

HUMA S-101(34141)
PROSEMINAR: ELEMENTS OF THE WRITER'S CRAFT
Harvard Summer School
Summer 2018

Instructor: Dr. Elisabeth Sharp McKetta | mcketta@g.harvard.edu
Classroom & time: Online classroom (Zoom) | MW 6:30-9:30pm EST

Overview: This is an intensive course in the craft and analysis of prose from a writer's perspective. Francine Prose, in her book *Reading Like a Writer*, observes that historically "writers learned by reading the work of their predecessors." In other words, we cannot write well if we do not know how to read well. The focus of this course, Elements of the Writer's Craft, is to teach prose writers how to read well. Students in this proseminar will explore the potential and possibilities of different approaches to writing, and, by the end of the course, will apply their close reading to their own fiction and nonfiction. The goal of the course is to build a deep understanding of key elements of craft through close reading and textual analysis of the work of master prose writers. We will analyze the work of these writers, discussing how they employ structure, character, setting, dialogue, point of view, and other aspects of craft. Close reading, weekly writing, and class discussion will form an integral part of this course. Students in this course are expected to have a firm command of grammar, syntax, and prose composition, and to have read widely. In Unit I, we will study a number of contemporary authors, possibly including work by Karen Russell, Ben Fountain, Lydia Davis, Kirstin Valdez Quade, Neil Gaiman, and Michael Paterniti. We may invite an author to visit our class as a guest lecturer to discuss craft. This unit will require that students write critically and creatively, both in-class and out of class, about the works under discussion and about possible applications to their own creative writing. The goal of this unit is for students to understand the conscious choices about craft that published writers make in order to fully realize a piece of writing. In Unit II, students will select a single author or work to focus their analysis on, culminating in a final project that combines an essay analyzing the author's craft choices with a sample of your own creative work that puts these master techniques to use, and includes a brief statement describing how your reading in this course influenced your own writing choices.

Prerequisite: Students entering this course must show a general familiarity with the college-level reading and writing skills taught in EXPO E-25, the Extension School equivalent of Harvard College's freshman writing course. Students may have acquired these skills by taking EXPO E-25 or by having completed comparable coursework elsewhere. A diagnostic exercise will be administered on the first day to determine preparedness. While we will briefly review basic expository writing concepts as part of our more advanced study of writing in the humanities, it will not be possible to devote extensive time, in class or in office hours, to teaching prerequisite skills.

Reading: Required: Coursepack on Canvas site
 Prose, *Reading Like a Writer*
Recommended: Franklin, *Writing for Story*
 McKee, *STORY*
 Booker, *Seven Basic Plots*

Grading: 15% - Exercises (5% each)
 15% - Craft Analysis I + Project Proposal
 10% - Presentation
 60% - Craft Analysis II + Final Project

Writing: You'll write two short double-spaced craft analysis essays, each focused on how a single work of literature is crafted and what choices the author made. The Unit I craft analysis will examine an assigned text; the Unit II craft analysis will be on a literary text (short story/essay or chapter of a longer work) of your choice. Alongside the Unit I essay, you will hand in a brief 1 p. proposal for a piece of creative writing that you are working on throughout the length of the course—you will explain your intended craft choices and link them to the choices made by the author whose craft elements you have analyzed. In Unit II you will hand in a final version of your creative work with a 1-2 pp. statement describing how your reading in this course influenced your own writing choices. Each essay will build through building block exercises that ask you to brainstorm ideas and build the scaffolding for the major parts of your two craft analyses. We will use short in-class writes as a way to generate ideas. For each craft analysis essay, you will write a draft, which will receive comments but no grade, and a final graded version. You'll receive feedback on your exercises and drafts from your peers and me, and, after substantial re-working, you'll submit revisions. You will write much more than you will turn in, and you will practice distilling your writing to its most succinct version, respecting the page count and word limits. To receive a passing grade in this class, you are expected to have read and learned from all comments on all assignments. If you do not understand a comment, ask for clarification; do not ignore it.

Close-reading: The basis of all of the work we will do in this class is close-reading, which is to say the slow, careful examination of a text in terms of the writer's choices of what to include or omit. Close-reading asks such questions as: why make this scene unfold in this particular way? How does the word choice and imagery contribute to the effect of the whole? How does time work? How are character and plot arcs constructed? How does each passage—ideally—uphold a certain thematic “claim” or question that the text seems to offer? Which words are especially noteworthy, evocative, suggestive, persuasive, strident, surprising, repetitive? Which passages puzzle you? What do these passages say about the text as a whole? In close reading, the goal is always to *pay close attention to the language* with an eye for how the author's micro-level choices contribute to the greater overall (macro-level) effect of the text, the feeling or conclusion it leaves us with as readers. In standard academic

writing, we identify a major question or claim put forth by a text, in response to which we craft a thesis to show how the text can be understood or unraveled according to this particular claim. Each paragraph serves as a building block, using textual evidence to move this claim forward. The type of writing we will do in HUMA 101 builds upon academic analysis in that it engages questions and employs close-reading, but we will discuss these points in terms of the author's craft and choices, and we will forge links between these elements of craft and your own creative writing.

Peer Review: You will have a peer review group of 2-3 students throughout the semester, and twice during the semester (for the proposal and for the conference paper) you are responsible for closely reading your peers' essay drafts and giving each other written notes and comments for improvement. We will also use these groups for the purpose of discussing each other's chosen Unit II texts and workshopping each other's writing projects. The point of peer reviews is to work together to locate what each piece of writing is trying to say and then give informed, respectful suggestions to help the writer say it more effectively. Responding to your peers' work will help you become a sharper critic of your own writing; the more you give, the more you get.

Seminar Format: This is a seminar in which everyone's active participation is expected. Sharing ideas—especially those you feel tentative about—is a mark of intellectual generosity. Come to class having done all the reading carefully and feeling prepared to share your questions and impressions. Readings may change according to student interests and possible guest authors.

Attendance: Because Writing Program courses proceed by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential even in an online class. If you are absent without medical excuse more than once, you are eligible to be officially excluded and failed. On your first unexcused absence, you will receive a letter from me warning you of your situation. Any student who is more than 10 minutes late in joining class will be counted as absent. If you must miss a class, please notify me by email in advance and consult our class website for any missed materials.

Schedule: Writing courses at Harvard are rigorous and move along at a quick and steady pace. Please come to class on time. Late essays and exercises drop a letter grade for each day late; no comments are given on late drafts. All assignments must be emailed by midnight EST on the date listed to mcketta@gs.harvard.edu.

Submitting Work: All exercises, drafts, and final versions of essays must be titled, word-processed in Microsoft Word, double-spaced, paginated, with an MLA-style heading and citation style, and with one-inch margins left, right, top, and bottom. When emailing any assignment, include your name in the title of the file and proofread your work before you submit it. Error-ridden assignments will be marked down, as will be writing that fails to respect word count.

Completion of Work: Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assignments to pass the course and you must write them within the schedule of the course—not in the last few days of the term after you have fallen behind. If you fail to submit work when it is due, you will receive a letter from me reminding you of these requirements. The letter will specify the new due date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit a substantial draft of the piece of writing by this new due date, you are eligible to be excluded from the course.

Conferences: Twice during the semester, we will meet for a conference to discuss your progress, specifically how to revise your writing to make it express more effectively what you want to say. Please prepare by rereading your draft and bringing to me questions you have about possible avenues for revision. A missed conference counts as an absence and will not be rescheduled. I will make time to answer student questions at the end of most classes.

Grading: I will grade only the final versions of your craft analysis essays, but I will comment on every exercise and draft that is turned in on time. Your exercises will be evaluated only with a check plus (✓+), check (✓), or check minus (✓-). In grading your revised work, I will check to see that you've addressed comments that your peers and I have made. I adhere to the following criteria: "A" means exceptional, "B" means good, "C" means adequate, "D" means deficient, and "E" means unacceptable. Please be advised that final grades are indeed final. Requests for grade changes are initiated by the instructor. Letter grades can be changed only if there is clear evidence of a computational or clerical error that is documented in writing by the instructor. A student may not submit extra work, resubmit work to improve a final grade, or have their work evaluated by a third party. Though students are entitled to an explanation of their grades, they should be careful not to harass instructors. Repeatedly asking about a grade or telling an instructor that a certain grade is needed could be considered harassment.

Writing Center: At the Writing Center, peer writing tutors work one-on-one with students of all abilities. Writing tutors will not proofread or edit your work, but they will work with you on issues such as generating ideas, thesis statements, analyzing evidence, structure, or incorporating instructor feedback. The best way to make use of the Writing Center is to come in prepared with a specific question or set of questions. You can make an appointment online: <http://www.summer.harvard.edu/resources-policies/writing-center>.

Accessibility: The Summer School is committed to providing an accessible academic community. The Accessibility Services Office offers a variety of accommodations and services to students with documented disabilities: <https://www.summer.harvard.edu/resources-policies/accessibility-services>.

Academic Integrity: You are expected to follow the standards of proper citation and to avoid plagiarism. Please consult the Harvard Guide to Using Sources (<https://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/>), prepared by the Harvard College

Writing Program, for a helpful introduction to all matters related to source use: identifying and evaluating secondary sources, incorporating them into your work, documenting them correctly, and avoiding plagiarism. To support your learning about academic citation rules, please visit the Resources to Support Academic Integrity (<http://www.summer.harvard.edu/resources-policies/resources-support-academic-integrity>) where you will find links to the Harvard Guide to Using Sources and two free online 15-minute tutorials to test your knowledge of academic citation policy. We recommend taking these tutorials before you submit any written work this summer. These tutorials take 15 minutes each to complete.

Proofreading: To have his or her content be taken seriously, a writer must understand:

- Semicolons vs. colons vs. commas
- Comma use in general (how to avoid comma splices and run-ons)
- Complete sentences vs. incomplete sentences
- Its vs. It's, Their vs. There vs. They're, Who's vs. Whose, Lie vs. Lay
- How to use clear, specific language (not vague terms or clichés)
- Active vs. passive verbs ("The dog bit me" vs. "I was bitten by the dog")

Essay Sequence: The full assignments begin on p.6 of this syllabus. All readings may be found on our online coursepack (CP—under Modules in Canvas), except for the ones in the book *Reading Like a Writer* (abbreviated RLW). Sample Student Essay or Exercises are abbreviated SSE, followed by a number.

Class/Work Schedule

Class Overview	Read for class	Write (due midnight EST)
6.25 – day 1 Intro, close-reading, sample	<i>RLW</i> : Ch.1-2; CP: Percy: “Refresh, Refresh”; SSE 1	Ex.1: close-reading (6.26)
6.27 – day 2 Paragraphs/Structure	<i>RLW</i> : Ch.3-4; Russell: “St. Lucy’s Home”; SSE 2-3	Ex.2: time + narrative (6.28)
7.2 – day 3 Narration <i>Conferences</i>	<i>RLW</i> : Ch.5-6; Davis: “What You Learn”; SSE 4-5	
7.4 – holiday (no class)		Draft Analysis + Proposal (send only to PR) (7.5)
7.9 – day 4 Peer Review	All peers’ drafts	Model text (send to PR + me) (7.10)
7.11 – day 5 Expert Plotting Tips	Franklin, McKee, Booker; PR: discuss model text	Final Unit I Analysis + Project Proposal (7.12)
7.16 – day 6 Dialogue/Details	<i>RLW</i> : Ch.7-8; Fountain: “Birds”; PR: workshop story	Ex.3: invisible claim (7.17)
7.18 – day 7 Authenticity/Symbols	Atwood, “Bluebeard’s Egg”; PR: workshop story	
7.23 – day 8 Layered stories/Themes	Paterniti, “The Last Meal”; PR: workshop presentations	Draft Analysis + Project + Statement (7.24)
7.25 – day 9 Adaptation/Myth	Gaiman, “Snow, Glass”; PR: workshop analysis	
7.30 – day 10 Presentations I <i>Conferences</i>		
8.1 – day 11 Presentations II <i>Conferences</i>		Final Unit II Analysis + Project + Statement (8.5)

The Writing Sequence

Your Creative Project

As part of this class, you are expected to have in mind a narrative writing project to work on during the semester, 10-15 pp. of which you will share with our class as part of the final project, and a short excerpt of which you will read aloud. The subject, genre, overall length, and other dimensions of this project are entirely up to you—the main thing is to use this piece of your own writing as a testing ground for the elements of craft explored in the works of the authors we read in this course.

Your Chosen Text to Analyze

For Unit II, you are expected to choose a literary text of your own to analyze in terms of authorial choices and use in part as a guide or model for the choices you make in your own creative writing project. It can be a short piece or a chapter of a longer one. During class meetings in the second half of class, you will be asked to present your text to your peer group and provide me with a pdf or link (15 pp. max).

UNIT I

Exercise 1: Close-reading

Choose one of the assigned stories. Close-read it with an eye for what you can learn from the writer's choices. For the first paragraph, introduce the story, zeroing in on its key parts: what happens (briefly)? How does it begin and how does it end? Who is the protagonist and what is the main conflict? How much time lapses in the story? What overall feeling does the story leave you with? Quote a sentence that seems to exemplify the author's style—then unpack it, showing how you think it works to support the overall purpose of the piece. End your introduction paragraph with a claim about how a particular element or theme of this story works. For the 2-3 paragraphs that follow, support your thesis claim with a dive into the writer's sentence-level choices. What do you notice about the sentences, the paragraphs, the word-choices that make up this story and this world? Quote and unpack how these craft choices shape the whole piece. Frame each analytical paragraph with a claim and an anchor sentence, filled out in the middle with several well-curated examples or quotes, close-read. Make sure each paragraph transitions naturally into the next one. In a final short paragraph, reflect on what about this piece makes it one that you, as a writer, can learn from. Include a title and works cited page. (600-900 words, double-spaced.)

Exercise 2: Time + Narrative

Choose a different assigned story. In this exercise, your goal is to study the authorial choices with an eye for how pacing works—how the writer handles the passing of time. Introduce the text with author and date, and then look deeply at the narrative movement, tracking what scenes move the characters closer toward the resolution. Discuss which moments are expanded in detail, which are glossed over. Where in the text do the seminal moments of change happen—and how does the writer prepare us for them? As in the first exercise, offer a claim about the author's handling of time, and use the body paragraphs to support the claim using the close-reading of evidence. Frame your paragraphs deliberately. In a final short paragraph, reflect on what about this piece makes it one that you, as a writer, can learn from. Include a title and works cited page. (600-900 words, double-spaced.)

Unit I Craft Analysis + Project Proposal

Revise and expand your Exercise 1 or 2 into a claim-driven essay that studies how one of the assigned stories works, how the authorial choices function together to help the story achieve a cohesive, authentic, or engaging narrative. You may also point to holes in the story or weaknesses you perceive in the craft. As in the exercises, make sure your analysis employs careful close-reading and well-shaped paragraphs, and please read aloud to proofread before turning in. Once you have analyzed the story to your satisfaction, write a short proposal describing the creative project that you are writing for the duration of this course, and note any ways the story under analysis has helped you think differently about craft in your own writing. Include a title and works cited page. If you wish, you may also include a 1-2pp. excerpt from the creative work in progress. You will receive peer comments on this draft, but I will only read the final version. (4-5pp. analysis, 1p. proposal; optional: 1-2pp. excerpt.)

UNIT II

Exercise 3: Invisible Claim

Choose a narrative text from outside of the class reading list to close-read as your Unit II text. You will spend one exercise and two drafts of an essay exploring this text, so please choose one that interests you deeply, both intellectually and personally, and one that seems likely to generate challenging ideas for application in your own writing. As in the earlier exercises, close-read this text, but focus in particular on the “invisible claim” at the text’s center—in other words, what you think this text is essentially about. To do this, study the overall effect of the piece and the authorial choices underlying it—and then unravel how the author sets up this claim and leads the reader toward it, subtly or overtly. Pay attention to what symbols the author creates and how they are handled, and how motifs or situations repeat and echo. What changes throughout the story? Why and how? Include a title and works cited page. (600-900 words, double-spaced.)

Story Craft Analysis + Final Project (draft + revision)

Build upon your Exercise 3, adding to it and shaping it into an essay that studies the craft elements of your chosen text. As in the Unit I Craft Analysis essay, pay attention to close-reading and show how the authorial choices work together to help the work of literature achieve a cohesive, authentic, or otherwise engaging narrative. Alongside this Craft Analysis, turn in a final version of your own creative work, and include a 1-2 pp. Statement explaining your own deliberate elements of craft and how your chosen text has influenced your own writing choices. In your Statement, please briefly answer the three peer review questions: 1) what do I see this piece, in its ideal version, doing or being about? 2) what do I love about the piece as it is now? 3) which elements feel unfinished/challenging/in need of change? (5-6 pp. Analysis, 1-2 pp. Statement, 10-15 pp. Creative Work)

Presentation

Presenting one’s writing to the public is a vital skill for a writer to have. Choose a short excerpt of your writing from this semester’s project and read it aloud to the class. A great reading frames the text itself with stories about how it was made or lessons learned. You may wish to study the skills of great writers who give great readings (look on writers’ websites or at Ted.com for videos of writers you admire). Use this time to share both your final product and the techniques you’ve learned and choices you’ve made. (5-10min)