

HZ9301 ADVANCED CREATIVE WRITING

How to use words to make something interesting happen in a stranger's mind

Division of English, Nanyang Technological University

Semester

Day:

Location:

Seminar Leader: Julian Gough

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Office:

In this workshop, I will try to pass on to you everything I wish I'd known when I was a young writer. The workshop will be of particular use to writers of fiction. As there will be a strong emphasis on storytelling, and on communicating clearly with your reader, it will also be useful if you are writing memoir or narrative non-fiction, or want to write for film, television or the internet.

I hope to share with you techniques, attitudes, and tools that will help you get better, every day that you write, for the rest of your life.

STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOPS

The workshops will last three hours (with a short break halfway through). The first half will be devoted to that week's topic. We will do short writing exercises during this half, to explore the points being made.

In the second half, we will discuss and critique two or three pieces of new work, written by members of the workshop. (We will draw up a rota for this at the first workshop.) These will be short pieces of between 300 and 800 words. They can be complete flash fictions, extracts from stories or novels, a screenplay scene, incident from memoir, whatever. You will be required to email your piece to all of us at least three days before the relevant workshop. Our discussion of these pieces will be thoughtful, compassionate and respectful. Each piece will have a workshop member assigned to it (also on the rota), who will begin the discussion by presenting 5 minutes of response (critique and feedback).

In addition to this, each of you will bring in an interesting sentence you've read during the week, that has struck you as particularly good, or particularly bad. We will analyse some of these sentences.

At the end of the semester, you will submit a sustained piece of writing, of between 1500 and 2500 words in total. Again, this could be a complete

short story, or part of a novel, memoir, experimental fiction, script, or narrative non-fiction. This should incorporate and build on some or all of the work you have had critiqued during the semester.

TOPICS & BOOKS

Below is a quick overview of a few of the topics we will address. Some workshops will draw heavily on a particular book, or books; in those cases I have included the name of the book. **You are not required to read them**, but, if a particular topic interests you, I would recommend reading the book(s) for a deeper understanding of the topic.

THINKING LIKE A WRITER

We do not just write with our conscious mind; we write with our full self – mind and body, conscious and unconscious, logic and intuition, imagination and memory. It is vitally important to develop a good working relationship with your full self, particularly your unconscious mind. We will work on ways to do this.

Books:

On Becoming A Writer, Dorothea Brande

Steal Like an Artist, by Austin Kleon

Big Magic, by Elizabeth Gilbert

YOUR BRAIN, AND HOW IT WORKS

To write well, you need to prioritise deep cognitive work. And to do THAT well, you need to understand how your brain works. In the past decade, a great deal of work has been done on the neuroscience of creative thinking; the strengths and limitations of the human brain, and optimal strategies for creative thought. Some of the results are of direct and immediate relevance to writers. This is practical stuff, grounded in good-quality research; what to have for breakfast, how to block distractions, when to take breaks, what coffee does for you.

Book: **Your Brain at Work**, by David Rock

EDITING YOUR OWN WORK

Most writing is rewriting. The ability to edit your own work is therefore vital, if you are to learn and grow as a writer; yet often the writer is, paradoxically, the least qualified person to do this. On re-reading, they see, not what is actually on the page, but a reflection of the original vision they had in their head. So; we will work on ways of reading our own work, not as its understandably biased author, but as an objective first-time

reader, who can see what's wrong, and fix it. This is a hugely important part of becoming a writer; mastering self-editing will help your development greatly.

Books: **Self-Editing for Fiction Writers – How to edit yourself into print,**

by Renni Browne and Dave King

The Wood for the Trees, by Betsy Lerner

MYTHOLOGY AND THE ROOTS OF STORY

All societies have stories; some stories are so successful they last for thousands of years, and become myths. So we will explore these myths, from the feuding Greek gods, and Sun Wukong's Journey to the West, to Star Wars and Wonder Woman.

What makes some stories endure? What makes them resonate in the human heart?

Books:

The Hero With A Thousand Faces, by Joseph Campbell

Wired for Story, by Lisa Cron

GENRE

Even if you don't think you are interested in writing genre fiction, there

is a lot to be learned from studying genres, and why they work. Horror, SF, fantasy, detective fiction, the thriller: genre rules, when applied to literary fiction, can make for a vibrant hybrid. (And vice versa.)

Books:

On Writing, by Stephen King

Zen in the Art of Writing, by Ray Bradbury

The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction,
by Ursula K. LeGuin

STORY STRUCTURE

The difference between fiction that works, and fiction that does not, is often structure; the way in which the parts are assembled. We will work on some simple general guidelines that can be used to improve your storytelling. Some are obvious: show, don't tell. But that's harder than it seems; we'll work on that, a lot.

One excellent, incredibly simple rule, which has been hugely useful to my students, comes from the creators of South Park: If your story beats are connected by "and then..." "and then..." "and then..." you are in trouble, because there are no cause-and-effect relationships to pull the reader forward through the story. If they are connected by "but..." and "therefore...", your story will work. We'll work on restructuring badly

structured stories – reconnecting their beats – using “therefore…” and “but…”

Book: **Creating Short Fiction**, by Damon Knight

SOFTWARE

These workshops will look to the future, as well as the past. New software tools such as Scrivener, Write or Die!, and Freedom, which are often designed specifically for creative writing, can be of great benefit to writers, who were previously stuck with unsuitable business software such as Word.

TECHNOLOGY AND CHANGE

New technologies create new art forms. The novel is a product of the 16th century printing press. The movie is a product of 20th century film technology and the cinema distribution model. We will discuss how the ongoing transition to a connected, global, digital world is affecting literature, and storytelling, bringing with it new risks and new opportunities.

These new, emerging digital forms will be of increasing importance to the next generation of writers. As the older generation haven't yet mastered them, new forms such as the Kindle single, or Twine's non-linear interactive stories, provide a perfect opportunity for young writers to annex entirely new artistic territory for themselves.

Books: **Reality Hunger: A Manifesto**, by David Shields

A Year With Swollen Appendices, by Brian Eno

Show Your Work, by Austin Kleon

OK; those are some of the topics we will cover. But the workshop will be responsive to your needs, and will also cover those things you specifically request.

SEMINAR NOTES:

- Please be present, please have your writing and reading done, and please be on time. If you are more than 20 minutes late to class it will count as an absence.
- Please no side conversations.
- Computers are fine--some people think better when typing than when writing by hand--but please no texting or other digital distractions.

- Let me know as soon as possible if you have any disability or other issue that requires special accommodation in class. (Examples: you need to sit in a special position so you can see or hear well; you need to leave your phone on in case of a family emergency; you need to leave class early to attend a medical appointment, etc.)
- Any writing that is not your own should be in quotation marks, unless everyone will recognize that it's by somebody else (even if they don't remember whom it's by), e.g., "The best laid plans of mice and men."

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Creating Short Fiction, by Damon Knight. This is a brisk, technical book on writing short fiction. Damon Knight is a science fiction writer, who taught at the Clarion workshop for thirty years. This book sums up everything he learned about teaching in those years, and it's a great one-stop shop for technique. It's primarily concerned with creating commercial, plotted, short, genre fiction; but the advice is helpful to anyone writing anything, of any length, who would like to write it better. A couple of chapters are dated; it doesn't matter. Good, practical, actionable advice on research, form, theme, point of view, plot, tone, compression, revision, etc, etc, etc.

Steal Like an Artist, by Austin Kleon. A short (VERY short!), funny, deeply reassuring book about becoming an artist. Smart, useful overview of what inspiration is in the digital age, and how to use your obsessions and your influences to create work of your own. As a bonus, it demolishes the myth of the

lonely creative genius, pulling ideas out of his or her ear.

ASSESSMENT

Course Assessment Summary

1. Class participation: 20%
2. Short piece submissions for critique: 30%
3. In-class presentations: 20%
4. Longer final piece: 30%

1. 1. Class participation. Your participation mark will reflect your attendance, your willingness to come to class prepared and your contributions to class discussion and activities, including in-class writing. Preparation for class includes bringing copies of your work on your allocated workshop dates. If you miss these dates without good reason, you will forfeit a portion of your participation mark. Preparation also includes reading and making notes on your fellow students' work before class time, so that you are ready to participate in workshop discussion with thoughtful comments.

Assessment weighting: 20 %

2. Short piece submissions for critique. Each student will submit 2 to 3 short manuscripts over the course of the

semester. Assessment weighting: 30 %

3. In-class presentations. Each student will be asked to give 2 or 3 presentations, of roughly 5 minutes, on the work of a fellow student. Assessment weighting: 20%

4. Longer piece of creative writing. An end-of-semester piece of 1,500 to 2,500 words, building on your pieces critiqued in the workshop. Assessment weighting: 30%

Course Outline

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Week	Topic	Reading
1 Jan 11		
2 Jan 18		
3 Jan 25		
4 Feb 1		
5 Feb 8	National Holiday	
6 Feb 15		
7 Feb 22		
8 Feb 29	Recess Week	

9 Mar 7		
10 Mar 14		
11 Mar 21		
12 Mar 28		
13 Apr 4		
14 Apr 11	Last Class:	Final Assessment Due

*NB. Topics and readings are subject to change depending on the depth of our interests and the speed of our progress.