

HZ9203: Writing Creative Non-fiction

Division of English

Seminar Number: 1

Time: Tuesday 14:30-17:20

Email address: broc.rossell@ntu.edu.sg

Semester 2, AY 2019/2020

Seminar leader: Broc Rossell

Location: HSS Sem Rm 4

Office hours: T/W a.m, HSS 03-71

Pre-requisite: HZ9101 (Intro to CW)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this class we think about how to write with real things. That's a simple-sounding but super loaded statement. Which real things? And which parts, in what context? With what kind of style, what kind of voice? In what order?

Students will explore the subjective choices writers make when they have committed to writing in an "objective" way. Every writer necessarily wrestles with questions of content and style when they decide which ideas, facts, and descriptions to include (or not include) in a piece of writing, but some take more liberties than others. How we determine this difference – the difference between insight and invention - is increasingly important to the way we read in the twenty-first century.

Students will use exercises to generate new work, read essays about writing and essays about life, and discuss them all in class. We will also critique original work by fellow students in a workshop setting. Each student will lead the workshop discussion of another student's work-in-progress twice over the course of the term. These works-in-progress, between three and seven double-spaced pages in length, will be distributed the week before the piece is discussed. In workshop everyone offers constructive feedback for everyone else's work and returns written thoughts to the writer at the end of the workshop discussion.

In addition to the reading required in the course each student will write a short critical self-commentary about their own writing context, models and/or process. This can be a reflective essay, a critical essay, a manifesto, some form of reading journal or a statement of aesthetics.

We will be together for three hours each week, and establishing a friendly, rigorous atmosphere for our conversations is really important. We will spend the first couple weeks creating that kind of space.

CONTENT

Week/Date	Topic*	Reading*
1 Jan 14 th	Introduction to the Course	(Heraclitus, handouts)
2 21 st	On Keeping a journal On Voice	Sei Shonagon Karr
3 28 th	On Character	Lopate
4 Feb 4 th	On Context and History Workshop	Jin
5 11 th	The Essay Workshop	Montaigne
6 18 th	The Lyric Essay Workshop	Rueffle
7 25 th	On Bodies Workshop	Lorde
8 Mar 2 nd	Recess Week	
9 10 th	Travel I Workshop	Wallace
10 17 th	Travel II Workshop	Lingis
11 24 th	Travel III Workshop	Baldwin
12 31 st	On Language and Form Workshop	Cha
13 Apr 7 th	Technology and the Modern World Workshop	Cortezar
14 14 th	Final Class Final Assessment Due	

REQUIRED READING

The course reader is to be purchased from Print Services, HSS Level B1. Printed, bound readers must be in hand for students to be marked present. Please note no PDFs are provided.

ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENTS. All work is typed in MLA format:

Participation	20%	Cumulative	Cumulative
Workshop Leads (2x)	20%	400 words ea.	Week 2 assign
Self-commentary	10%	1000 words	Due Week 14
2-4 works of non-fiction	50%	Length TBD upon enrollment	Cumulative

Nature of the workshop

The workshop is a classroom format where students and professor meet (envision a round table) to discuss our work in order to deepen and strengthen our relationships to the art. It depends on students who are respectful, thoughtful, and engaged. We assume that everyone in the class is an artist committed to improving their craft and we will treat each other and our work with the respect and effort it requires and deserves.

Our critical thinking is focused on improving each other's work. To "workshop" a text in this class means we will *not* read it like university students, closely analyzing meaningful sections and sentences. It means reviewing a text carefully and attentively, as a writer preparing the gift of their attention for a fellow writer. It means avoiding qualitative statements (like "it's good," "it's bad" – "I like it," "I don't like it") at all times and, instead, to ask questions about each text:

- What techniques and strategies does the writer use to create an effect?
- Are they effective choices for this particular text? Why/why not?
- How is this text most itself - how is it alive? What are its strengths, its dynamics, its assumptions?
- Where, if any, are there moments it fails to be itself?

Descriptions of Assignments:

Participation

Participation means active engagement with the material, both published and unpublished. It is essential for your success and ours. It means being present and prepared. The minimum required is: coming to class on time with printouts of the reading – the course reader and your peers' workshop materials – and your responses annotated by hand. Typed responses are also acceptable. Producing feedback after class is over is not acceptable.

We have a variety of activities by which to be engaged. I know everyone learns differently and expresses their interests differently. Those who have difficulty being vocal in class will compensate by the depth of their comments on their peers poems.

Critically, participation means sharing your own workshop materials with your classmates by the deadline so that they have time to really think about your work and respond to it meaningfully. The deadline is the week prior your workshop: by midnight on the Thursday before class. One failure to upload on time will result in the loss of half of your participation mark. Two means a zero.

Workshop Leads (Two)

Your workshop lead is a typed, double-spaced, 400 word reading response to the work of a classmate up for workshop. Your comments will begin our class discussion. The workshop lead is **not a close reading of the text**. It consists of three parts, roughly one paragraph each: (1) your characterization or interpretation of the text that describes the kind of text it is and what it does for literature, (2) quotes that support your characterization, and (3) a clear, logical explanation of how the text you cite supports your characterization. It is a concise, incisive work of literary analysis. Two copies – one for the writer, and one for the teacher – are due in class. You submit two leads over the course of the term.

Self-commentary

Your 1000-word essay can take many forms (reflective essay, a critical essay, a manifesto, some form of reading journal or a statement of aesthetics, for instance, as noted above). Generally speaking the easiest and most effective way to write a self-commentary is to compare your most recent work to older work, using specific references to work in your workshop submissions to chart your development and evolution, and making a convincing description of your current methods and goals. Your self-commentary is a short assignment but it is in some ways the capstone to the course: an articulation as cogent, clear, and forceful as you can make of what you value in writing: the conversations that happen around non-fiction and what it makes you think about.

Assessment notes / general guidelines / rules of the game:

An unexcused absence will not affect your participation mark. A second unexcused absence will lower it a full letter grade and a third will result in a zero for the assignment.

Missed class periods do not excuse the requirement of providing feedback for workshop. Notes for all workshop materials are to be provided by PDF as an email attachment to your prof within forty-eight hours of the end of class you missed.

Arriving more than 20 minutes will be counted as an absence.

Failure to upload your own workshop materials to BlackBoard by Wednesday midnight will result in your participation mark being lowered by one letter grade.

All graded work is to be typed according to MLA format. Please review MLA format at OWL MLA now if you're not intimately familiar or coming from another major or discipline.

Late work will be penalized according to departmental and university policies unless arrangements are made with the instructor at least 48 hours before the due date.

Emails to me will be answered within 48 hours. Emails about assignments that are due within 48 hours will not receive a response.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. It's very easy to spot, especially in a creative writing class. Don't do it. If you're tempted to do it, this class is not right for you and you should definitely take a different one. If you do decide to steal someone else's ideas, words, or work (which includes unacknowledged collaboration), the university process will be activated and a hex shall be upon your head.

APPENDIX 1: Workshop Learning Agreement and Feedback Guide

Workshops are an integral part of any creative writing class. At least twice during the semester you will present written work to your colleagues for discussion and critique. Use this workshop time to help you prepare for assessment. A schedule of allocated dates for these workshops will be drawn up within the first few classes. If you forget to bring in work to class, you will be responsible for distributing this work by email. Ensure you have your class's email addresses at the start of the semester.

Learning Agreement

The purpose of creative writing workshops is not only to provide your work with an audience, though this is important. It is always useful to test the success of your writing on a community of readers in order to gain an idea of what works (what communicates or "carries") and what doesn't. You can then think about *why* some things succeed and others don't. This process of workshop-generated reflection is key to good revision and to informing the critical self-commentaries that form part of all assessed assignments.

But there is more to it than that. In submitting your work for discussion you are providing us – the group – with an opportunity to think about some of the key issues in creating stories, poems, novels, and scripts. These issues may be technical, ethical, perceptual, philosophical... And it isn't just you – the author – who benefits. In analysing your work, we are all pressed in to thinking about the issues your work raises.

The workshop provides us all with an opportunity to learn, regardless of whose writing is under discussion. For this reason it is crucial that you participate in every session. Your participation will benefit you as much as the person whose work is being discussed.

Although undertaking studies in creative writing demonstrates willingness to engage in the workshop process, not everyone enjoys having their work discussed, let alone

dissected; not everyone feels comfortable in the spotlight. It *can* be a trying experience. It can also seem quite at odds with the day-to-day reality of writing, which usually involves silence and solitude. Even those of us who do feel at ease may struggle to cope with certain kinds – and levels – of criticism. It is therefore important that your criticism be constructive.

In order for your criticism to be constructive, you should endeavor to identify and praise what does succeed before you go on to talk about what might not. And in discussing what works less well, you should try always to think about solutions, remedies, the ways in which a difficulty might be resolved. What is the problem exactly? How do you think it might be fixed? Bear in mind that the improvement of technique and structure – insofar as these can be separated from theme and from one's personal philosophy – is our primary focus.

Needless to say, whatever your feelings about the writer, it is the work you should be focused upon. The workshop is not a place to air personal grievances and the work itself should never become a pretext for other kinds of criticism. This guideline for conduct should, naturally, apply to correspondence outside the classroom as well. Moreover, the confidentiality of someone else's written work must be respected; that which is meant for discussion in the workshop should not be shared elsewhere.

Feedback guide

The writing workshop is an opportunity for you to share your creative writing in progress with the group, but also an opportunity for you to aid in the development of others' work. There are a few guidelines for giving and receiving feedback which will make the sessions as productive and useful as possible, so please bear them in mind. Refer to this list if you get stuck when giving feedback.

Giving Feedback:

- Give an overall response at the end that is positive and supportive and balances criticism with praise. Think 'critical sandwich' – a positive comment, followed by a more critical, questioning comment, followed by another positive comment.
- Everyone is expected to contribute in class, bear in mind the above when making comments in class.
- Avoid psycho-analysing the writer, assuming their work is biographical, or giving comments that are personal in any way.
- It is useful to write comments or mark/underline your copy, then give this copy to the person presenting

Things to consider when giving feedback:

- **Initial impressions:**

- What's your 'gut feeling' about the piece, what first impressions do you have?
- When you have read it, what remains, are there certain images or ideas that linger in your consciousness?
- What are the most significant aspects of the piece?
- What were the strongest images or ideas?
- Did it feel fresh, original or distinctive?
- Was it hard to put down?
- What are its strong points? Its weaker areas?
- Does it feel complete?
- Are you left with a sense of satisfying mystery, or confusion?
- What do you think the piece is about?
- Did the piece provoke thought?
- Does the piece feel complete, rounded, or like a fragment? After the initial impressions, you need to focus on more technical areas.
- **Please make sure you read all the work that is due to be workshopped that week and make notes on the work to help you participate in discussion**

- **Receiving Feedback**

- Remember you are in the privileged position of having a cross-section of your potential readership spending lots of time looking at your work in detail.
- During feedback in class it's useful to stay silent for the initial feedback. This avoids leading the reader towards a particular interpretation of your work, and means you will get an outside view of your writing.
- Be open to feedback and see it as a positive way to improve and develop your work.
- Don't take more critical comments personally, instead think constructively about how you can use that information to improve your work.

APPENDIX 2: HSS English Division: Definition and Penalties for Plagiarism Definition

Plagiarism (from the Latin word for 'kidnapper') is the deliberate or accidental presentation of someone else's ideas or words as your own. This includes:

- The unacknowledged use of words, images, diagrams, graphs, or ideas derived from any source such as books, journals, magazines, the visual media, and the internet.

Note: cutting and pasting words from the internet into your own essay, even if you reword them, is still plagiarism.

- Copying the work of a fellow student, having another student write one's assignments, or allowing another student to borrow one's work.

- Buying and/or copying essays, assignments, projects etc., from the internet or any other source and handing them in as your own.

Please bear in mind that your lecturers know the subject and have read widely. They therefore can spot unreferenced quotations, and can tell the difference between university level writing and that of published scholars.

Penalties

- If a first year student is caught plagiarizing, and it is the student's first offense, the student will have the opportunity to rewrite the paper with one grade reduction.
- After the first year of studies, it is expected that a student thoroughly understands the implications of plagiarism. Thus, after the first year, or if a student is caught plagiarizing a second time, the student will receive an F for the assignment.

Why plagiarism is academically dishonest

- The unacknowledged borrowing of another's work is theft.
- Independent and creative thinking, as well as intellectual responsibility, are fundamental to a humanities education, and cannot be developed if one simply borrows the work of another.

How to avoid academic dishonesty

Plagiarism

- If you use an author's exact words, you must put them in quotation marks. If you paraphrase another's ideas, you again must indicate the source to your reader.
- Facts and statistics that are not "common knowledge" must be referenced.
- Be sure to use the method of citation recommended by your professor.
- If in doubt, it is always best to reference your material.
- Remember that your lecturer wants to see your ideas and interpretations. Avoid excessively quoting secondary sources and show your reader your thinking.

Collusion and complicity

- Ask your lecturer if you are allowed to work on assignments in groups.
- Get the approval of your professor if you want to hand in material that you have already submitted for another course.

- Do not allow students to copy your work (including work from previous semesters).
- Follow the examination rules set out by the university.

If you still have questions, please ask your professors, or consult the website:

<http://www.plagiarism.org>.

Sources for this document:

The Little, Brown Essential Handbook. Ed. Jane E. Aaron. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR CREATIVE WRITERS:

The conventions for acknowledgement in creative writing are somewhat different to those for acknowledgement in academic writing, but NO form of intellectual dishonesty is acceptable. It is acceptable to appropriate material from source texts, AS LONG AS your use of these texts is acknowledged, is within reason, and demonstrates substantial independent and creative thinking of your own.

There are a number of ways to acknowledge the use of source texts in creative writing, and these vary according to your stylistic imperatives, the level of dependence on the source text and the level of familiarity your audience is likely to have with the source text. For the purposes of this course, you need not always use quotation marks for quoted material if this interferes with your stylistic imperatives (they may be intrusive in a poem, for example). You MUST, however, acknowledge any source texts you use through reference integrated into the work itself, through footnotes or through endnotes. Do not “borrow” work from friends, books, the internet, song lyrics or any other source without acknowledgement, as this counts as plagiarism.

APPENDIX 3: Critical Self-Commentary Guide

All creative work relies to some extent on instinct. As a writer you need a feel for the rhythms and textures of the language, for the shape of a phrase, the weight of a word. You need to be responsive to the promptings of your imagination. You need to be sensitive to the subtleties of human behaviour.

Instinct, however, will only take you so far. You also require a sound understanding of the conventions of writing. You need a solid grasp of the techniques for creating poems and stories. You need to be capable of careful redrafting and editing, and you need to be attuned to other writing and how you might learn from it: every good writer is first of all a good reader.

In other words, the process of writing is both instinctual and highly self-aware. For this reason all our creative writing courses carry some element of critical self- commentary.

The purpose of the self-commentary is to provide you with an opportunity to consider your own creative processes. Here you might account for the ways in which your reading has influenced or guided your writing, in terms of both theme and technique. You might comment on the technical difficulties you have encountered and the strategies you have employed to overcome them. You might attempt to place your creative work in the context of your wider critical studies.

Among the questions you might seek to answer in your self-commentary are these: How are you a writer of a particular cultural/historical context? What problems did you run into, and what steps did you take to overcome them? What techniques have you learned from other writers? What were your thoughts at each stage of composition, and what gains did you make in the process of redrafting? What insights did you gain *as a writer* from your reading? And what do you think you have learnt in producing this work, both as a writer and as a reader of other writings?

To help guide your reflections it might be useful to keep a writer's journal over the course of the semester. Here you can chart the journey you make from conception to completion. You can divide the process of composition into stages and make notes on each stage. You can analyse the issues that arise, and set down your anxieties, and explore some potential solutions. You can register your responses to class exercises and workshops. You can keep a detailed log of your reading.

Such a journal would not be submitted for assessment. However, you could draw upon it when writing your self-commentary. You could quote from it directly.

When you submit work for assessment I do not expect you to demonstrate your progress by including earlier drafts of your poems or stories. You may however quote from these earlier drafts in your self-commentary, giving a considered account of how your writing has developed.

What I am looking for is self-awareness, an ability to comment in a writerly way on your writerly processes and perhaps make a literary-theoretical critique of the end product.

You should be reflecting intelligently on your experience of writing and showing a genuine understanding of the issues raised in class. I will be looking for you to demonstrate an ability to examine your own work in the light of these issues and to refer to any set reading as appropriate. You may also draw on your knowledge of critical theories and theories of creative writing, using the appropriate critical vocabulary. I will also be looking for evidence of an ability to place your own work within larger critical and cultural contexts. You should be able to demonstrate a critical awareness of some key issues of literary production - such as, for instance, questions of authorial control

and intentionality – and be able to employ theoretical perspectives when analyzing your own processes. You should, in other words, have a sophisticated take on what it is you're up to.