

SYLLABUS GLS FALL 2025

Subject to change.

“Becoming a Writer: The Craft of Creative Writing”

Fall 2025

GLS/Wesleyan University

Instructor: Jeanne Bonner (jbonner@wesleyan.edu)

**“Work absorbs us. It’s holy. It never stops, task after task.”
(Donald Hall)**

Short description: In this course, we will explore the art of creative writing by reading great works of fiction and nonfiction from the past century, by completing weekly writing exercises and by participating in student workshopping sessions. This course is a mixed genre writing course that will allow students to practice writing both fiction and nonfiction while also discovering tools for making writing any kind of material a sustainable practice. Each week in class, we will begin with a set writing period for free writing and for generative prompts. These weekly writing prompts will help students gather the elements and the inspiration to write two full-length works of creative writing. In addition to reading master works from both fiction and nonfiction genres, students will also read seminal texts about writing, which will serve as tools for figuring out what and how to write.

Full description:

**“The secret of life is to have a task that occupies us every minute,
every day, for our whole lives.”
(Henry Moore)**

Through living, we all accumulate the raw material for stories, essays and novels. But where to begin? And what genre best captures your voice? How to shape the material as writing?

To master narrative prose, one needs to read a lot and write a lot. Carving out time to read and write is critical, and so is knowing what to read.

In this course, we will read a variety of texts and engage in formative writing exercises that will invite students to embrace writing as a lifelong creative pursuit. In addition to reading master works from both fiction and nonfiction genres, students will also read seminal texts about writing, which will serve as tools for figuring out what and how to write. Regardless of genre, writers need to master the art of storytelling.

Initially, we will engage in an array of writing exercises not tied to genre. We will focus on developing key skills, including character development (useful for fiction AND nonfiction), and also on mining our interests and our lives for topics of interest. Students will learn about various subgenres of fiction and nonfiction, including the personal essay, flash fiction and travelogues.

We will read as writers so instead of primarily analyzing the works for symbolism or thematic concerns, we will examine stories, essays and other assigned reading to figure out how the authors developed characters and plot or used description. We will learn the art of describing people, places and things. But we will also learn that storyline is what keeps the reader curious and reading.

Our initial assignments will be short (1-2 pages) and designed to have students get comfortable with creative writing while also identifying fertile topics for exploration. The course's major assignments consist of two complete works of creative writing (most likely one work of fiction and one work of nonfiction) and a journal. We will use workshoping to elicit peer critiques and work on revision.

Each student will also utilize a course notebook or writer's diary to record bursts of inspiration, detailed observations/responses about the readings and topics of interest.

But the most important assignment, in the words of legendary poet Mary Oliver, is this:

“Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

Last but not least, the aim of the course is that students leave with a firm idea of how to find time – and feel inspired -- in their everyday lives to read deeply and write regularly.

Course assignments

*Two original works of creative writing (3,000 words or more) -- 30% each

*Two short writing assignments (2 pages max) – 20%

*Writer's Journal/Reader's Notebook -- 20 %

Note: The two short writing assignments can be the basis for the two longer works

What is the Reader's Notebook?

You will keep a Reader's Notebook to record impressions, comments, questions and reflections about the readings we do. Aim to write at least a page for each reading; close reading of each text will help elicit observations and comparisons, and may also inspire you to think about works of your own that you want to write (and you can include this information in the RN). The notebook would also be the right place to transcribe quotations, and all of these notes will serve you well during course discussions. I won't collect the notebook as it is your private record of responses to the course readings and reflections on this type of writing, but I will ask you to **submit two (2)** examples from the notebook of your reflections. The Reader's Notebook this semester will stand in place of an academic assignment in which you would formally analyze the text, so you will likely need to polish and revise the reflections from your notebook so that they can be shared with someone else; think of them as mini-essays or thoughtful, well-written, well-edited blog posts about our readings. I leave it to you to pick the best ones to submit.

Course texts

Stephen King, *On Writing*

Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*
Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*
James Joyce, *The Dubliners*
Alice Munro, *The Love of a Good Woman*
Junot Diaz, *Drown*

Other short readings (provided by instructor)

“A Way of Writing” by William Stafford
“On the Necessity of Turning Yourself into a Character” by Philip Lopate
“Why I Write,” Joan Didion
“Winter in Abruzzo” and “Portrait of a Friend” by Natalia Ginzburg
“Once More to the Lake,” E.B. White
“No Name Woman,” Maxine Hong Kingston
“Your Husband is Cheating on Us” by Jill McCorkle
“The Haircut” by Ring Lardner
“Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid
“Indian Camp” by Ernest Hemingway

Proposed/tentative schedule

Week 1

Syllabus, introductions and personal goals for the course
In-class writing prompt (TBD); in-class reading: “A Way of Writing”
HW: First night assignment: what you know about creative writing, what you want to know about creative writing and what stories you think creative writing can help you tell

AND

Read Joan Didion’s “Why I Write,” Philip Lopate’s “On the Necessity of Turning Yourself into a Character,” and Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (part one)

Week 2

Character sketch discussion
Exercise: Sketch a character using only setting. Describe the objects he or she would have in the bedroom or how the kitchen is decorated -- anything that gives insight into his or her character
HW: Short writing assignment based on in-class writing prompt
Read Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (part two)

NONFICTION

Week 3

Creative nonfiction overview
Point of view (part one)
In class: Write a sketch of your parents as characters in a memoir you could write

HW: Write/revise short writing assignment based on in-class prompt (your parents)
Read individual pieces by Mason Stokes, Maxine Hong Kingston and others as assigned

Week 4

The Personal Essay

In-class prompt: “I remember.”

HW: Read *A Small Place*

Reader’s Notebook assignment due (first)

Week 5

Cultural criticism and travel writing

HW: Read individual pieces provided by instructor

Week 6

Finding inspiration for stories; the real as a foundation for creating the unreal

HW: Read Stephen King craft book (first half)

First full-length assignment due

Week 7

The art of revision

Exercise: Revision through rewriting/retyping

HW: Read Stephen King craft book (second half)

FICTION

“Writing fiction, for me, is about putting on paper my obsessive interest in something mysterious.” (ANTONYA NELSON)

Week 8

Fiction genre overview

Writing with the five senses

HW: Read James Joyce, *The Dubliners* (part one)

Week 9

The Short Story

Exercise: Begin a story in medias res—in the middle of the action—using this prompt: Where were you last night?

HW: Read James Joyce, *The Dubliners* (part two)

Week 10

Point of view (revisited)

HW: Alice Munro, *The Love of a Good Woman*

Week 11

Exercise: “interview” with your main character

HW: Second full-length writing assignment due

Read individual stories by Antonya Nelson, Ernest Hemingway and Jill McCorkle, et al, (professor will provide)

Week 12

Flash fiction overview

In class reading: examples from *Brevity*

HW: Junot Diaz, *Drown*

Week 13

Final class!

Student reading

Reader’s Notebook assignment due (second)

Final instructions for optional revision submission

Course objectives:

1. To read widely within the creative writing genre
2. To learn about short works of creative writing with an eye toward cultivating a regular writing practice
3. To gain a more comprehensive working knowledge of the elements, approaches and features of short works of creative writing, including revision
4. To write a portfolio of two pieces

Requirements: Please read the assigned texts fully and deeply. Complete all of the assignments. Attend class. Submit work as assigned.

Course format: This is a seminar, not a lecture. So, what does that mean? I want to hear from you! I will value your active participation in the form of questions and comments during class.

About the instructor: Jeanne Bonner has an M.F.A. in Fiction from Bennington College. She is the translator of *This Darkness Will Never End*, an Italian short story collection published by Paul Dry Books. She was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship in Translation. Her short story and poetry translations have been published by the *Kenyon Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *The Common* and *Asymptote Journal*. She has reviewed books, and in particular fiction in translation, for *The Boston Globe*, among other outlets. Her creative writing has been published by *The New York Times*, *Catapult* and *Brevity*. She studied

Italian literature at Wesleyan University and has an M.A. in Italian Literature and Culture from the University of Connecticut.