles of good creative writing** that we’ve studied so far.

Experiment 4: Conduct any of the following modes of creative research: (1) interview a role model, person you admire, friend, or family member on the phone or in person. Dig into their perspective in a way you have never been able to before. Get insights into historical event they experienced, another part of their life that interests you, or an experience that you shared with them – all of these work, as long as it really matters to you, and as long as you discover things you didn’t already know. (2) go to a place you’ve never visited before *or* you’ve visited frequently but never really paid attention to. Make detailed notes about the place, and use the internet or the library to discover background information not available in the place. (Yes, you must physically go there and take notes.)

February 22nd (Fri.) Submission day for Short **Workshop Group 1** (whole class workshop – 4 students)

February 27th

Read the workshop section in *Cambridge* 115-123 (and take it in! it’s important!) as well as **all the workshop pieces submitted**.
Write critiques for the students you were assigned.

March 1st (Fri.) Submission day for Short **Workshop Groups 2-6** (small group workshops)

March 6th

Read all workshop pieces you were assigned and **write critiques** as required. Also, read Part 3 of *Bright Dead Things*.

March 13th Spring Break

March 20th **Read** the Wikipedia entries on literary fiction and genre fiction. Of course, there's an academic ban on Wikipedia. The point of this exercise, though, is to examine the hierarchies of the academy so reading a "banned site" is part of the point. Also, read "Bone Men," "Keepers," and "One for Sorrow, Two for Joy" in *Earthly Delights*.

Experiment 5: Find a place where books are sold and, if you are physically able, sit down in it. The floor, a chair, or a bench are all fine. What matters is that before sitting down, you look around. What is the place like? How are the books and magazines organized? What does that organization mean? What decisions has the management made to get people to buy more books? Which sections are your favorite? If you wrote a book, where would it appear? That's where I want you to sit down. Describe the setting in as much detail as you can (100-300 words). Then, write the beginning of a short story (200-400 words).

March 27th **Read** Lacy M. Johnson's "After the Flood," "The Fallout," and "On Mercy."

Experiment 6: All of the essays you are reading for today weave (seamlessly) together narrative of personal experience, poetry, philosophy, historical research, and scientific research. Make a list of ten such things Johnson uses, and how you think she obtained accurate information (e.g., do you think the author kept a journal for dialogue? Did she find the poems on the internet? Did she go to an archive?) Then, imitate the author's methods by (1) choosing an event in your own life that will yield the kind of deep questions Johnson asks, (2) finding three pieces of information related to that event that you *didn't already know* (3) writing about 400 words that blend narrative with your three pieces of new information.

April 3rd **Read** the handouts on **plot** and **characterization** as well as "Stereograms," "We Are Meant for Greater Things," and "Earthly Delights." Also, read the interview Dr. Eleftheriou did of Professor Jen Julian.

Experiment 7: Write the plot sketch *or* an in-depth character sketch for a story that you will base on one of the fun facts you gathered for 1/30. Be inspired by "Attachment," which was inspired by the facts of how angler fish reproduce.

April 10th **Read** *Difficult Fruit* and the assigned Odes by Tim Seibles. Then, find at least one video of Seibles or Alleyne and watch it. Be prepared to share it. **No experiment** today, but if you're doing poetry for your long workshop, consider writing an ode!

April 12th (Fri.) Submission day, Long **Workshop Group 3A** (whole class workshop – 5 students)

April 17th **Workshop Group 3A** (whole class; read all submissions, bring critiques as assigned)

April 19th (Fri.) Submission day, Long **Workshop Group 3B** (whole class workshop – 3 students)

April 24th **Workshop Group 3B** (whole class; read all submissions, bring critiques as assigned)

April 26th (Fri.) Submission day for Long **Workshop Group 4** (small-group workshops—all others)

May 1 **Workshop Group 4** (Small Groups). Bring *Difficult Fruit* and be prepared to discuss your favorite poems from the book.

All late work (experiments, critiques, submissions) is DUE TODAY, May 1.

May 3rd (Fri.) Artist's Statement is DUE on Blackboard by 11:59pm

May 8th **Revision Presentations.** All students will present for 4-6 minutes on the revision choices they employed while improving their work. Come to class with your presentation on a flash drive or upload it to Blackboard. You may also go low-tech and just talk to the class about what choices you made to improve your work.

At the end, students can volunteer to read the revisions and continue the development of their work after the semester has ended. The idea is for you to stay in touch with the writers you have come to respect and trust during the semester, and to begin (today) to support the post-course development of your literary endeavors.