

English 202: Introduction to Poetry Writing
MW 4:00-5:15 Buttrick 205
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Office hours MW 2:30-3:45, T 1:00-3:00, and by appointment

This class will cover introductory questions of the craft of poetry writing, including the relationship between form and content, the sound and rhythm of language, the elements of English poetic form, and the importance of precision and originality. We will address these elements of poetry through both discussions of contemporary poetry and workshops of student writing.

Required texts:

J. D. McClatchy, *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*

Stephen Fry, *The Ode Less Travelled*

Weekly readings on Blackboard

W August 27: Introduction

Due Friday, August 29: Think of a person you know well (NOT YOURSELF), and then write two newspaper-style personal ads on that person's behalf. The first personal ad should be composed entirely of clichés; the second should be as individual and real as possible. The challenge of this assignment is to make both personal ads accurate reflections of the person you're writing for. [Note that the ads do not have to be plausible personal ads: feel free to take this opportunity to satirize public figures, get revenge on your ex, mock your sister, etc., etc.]

M September 1: LABOR DAY

W 3: in McClatchy: Bishop, "The Armadillo" (32); Jarrell, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" (58); Hayden, "Night, Death, Mississippi" (83); Moss, "Ménage à Trois" (147) "Einstein's Bathrobe" (153); Howard, "Venetian Interior, 1889" (338); Sexton, "Her Kind" (304)

on Blackboard: Browning, "The Last Duchess"; Frost, "A Servant to Servants"; Dove, "Belinda's Petition"
Fry, pp. 320-323

F 5: Write a poem in which you speak from someone else's point of view. The person may be real or imaginary. He or she may be talking about anything you like, but pay attention to phrasings and word choice to be sure you're true to your adopted character.

M 8: in McClatchy: Roethke, "I Knew a Woman" (45); Nemerov, "Writing" (118), "Learning the Trees" (121), "Because You Asked About the Line Between Prose and

Poetry” (122); Wilbur, “Advice to a Prophet” (130) “Walking to Sleep” (131); O’Hara, “Ave Maria” (211); Kizer, “A Muse of Water” (192)

W 10: in McClatchy: Jarrell, “Cinderella” (59); Cunningham, “For My Contemporaries” (80); Lorde, “Movement Song” (403); Lee, “One Heart” (584)
on Blackboard: Macdonald, “Instruction from Bly”; Clifton, “Miss Rosie,” “Wishes for Sons”; Creeley, “The Language”; Frost, “Directive”

F 12: Write a poem in which you give someone advice, directions, or instructions. Pick a topic you know something about, and think about how much detail you need to give to make your advice useful. Or, with the same kind of details in mind, write a poem about learning something.

M 15: in McClatchy: Roethke, “In a Dark Time” (46); Hacker: “Nights of 1964-66: The Old Reliable” (486); Bowers, “An Afternoon at the Beach” (188), from “Autumn Shade” (189)

On Blackboard: Bontemps, “Nocturne of the Wharves,” “A Black Man Talks of Reaping”; Gunn, “Iron Landscapes (and the Statue of Liberty)”; Williamson, “Nature Poem”; Hudgins, “Praying Drunk,” Campo, “For J. W.”
Fry, pp. 1-16

W 17: Presentation: James Merrill

in McClatchy: Nemerov, “The Dependencies” (120); Wilbur, “Looking into History” (126); Van Duyn, “Homework” (136); Merrill, “A Renewal” (244), “Voices from the Other World” (245), “Days of 1964” (246), “Willoware Cup” (248), “Lost in Translation” (249)

on Blackboard: Merrill, “Mirror”
Fry, pp. 21-31 and 34-49

F 19: Write a poem in blank verse (that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter). The subject matter is up to you. The big challenge here is to get the rhythm right without twisting the grammar. Note that all the variations Fry describes are available to you, but that the poem as a whole should be clearly recognizable as metrical.

M 22: Presentation: The History of the Sonnet

in McClatchy: Meredith, “The Illiterate” (111); Hacker, from “Taking Notice” (481)

on Blackboard: cummings, “the cambridge ladies”; Hacker, “Did You Love Well What Very Soon You Left?”; Gunn, “Diagrams”; Brooks, “The Rites for Cousin Vit,” “The Sonnet-Ballad,” “The Egg Boiler” “The White House”
Fry, pp. 281-291

W 24: Presentation: New Formalism

on Blackboard: Collins, "Sonnet" Grosholz, "The Old Fisherman"; Bawer, "The View From an Airplane at Night, Over California"; Gwynn, "Body Bags"; Hadas, "Moments of Summer," "In the Hammock"; Nelson, "Chopin"
Fry, pp. 123-142, 150-155

F 26: Write a sonnet—fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, following any one of the rhyme schemes discussed in Fry. The challenge is similar to that of the blank verse poem, but you also have to rhyme.

M 29: Presentation: Elizabeth Bishop

in McClatchy: Lowell, "Skunk Hour" (10); Bishop, "The Bight" (22), "At the Fishhouses" (25), "Brazil, January 1, 1502" (28), "Filling Station" (33), "Poem" (38); Swenson, "Stone Gullets" (99), "Staying at Ed's Place" (99); James Wright, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" (290), "A Blessing" (291)

W October 1: Presentation: Derek Walcott

in McClatchy: Merwin, "St Vincent's" (262); Ammons, "Terrain" (271), "The City Limits" (272); Garrigue, "Amsterdam Letter" (91); Van Duyn, "Into Mexico" (137)
On Blackboard: Walcott, "As John to Patmos" "A Far Cry from Africa," "A Sea-Chantey," "Pentecost," from Omeros.

F 3: Go to an unfamiliar place where you can sit for an hour or so, preferably one where you are not likely to meet people you know. Sit for a while in the place and pay careful attention to what happens there: what does it look like? what's there? who comes and goes? why? are there birds, animals, bugs, floating dust motes, kids, funny-looking chairs, odd smells, graffiti? what changes while you sit there? does the place have a history, and does it show? Observe, and take notes. Then go home and write a poem about what you've seen, including whatever details strike you as important and interesting.

M 6: in McClatchy: Schuyler, "Korean Mums" (176); Levertov, "Clouds" (178); Pinsky, "Shirt" (459); McHugh, "From 20,000 Feet" (541); Schnackenberg, "Signs" (572), "Supernatural Love" (573)

on Blackboard: Dove, "His Shirt"; Murray, "The Tin Clothes," "The Successive Arms," "Clothing as Dwelling as Shouldered Boat"

W 8: in McClatchy: Lowell, "For the Union Dead" (13); Roethke, "Cuttings" (40), "Root Cellar" (41), "The Shape of the Fire" (41); Warren, "Masts at Dawn" (63); Nemerov, "Storm Windows" (117), "Money" (119); Wilbur, "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra" (124); Snodgrass, "A Locked House" (242); Hollander, "The Night Mirror" (328).

F 10: Write a poem about or to an object. (Not a concept! An object.) Describe the object as precisely as possible. Be exact, detailed, scrupulous—although naturally you should pick your details to suit your interest. What’s the object for? what’s it made out of? what does it look/feel/sound/smell/taste like? is it old, new, big, little, chipped, shiny, solid, broken? does it have a history? where is it from? is it used for the purpose it was made for? The purpose of this exercise is eye-training: describe what you really see. But you should choose the object for a reason, and have a point to make about it.

M 13: Presentation: Confessional Poetry

in McClatchy: Lowell, “”Reading Myself” (19), “Fishnet” (20), “Dolphin” (20); Plath, “The Colossus” (368), “The Hanging Man” (369), “Daddy” (370), “Lady Lazarus” (376); Olds, “The Feelings” (501).

W 15: Presentation: The Black Arts Movement

in McClatchy: Lorde, “Afterimages” (404)
on Blackboard: Sanchez, “A Poem For My Most Intelligent 10:30 AM Class/Fall 1985”; Baraka, “The Pressures,” “Babylon Revisited”; Giovanni, “Make Up,” “Categories” Durem, “ I Know I’m not Sufficiently Obscure”; Reed, “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra”; Knight, “The Idea of Ancestry”; Evans, “A Good Assassination Should be Quiet”

F 17: FALL BREAK

M 20: Due in class: Write a poem FOR or AGAINST something. The subject matter might be aesthetic, political, psychological, serious, comic, etc, but the poem should contain either praise or condemnation, or possibly both. This balance may be as complicated or as simple as you like, so long as it’s saying something we don’t already know.

Presentation: Gwendolyn Brooks
in McClatchy: Hecht: “A Hill” (162); Levertov, “Intrusion” (180), “Seeing for a Moment” (180); Dove, “Parsley” (558)
on Blackboard: Brown, “Slim Greer in Hell”; Brooks, “The Lovers of the Poor,” “The Anniad”

W 22: Presentation: Yusuf Komunyakaa

in McClatchy: Wagoner, “The Source” (216); Creeley, “I Know a Man” (218), “The Rescue” (219) Komunyakaa, “Camouflaging the Chimera” (536), “Facing It” (537)
on Blackboard: Komunyakaa, “A Good Memory”

F 24: Write a poem in which you tell a story. Some things to take into account: how much background do you need to give us? how much information does it take to convey what happened? who are the people in the story, and which ones are really important? why does the story matter? what are you telling the story for? who is your audience?

M 27: Presentation: Jorie Graham

in McClatchy: Van Duyn, "The Twins" (139); Justice, "Mule Team and Poster" (202); Simic, "Tapestry" (431); Graham, "Over and Over Stitch" (549), "San Sepolcro" (550); Doty, "Broadway" (561)

on Blackboard: Graham, "Reading Plato," "Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt," "At Luca Signorelli's Resurrection of the Body" "Noli Me Tangere"

W 29: Presentation: the New York School

in McClatchy: Schuyler, "Shimmer" (175); O'Hara, "A Step Away from Them" (205), "Why I Am Not a Painter" (208); Ashbery, "Pyrography" (278), "And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name" (281); Sexton, "The Starry Night" (307), Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" (439), "The Militance of a Photograph in the Passbook of a Bantu Under Detention" (443); Dove, "Canary" (560)

on Blackboard: Brooks, "The Chicago Picasso"

F 31: Write a poem about a work of art. (This kind of poem is formally known as "ecphrasis.") What are we looking at? why? what's emphasized? what does the artist want us to see, and what do you in particular see? what colors, shapes, textures, etc are there in the artwork? what's interesting about this particular work of art? why do you want to tell us about this particular artwork?

M November 3: in McClatchy: Bishop, "One Art" (37); Meredith, "The Jain Bird Hospital in Delhi" (115); Justice, "The Assassination" (202);

on Blackboard: Bishop, "Sestina"; Hacker, "Wagers"; Disch, "Entropic Villanelle"; Justice, "Villanelle at Sundown"; Burt, "Six Kinds of Noodles"; Gioia, "My Confessional Sestina"; Hadas, "Pantoum on Pumpkin Hill"

Fry, pp. 221-246

W 5: Presentation: LANGUAGE poets

in McClatchy: Ginsberg, from "Howl"; Levine, "They Feed They Lion" (313);

on Blackboard: Palmer, "Letter 6," from "Six Hermetic Songs," from "The Leonardo Improvisations"; Muldoon, "As"

F 7: Write a poem in which you use strategic repetitions. The repetitions may be a chorus, a repeated last line, a repeated opening line, a repeated word or set of words, or any other formally recognizable repetition. Pay attention to how meanings of the repeated words shift. What happens to sounds when you repeat them? why? how can you use this effect?

M 10: in McClatchy: Bishop, "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" (23), "The Shampoo" (28); Jarrell, "Well Water" (62); Garrigue, "Cracked Looking Glass" (93); Swenson, "Teleology" (97); Wilbur, "Mind" (129); Sexton, "The Room of My Life" (310); Lorde, "Coal" (402); Doty, "A Display of Mackerel" (565)

on Blackboard: Kumin, "The Envelope"

W 12: Presentation: Seamus Heaney

in McClatchy: Meredith, "Thoughts on One's Head" (112); Creeley, "For Friendship" (220); McHugh, "Auto" (543)

on Blackboard: Dove, "Geometry"; Heaney, "The Rain Stick," "To a Dutch Potter in Ireland," "A Sofa in the Forties," "Weighing In," "Seeing Things," "A Basket of Chestnuts"

F 14: Write a poem with a dominant metaphor or simile. Compare your subject (which may be a thing, an idea, an emotion, etc. etc. etc.) to something concrete and familiar. How does the comparison shed light on your main subject? how does the comparison change, adapt, obscure, and otherwise distort the thing you're comparing your subject to? what does the comparison gain you, and what does it force you to abandon? The comparison may be implicit or explicit.

M 17: in McClatchy: Cunningham, Epigrams (81); Hayden, "Middle Passage" (85); Bidart, "The Sacrifice" (451) Hirsch, "A Short Lexicon of Torture in the Eighties" (546)

on Blackboard: Frost, "Home Burial"; Moore, "Baseball and Writing," Komunyakaa, "A Quality of Light," "Changes; or, Reveries at a Window Overlooking a Country Road, with Two Women Talking Blues in the Kitchen"

W 19: Presentation: Adrienne Rich.

in McClatchy: Rich, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" (345), "Planetarium" (349), "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (351), "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff" (354), "For an Album" (358); Smith, "Elegy in an Abandoned Boatyard" (474), "The Roundhouse Voices" (476)

F 21: Write a poem in which you use more than one voice. This can take the form of a dialogue, a monologue by a person with multiple personalities, a poem incorporating quotations from other poets, an internal debate, a contrast between past and present or between two different locations, or any other means of incorporating several ways of speaking. However you do it, make sure that the two (or more) voices are distinct.

M 24: Presentation: Louise Glück

in McClatchy: Oliver, "Rain" (409), "Hawk" 415; Clampitt, "Beach Glass" (467); Glück, "Messengers" (503), "The Garden" (505), "Mock Orange" (508); Voigt, "The Lotus Flowers" (525), "Winter Field" (529); Ryan, "Paired Things" (530), "A Cat/A Future" (531)

on Blackboard: Komunyakaa, "Praising Dark Places"

W 26: THANKSGIVING BREAK

M December 1: Due in class: Write a poem about a particular thing you find in nature—a bug, a plant, a puddle, a mountain. OR write a poem about something you find in a good

nature-or-science magazine: *National Geographic*, *Nature*, *Science*, the science section of a good newspaper or some of the more serious travel magazines. Pay attention to detail, and to how you choose to represent your subject. in McClatchy: Swenson, "Staying at Ed's Place" (99), "Strawberrying" (100); Simic, "My Shoes" (432), "Watermelons" 435; Harper, "Grandfather" 441; Pinsky, "Poem About People" (452), "The Hearts" (456); Olds, "The Promise" (499)

on Blackboard: Muldoon, "Redknots," "Cradle Song for Asher"

W 3: in McClatchy: Oliver, "Whelks" (414); Wright, "The Homecoming Singer" (417) Matthews, "Onions" 491; McPherson, "Streamers" (513); McHugh, "The Typewriter's the Kind" (540); Lee, "Pillow" (583); Phillips, "The Compass" (586)

on Blackboard: Hudgins, "My Wife: an Ode"; Louise Erdich, "The Strange People," "Mary Magdalene"

F 5: Write a love poem to someone or something besides your spouse/significant other/crush—a love poem, in other words, to anyone or anything besides the usual conventional subject. Suggested subjects include your cat, a mango, your hometown librarian, a literary character, a flowering tree... etc.

M 8: Summary

In lieu of exam: Portfolio of revised poems, complete with drafts. Include all copies of poems on which you received comments from me or from the workshop.

This syllabus may be slightly modified during the semester.

Assignments:

There will be extensive readings for each class. A poem is due every Friday by 2:00 in the wallbox outside my office. (Please do not submit electronic copies without prior permission.) Final portfolios, consisting of revisions of all assignments as well as all returned drafts, will be due on the last day of classes.

Workshops:

Over the course of the semester, each student should submit no fewer than two poems to the class for workshopping. Students intending to workshop a poem should distribute their poems by e-mail by 2:00 the day before the workshop (please be prompt with this, as people may have scheduling difficulties which make it difficult to print at short notice). Print out the poems you receive, write comments on them, and bring them to class with you. Sign your comments. Your participation as a commentator in workshops will be a part of your final grade.

Grading criteria:

You will not receive grades on individual poems. Your final grade will be based upon your class participation (15%), an in-class presentation (10%), and your portfolio (65%). I will give midterm grades, and will also give estimated grades upon request at other

points in the semester. If you have difficulty at the beginning, but improve towards the end of the course, your grade will reflect that improvement.

A rough grading schema goes like this:

A: Original, interesting, technically adept and adventurous poems; the poet is clearly thinking hard about both form and content and puts her thoughts into practice gracefully. The images are compelling, the language is efficient and precise, and the poet's ideas are based on both attentive observation of the world and an active imagination. The portfolio contains a variety of subjects and approaches.

B: Interesting poems displaying original thought, free of clichés. Images are clear and the language displays understanding of sound and rhythm. The poet has tried out new ideas and techniques. There may be some formal or grammatical difficulties, but these are not serious and may stem from the poet's willingness to experiment. Some ideas may not be fully worked out, but are generally promising.

C: Poems are clichéd in phrasing or content. Some may have serious grammatical or formal problems. The poet has, however, made an honest attempt at resolving these problems.

D-F: Missing poems, missing effort, missing poet.

This class is predicated on the idea that there is such a thing as bad poetry: if there weren't, there would be nothing to teach you. You are not being graded on, for example, your soul-searching, nor on your grammar, nor your vocabulary, although at least the last two elements will have an effect on your poems. Grades are based solely on whether the poems you write would interest, please, excite, disgust, or otherwise involve a hypothetical reader. That involvement, and what makes it happen, is the fundamental subject of this class.

Attendance policy:

This class is based on discussion. If you don't participate in discussions, whether by contributing or listening to your peers, you haven't really taken the class. You will be allowed up to three absences over the course of the semester. After that, your final grade will be penalized by one third of a letter grade for each absence. Three lates will count as an absence. Since there can be no way to make up discussions, this policy must apply even in cases where students have medical or other legitimate excuses. Participation grades do not reflect absences; they're based on your behavior once you've made it to class.

Late policy:

You may take a three-day extension (i.e., until Monday) on one poem, no questions asked. The rest must be handed in on time, or your final grade will be reduced.

Honor code and originality:

All assignments should be students' original compositions for this course. If you have old poems on which you would like comments, I will be happy to look at them, but they may not be submitted for course credit. Regarding the work of other poets, students are expected to abide by the Agnes Scott College Honor Code. Any student convicted by Honor Court of plagiarism in this class will, in addition to any penalties Honor Court assigns, automatically fail the class.

Course evaluations:

At the end of the semester, you will receive an e-mail asking you to submit online course evaluations. Please fill them out! I pay very careful attention to them. I want to know what you thought so that I can improve this course in the future. Course evaluations are also used by the college during faculty performance reviews.