



University of Pittsburgh

Introduction to Creative Writing | ENGWRT 0400 Summer 2024

Instructor: Avery Robinson
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Schedule: Monday, 6:00 – 8:30 PM
2309 Cathedral of Learning (23rd Floor)

Office Hours: Monday, 5 – 6:00 PM

COURSE OVERVIEW

Course Description

“Call my name and the whole woods
rise up inside me. I is a plural state
of being. Consider the multitude
before my footfall; how I’m able to crane my neck back
see only myself”

— Taylor Johnson, “Consider the Deer”

Writing begins with an inquiry—and like all good questions, not all the mysteries and contours prompting us to write are meant to be understood. Of course, this is beautiful in theory, but how do any of us go about crafting a poem, writing fiction, or essays if our only instruction is “be curious?” In this course, we’ll center on a forever poem we revise with each breath: each moment of brushing against a stranger and sharing in their space; every time we reach toward language and instead, find something raw and evocative, something hard to articulate that is often slipping into the margins. Here, we’ll let these mysteries populate our writing and move toward the pulse of these unanswerable questions, the primary one being what makes the “i” at the center of creative writing so vivid and raw in all its aliveness (or, its refusal to come alive).

If this all sounds very woo woo, that’s OK too! As with all art, we have to give ourselves over to not being understood easily—it is in the worlds we weave of language, imagery, sound, and every contour and texture of the art we call poetry or creative writing that we might move beyond only a space of “logic” and legibility and instead, start translating our interiors in the unique way only our voice can do.

Note that my primary practice is primarily as a poet—as a result, much of our work will be foregrounded in poetics as a practice first, before we allow this central framing to explode our understanding of genre and conventions / constraints. In this specific course, we’ll blur between genre and style, and you’ll have the freedom to compose in as wide a range as you wish, be it fiction in verse or as a screenplay, flash fiction, nonfiction through witness poetics,

graphic memoir, or even in an audiovisual format; we'll make space for every imagination sparked by the world of writing as art.

Course Materials / Readings

These will all be offered by the instructor and will be comprised of excerpts from the greater collections listed. Don't buy any of these books (unless a piece we read really moves you and leaves you wanting more!)

Tentative List (will adapt according to the semester—these are just a scattershot of potential options / sections from which we'll have assignments, prompts, and occasional readings):

(Poetry)

Danez Smith, *Bluff*
Patricia Smith, *Blood Dazzler*
Safia Elhillo, *Girls That Never Die*
Natalie Diaz, *Postcolonial Love Poems*
Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas*
Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem*
Donika Kelly, *Bestiary*

+ Various poems from Diana Khoi Nguyen, Douglas Kearney, Tyehimba Jess, Taylor Johnson, torrin a greathouse, George Abraham, and others

(Nonfiction)

Kiese Laymon, *Heavy*
Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do*
Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*
Vauhini Vara, *Ghost* (from The Believer Magazine)
Don Mee Choi, *DMZ Colony*
Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, *The Undocumented Americans*
Saeed Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*

(Fiction)

Daniel Moniz, *Milk Blood Heat*
Ling Ma, *Bliss Montage*
Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, *Friday Black*
Kaveh Akbar, *Martyr*
Tatsuki Fujimoto, *Look Back*
Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties*
Tommy Orange, *Various*
Sayaka Murata, *Love Letter to Convenience Stores* (from LitHub)

Course Goals

- Engage meaningfully with the basic elements of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction through the work of established, accomplished writers and work toward excavating the poetic "I" at the heart of your voice
- Experiment with different modes of writing to create original work
- Revise your work by incorporating feedback generated by class discussion
- Learn to constantly observe, note take, and find inspiration in unlikely contexts (the best

- artists live many lives...)
- Build sustainable habits for reading and writing in daily life

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Workshop Submissions

Expect this workshop to mostly be generative—that is, you will be expected to produce at least 1-2 works in each genre, with more regard to nurturing your writing out into the world than making it necessarily “good.” After all, trying to write a “good” poem/story/essay has doomed even the best of writers; try to write toward your loves, the hardest desire to put on the page, and treat the subjects of your art with tenderness and grit. This course will be largely discussion based, and we will have 1 round of workshop per each genre.

Because of the composition of this course, on the second class, there’ll be 3 signups for each workshop: 7 poetry slots, 6 nonfiction, and 6 fiction. Even if you don’t get the workshop of your preferred genre, keep in mind not only that experimentation in another genre may be an incredibly beneficial practice for your writing as a whole, but also that there are opportunities to blur the boundaries of each genre and create something between the space of your comfort zone and your genre (i.e. prose poem, personal essay as storytelling, fiction in received or newly imagined forms).

Submissions (due the previous Wednesday before class):

- **For Poetry:** submit 1-2 poems, 12-point font (preferably Times New Roman, Garamond, or a standardized serif font), single spaced, with your name on the first page and a page number (if necessary) at the bottom.
- **For Nonfiction:** 1 essay or, if genre-hybrid, the equivalent (2+ pages), 12-point font, double spaced, following general MLA format guidelines (indentation before paragraph, name, date, etc.).
- **For Fiction:** 1 Story or flash fiction piece, or the equivalent, 12-point font, double spaced, following MLA format guidelines or whatever conventions of the chosen form (i.e. screenplay, play, comic, etc.).

You’re encouraged to submit work from the assignments, but feel free to submit different work if you would prefer or if you have writing you’d like feedback on from the past weeks / outside of this class (though try to keep it in a recent timespan). If you miss your workshop day, note that it won’t be replicable in either experience or grade – so do try to submit on time and be present in class during your workshop. Otherwise, you will receive a hit to your grade and won’t have the opportunity for makeup work.

Canvas Assignments:

There will be a few assignments to respond to, experiment, or play inside the container of certain forms. These will be due by the following class; should there be a delay in the writing for any reason, let me know as soon as possible so we can work something out.

Feedback

No writing is done in isolation. Offering thoughts, ideas, observations, or even simply what synapses and feelings were sparked by the reading, however inarticulate it may feel, are all acts of

community. For each workshop submission by your peers, you will be graded on this generosity, i.e.: your participation, which will include:

- a substantive written feedback note submitted via Canvas (300—400 words for each submission)
- thoughtful margin notes and/or line edits
- active in-class participation

Active participation is essential to a functional writing workshop; that being said, please contact me if you feel uncomfortable speaking up in class for any reason, and we will work together to find a solution. You will be graded on the quality (thoughtfulness/care) of your contributions to discussion, not on how much you talk.

Mining the Passions

Writing often starts from a point of obsession. Each student will give an informal 5-minute presentation during the semester on anything they are passionate about. It can take any format (verbal, powerpoint, video, etc.). Consider that your passions are deserving of poetry and being interrogated, same as any other subject in your art. Even if it seemingly has no bearing on your poetry, keep in mind that the most unexpected of sources can yield the most exciting, surprising connections—and what is a poem if not a bridge between two disparate worlds?

Final Portfolio

In the Final Portfolio, you will submit revisions of either: 1 short story / fiction piece, or 1 essay / nonfiction piece, or 1-2 poems (this will come with a longer craft reflection requirement if you choose 1 poem). With each submission, you will include a writer's statement explaining the changes or moves you made, and what craft elements from the term you incorporated. This will be due the week after our last class.

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Attendance and Participation

The work of the course depends on our collaboration as readers and writers over the term, and your work is central to class discussion. It is therefore important that you be prepared to participate in each class session, and that you turn in your assignments and come to class on time. Keep in mind we only meet once a week and will already miss 3 classes, barring any unexpected events on my end. You'll have two free absences overall regardless of whether they're excused or otherwise. Please let me know as soon as you think you'll be missing a class. You won't have to explain the reason for the absence—though if you miss more than two classes during the semester, I will likely check in with you to ensure that you're okay and that you're still engaged with the course. Assignments due on a day you miss class must be posted as scheduled unless I approve an extension. Frequent absences without a confirmed exception will impact your overall attendance grade: -1/2 letter grade (ie A to A-) for each class past the one free absence.

Come prepared to participate in each class as an active writer and reader. I will take attendance each class period, noting your presence so long as you are 1) contributing to discussions and small group work or 2) taking notes and seeming otherwise engaged in class activities. I will reach out to you via email if I sense various bouts of disengagement.

Statement on Class Decorum

I encourage an open classroom and the sharing of ideas in a safe, respectful environment. To facilitate this open exchange of ideas, as members of this class, we agree that we will not engage in derogatory language, writing, or expressions against race, ethnicity, religion, gender identification, sexuality, economic position, and political views. Any disagreement in class discussion with me or with your fellow students should be respectfully expressed so that there can be an equal exchange of thoughts.

While we will deconstruct ideas and texts, we will not dismiss identities, cultural norms unfamiliar to us, and any other aspects of an author's own personal life insofar as it is unrelated to the work. Any discourse that speculates on the relationship between an author's identity and their work; that rejects the existence of whatever minority the author may be a part of; or engages with another student in a series of ad hominem or language considered inappropriate will be immediately confronted and not tolerated.

In terms of the slurs and outdated language that will appear in our readings: my general rule is if you experience some degree of close proximity to the subject of the slur (i.e. you are a member of the community with which this term is often used), you are free to proceed as you feel comfortable—with the caveat that should it make another student uncomfortable, it will be discussed and subject to the class' scrutiny. I am subject to this rule as well: should my use of language that I consider natural in my own community make members of the class uncomfortable, dialogue around this is always welcome. Any act of reading out loud constitutes an utterance, and in this class, all utterances are an opportunity to engage with rhetoric and our relationship to language in a safe, open-minded environment.

Content Warning and Class Climate

Our course readings and discussions will at times focus on mature, difficult, and potentially challenging topics. Readings and discussions might trigger strong feelings—anger, discomfort, frustration, anxiety, confusion, excitement, humor and even boredom. Some of us may have emotional responses to readings; some of us may have emotional responses to our peers' understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us in the classroom. I expect everyone to discuss the readings in a mature and respectful way.

GRADING

For each assignment that you submit to Canvas, you will receive percentage points toward a final letter grade for the course. Here is the breakdown of percent values per assignment toward that grade:

Submissions: 20%

Participation / Workshop + Feedback: 30%

Canvas Assignments: 20%

Final Portfolio: 25%

Mining the Passions: 5%

Here is how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade:

A = superior attainment

B = meritorious attainment

C = adequate attainment

D = minimal attainment

F = failure

Note that “meritorious” means commendable or praiseworthy: a “B,” in other words, is earned for work that is above average.

COURSE SCHEDULE

The following schedule is tentative and subject to change. Detailed instructions for writing assignments will be provided in class and on Canvas. You will have opportunities to ask questions in class, and you are welcome to email me for further clarification or attend office hours.

WEEK 1

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
M 8/26	<i>Intro to Creative Writing + Syllabus & Welcome!</i> Read: ○ Series of “I” and selfhood poems Write: ○ Respond to one of the prompts – start your writing early!

WEEK 2 (NO CLASS – Labor Day)

WEEK 3

	Readings and Assignments (due before class)
M 9/9	<i>Fundamentals of Poetry / All Forms of Witness: the I as in we as in you as in them as in...</i> Read: ○ Form Poems Write: ○ Respond to one of the prompts ○ Fill out sheet for Workshop Day / Genre

WEEK 4

Readings and Assignment (due before class)	
M 9/16	<i>Received Forms</i> Write: ○ Poetry Workshop: post workshop submissions by Sat (9/21), end of day ○ Write feedback by next Wed (9/25), end of day

WEEK 5

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 9/23	<i>Workshop #1</i> Read: ○ Intro to Nonfiction Packet (short essays) Write: ○ Finish workshop comments by Wed. end of day

WEEK 6

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
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M 9/30	<i>Nonfiction Intro: Interrogating your obsessions</i> Read: ○ <i>Fun Home</i> ○ <i>The Man Who Could Move Clouds</i>
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WEEK 7

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 10/7	<i>Writing the Hard Thing / Truth & fiction in memoir</i> Read: ○ <i>DMZ Colony</i> ○ <i>Dictee</i> ○ <i>Ghost</i>

WEEK 8 (NO CLASS – MIDTERMS / FALL BREAK)

WEEK 9

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 10/21	<i>Saying the Untranslatable: Witness Poetics & the Poetry of Nonfiction</i> Write: ○ NF Workshop: post workshop submissions by Wednesday, end of day ○ Write feedback by next Wednesday

WEEK 10

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 10/28	<i>Workshop #2</i> Read: ○ Intro to Fiction Packet Write: ○ Upload feedback by Wednesday

WEEK 11

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 11/4	<i>Intro to Fiction: Beginnings, Endings, and other Engines of a story</i> Read: ○ Form and flash fiction pieces Write: ○ Opening or closing scene to story

WEEK 12

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 11/11	<i>Chaos Containers—or, the Shape and Form of a Plot</i> Read: ○ Revision craft and fiction Write: ○ Descriptive scene of a story

WEEK 13

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 11/18	<i>Revision as a creative practice</i> Write: ○ Fiction Workshop: post workshop submissions by Wed, end of day ○ Write feedback by next Wed, end of day

WEEK 14 (NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK)

WEEK 15

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 12/2	<i>Workshop #6</i> Bring for Last Class: ○ Come prepared with a piece of writing you're proud of or that you've become drawn to over this semester

WEEK 16

Readings and Assignments (due before class)	
M 12/9	<i>Outro Day</i>

Final Portfolio due Dec. 15, EOD – unfortunately, no exceptions!

COURSE POLICIES

Non-Discrimination Policy

The University of Pittsburgh, as an educational institution and as an employer, values equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, the University prohibits and will not engage in discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, genetic information, disability, or status as a veteran. The University also prohibits and will not engage in retaliation against any person who makes a claim of discrimination or harassment or who provides information in such an investigation. Further, the University will continue to take affirmative steps to support and advance these values consistent with the University's mission. For more information: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/notice-nondiscrimination-and-anti-harassment-policy-statement>.

Gender-Inclusive Language Guidelines

Aspiring to create a learning environment in which people of all identities are encouraged to contribute their perspectives to academic discourse, the University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program provides guidelines and resources regarding gender-inclusive/non-sexist language (gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432). Following these guidelines fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment, strengthens academic writing, enriches discussion, and reflects best professional practices.

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (e.g. first-year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the

difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

These guidelines fulfill the best intentions of the University of Pittsburgh's Non-Discrimination Policy: <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/notice-nondiscrimination-and-anti-harassment-policy-statement>

Sexual Misconduct, Required Reporting and Title IX

The University is committed to combatting sexual misconduct. As a result, University faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct, including harassment and sexual violence, to the University's Title IX office so that the victim may be provided appropriate resources/support options. What this means is that as your instructor, I am required to report any incidents of sexual misconduct that are directly reported to me, or of which I am somehow made aware.

There are two important exceptions: a list of the designated University employees who, as counselors and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found at <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/resources-and-support-services/confidential-resources>. An important exemption to the reporting requirement exists for academic work. Disclosures about sexual misconduct that are shared as part of an academic project, classroom discussion, or course assignment are not required to be disclosed to the University's Title IX office. If you are the victim of sexual misconduct, Pitt encourages you to reach out to these resources: *Title IX Office: 412-648-7860 *SHARE @ the University Counseling Center: 412-648-7930 (8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. MF) and 412-648-7856 (after business hours). If you have a safety concern, please contact the University of Pittsburgh Police, 412-624-2121. Other reporting information is available at <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/make-report>.

Academic Integrity Policy

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted below, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. (For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html.) See Additional Language about Academic Integrity below.

Additional Language about Academic Integrity

It is important that the work you submit is your own work, that you acknowledge your sources, whether quoted or paraphrased, and thank anyone who has helped you with your drafts. You will discuss in class responsible use of sources, and you should consult your handbook for guidelines on proper paraphrase, quotation, and citation. You can get additional help at the Writing Center.

The English Department defines plagiarism by a student as:

when a student presents as his/her own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or works of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgement of sources.
when a student submits work of another person in a manner which represents the work to be his/her own.

Instances of plagiarism may result in a loss of credit for the assignment and a report to the dean. Severe cases may result in failure of Seminar in Composition.

For the Dietrich School's full policy on Academic Integrity and the adjudication process for infringements, including plagiarism, go to <https://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policies-and-procedures/academic-integrity-code>

Artificial Intelligence

The use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, GrammarlyGO, GPT-3, GPT-4, BERT, or others) is prohibited in this class. Assignments for the course have been designed to help you develop as a writer without the use of these technologies. You will generate ideas, read, revise, and write on your own and/or in consultation with peers, me, or Writing Center tutors and you will not use AI at any stage of your writing process. You are the author of your work for the course and authorship means you take responsibility for your words and claims. Any use of AI technologies in your work will be considered an academic integrity violation and addressed accordingly: <https://www.as.pitt.edu/faculty/policies-and-procedures/academic-integrity-code>. Please see me if you have any questions about this policy.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on *Edit Forwarding Addresses*, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. *(For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to <https://www.as.pitt.edu/e-mail-communication-statement-syllabi>.)*

Late Work Policy

It helps our class run more smoothly when work is submitted on time. That being said, we all have busy schedules and disruptions do occur from time to time. As soon as you think you will need an extension on an assignment, please email me and let me know a reasonable alternative date for your submission. I'll do my best to honor that date. If you anticipate missing a substantial amount of work due to illness, bereavement, unavoidable travel, or any other reason, please email me as soon as possible so we can accommodate that. I will be grading assignments based on completion, so late work submitted without an approved extension may receive a lower grade. You also forgo the opportunity to receive timely feedback from your peers.

Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use. (For teachers: this language comes from the Center for Teaching and Learning: <https://teaching.pitt.edu/resources/syllabus-checklist/#Statement-on-Classroom-Recording>)

Zoom Policy

Since this course is web-based, I highly encourage you to keep your camera on, though if you need to be off for whatever reason (bathroom breaks, etc.), please feel free to do so. We can discuss this in as a group in the first class as well!

STUDENT SUPPORT

Disability Resource Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/412-383-7355 (TTY), or <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/disability-access/disability-resources-and-services> as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Pitt Community Resources and Assistance

Pitt Libraries have compiled a wonderful list of resources that may be helpful to you if you are experiencing food insecurity, financial issues, mental health concerns, need help buying books, etc. <https://pitt.libguides.com/assistanceresources>.

Counseling Center

Pitt offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties, The Counseling Center, located on the 2nd floor of Nordenberg Hall, offers Psychological Services and Sexual Assault Services (412-648-7930) offers drop in hours. Go to <https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cc/> or call 412-648-7856 after 5 pm, Monday-Friday or on weekends). For after hours support: UCC Mental Health Crisis Response: 412-648-7930 x1. Or Re:solve Crisis Network: 1-888-796-8226. Sexual Assault Response: 412-648-7856.

Writing Center

The Writing Center, located at 317B O'Hara Student Center, is an excellent resource for working with an experienced consultant on your writing. Although you should not expect consultants to "correct" your submission for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, revise, and edit your work. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis or throughout the term. In some cases, your teacher may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. Their services are free. You can browse the services they offer or make an appointment by visiting www.writingcenter.pitt.edu.

Canvas Course Website

The syllabus, assignments and other course material as well as grades may be found on the canvas course website. Go to <https://canvas.pitt.edu/> or <http://my.pitt.edu/> and then select Canvas to locate our course website. **Canvas Support:** Tutorials are located in the Canvas "Help" menu. Call the 24/7 Canvas Support Hotline: (412) 314 1719. Or call the Pitt help desk at (412) 624-HELP.