GETTING STARTED IN CREATIVE WRITING

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Stanford University Online Writer’s Studio
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Required Texts:

A Poetry Handbook by Mary Oliver, ISBN # 0156724006


Supplemental Reading:

I may attach some additional stories or articles as PDFs, or direct you towards websites that explore the topic at hand. Much of the time these readings will be optional and may be done as your lifestyles allow, as a supplement to our discussion.

Course Structure:

Each week begins with an introductory paragraph about a topic in creative writing that you’ll find in the Schedule section. During weeks 1-5, you will be completing a short writing exercise based upon the week’s topic. We will begin the course by reading and writing a few poems together as we consider Mary Oliver’s A Poetry Handbook. Here, we will really slow down to look deeply at the sensory images that inspire each of us to write, to express ourselves, and to explore the material that lies within us. These are not meant to be polished poems by any means, but rather exploratory writings that help us access our own vital imaginations and make our writing a daily habit. I want you to use these exercises in the way that best fits your own writing life, not to feel constrained by them. After two solid weeks of poetry, we will begin to consider narrative forms of writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, as we read sections of LaPlante’s book together. Here, we will discuss scene-building, how to write effective dialogue and develop believable characters, and the shapes that our stories or
essays might take.

Also during the first five weeks, we will be working intensively in small groups of 3 – 4 students. I will change the constellation of each group every week, in order to give you the chance to work with a variety of your peers. The intention here is to allow people to really read and respond to one another’s writing exercises, noting moments of energy and possible directions for future writing.

Beginning in Week Six, students will post a section of an original manuscript (up to ten pages of poetry or 1250 – 5000 words of prose) for an online creative writing workshop, where they will receive careful, supportive critique from me and from the community as a whole. As developing writers, it’s just as beneficial for us to read and respond to one another as it is to read and respond to accomplished pieces of literature. The whole process can work together, and it should in the writing life, as we mine our memories and experiences and train ourselves to think like writers.

This workshop section (weeks 6 – 9) is the most important part of the course. To this end, writing your letters of critique to one another will replace the weekly writing exercises; reading one another’s original pages will be your only required reading. We will be discussing pages by four writers per week. During the final week, students will be incorporating feedback from the workshop section into a final short manuscript of poetry, fiction or creative nonfiction.

**Weekly Schedule:**

*Monday morning:* Each new week officially starts on Monday. Every Monday morning, I will send out an email to the class introducing the topic for the week, letting you know a little bit more about the craft point we will be focusing on, the reading we will be doing together, and directing you to the new Forum threads, including your Discussion Points about the week’s readings and your weekly creative writing assignments. (NOTE: Because many of you may have busy work schedules, the weekend might be your preferred time to work. Because of this, I will always post up the assignments and Forum threads the prior Friday so you can get a head start if you want.)

*Thursday afternoon,* by 5pm (PST) Writing exercises are due to your small group. Then, you should respond to the members of your small feedback group by the end of the weekend, before the next week begins. This will give you three days to read and respond to the people
in your group. Every week for the first five weeks, you will be working in groups of 3 – 4.

**TBD:** Depending on people’s schedules and in the hopes of accommodating as many students as possible, I’ll be hosting an hour-long live “chat” session every week. This session is an online “office hour” of sorts, but in a group context. Attendance is optional, and the session will be recorded if you can’t make it. This is where I’ll address issues of craft and process, hopefully simulating the live give-and-take you’d find in a traditional classroom. We’ll discuss the readings, answer one another’s questions in regard to writing technique, and continue the conversations regarding student work. During the workshop weeks, chat will focus on the student workshop pieces. Also, feel free to drop in for shorter periods of time within that hour if you can’t make the whole time. During Week One, I’ll get feedback from the class on which day and what time would be most convenient. We’ll kick Chat off in Week Two.

**Weekend:** IF you want, use the weekend to get a jumpstart on reading assigned chapters and drafting your writing exercise. I won’t be in the classroom over the weekend but you’re welcome to start posting for the next week whenever you’re ready. The classroom is always open!

**My Commentary:**

I will comment on each of your weekly writing exercises and weigh in on the discussion questions where appropriate. I will write a longer letter of critique during the workshop section of the course and post these letters in the Discussion Board where anyone can read them. This is because, in a live course, we would be reading and responding to one another’s creative writing as a group. Although we aren’t sharing the same physical space, you should think of the Discussion Board and the threads as a place to interact with each other. I will also read your comments to one another, piping in when I have something to add. These discussions will be as lively as you make them. Again, the intention is to think carefully, to bounce our ideas off one another, to write a lot and to always be looking for inspiration.

**My Online Presence:**
I’ll be online and actively responding to new posts in the classroom every weekday. If there’s a holiday or I have some conflicting obligation, I will let you know well ahead of time. I also check my email at least once a day and respond as promptly as I can. The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit; we don’t have to be working simultaneously. So log on when it's convenient for you, morning or night, daily or every few days.

**Protocol for a Productive Conversation:**

When exploring our creative writing, we may feel as though we are sending chunks of our very souls into the universe whenever we post online. In addition, we are not sitting across from one another in a classroom, so the nuance of a phrase or the tone of the speaker may get lost in translation. In order to keep us focused on our art, I would ask that we use our conversation as a place for serious attention to one another. For example, in person I myself can be very funny, but this might not work so well online because I can’t see how my joke is received. The temptation is then to use emoticons or ‘winks’ or ‘hahahaha’ in order to make sure I’m understood. Before I know it my posts are full of emoticons or nudges and winks, or I have offended someone without intending to. I mention this not to make you nervous, but just to remind all of us to always assume the best of intentions from our fellow writers. We are all here to grow together, to show respect for the writing life, and to challenge ourselves as writers.

In addition, I do think it’s important to develop a sense of pleasure and play in creative writing, and to really be connected to one another even though we may be far apart in time and space. To this end, I will create a ‘Fun Thread’ every week. Here, we are free to log in or not, as we see fit. We can post links to writings or blogs or websites that we want to share with everyone. We can tell our best Emily Dickinson jokes! But this will be an extra curricular activity and will not count towards your grade. I hope this makes good sense. If, at any time, you have any concerns at all, please do feel free to email me privately. I will do my best to resolve any problems with professional courtesy. We are all in this together, and I want us to have a wonderful time!

**A Final Important Note:**

Although many students take online courses with the absolute best
intentions of doing every last assignment, "real life"—family, illness, professional deadlines—often has a way of making that impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop completely out of the class. Hold on! If you have to skip a couple exercises, this is also okay. As long as you're getting most of the work done and commenting on your classmates' submissions, you'll be fine. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch if you have any concerns about your standing. If you foresee some bumps in the road, let me know. We'll work together to find the best possible solution for you.

This is your class. I’m the guide, yes, but the quality of our discussions will depend upon your engagement, insightfulness, and good humor. This course will be as good we all make it together. So, please participate fully and generously, as your lifestyle allows. Read with a keen eye and a sense of possibility. And always let me know if there’s anything I can do to make this a better experience for you. I welcome suggestions. If there’s something you want to discuss, let me know. If there’s an assignment that you think would work in this class, tell me. If you find something that you’re very excited about sharing with the group, please do so! We are here to develop as writers and there is always a new topic to explore, which is partly what makes the writing life so rewarding.

**Grading:**

For those of you who are taking this course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows. Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) simply by letting me know.

Writing Exercises (Wks 2-6): 33 % This will measure your timeliness (did you meet deadlines?) and the energy of your writing. I’m not looking for mastery or ‘polished’ writing exercises, but rather for originality and a sense of playful exploration!

Full-Length Workshop Piece: 33 % This will measure your timeliness also, and the risks you may have taken, the creative stretching you did during the quarter, the general spirit of your writing. How strongly is your own style or voice coming through? Again, nothing ‘polished’ here – we are exploring and expanding our horizons together.

Forum Presence: 33% This will measure your timeliness in responding to colleagues, along with your willingness to operate as one member of a small community of artists, not as an individual off on your own. I
am looking for cordial, helpful interactions between students and careful critique of one another’s creative work, keeping the intentions of the writer in mind at all times.

**Brief Weekly Syllabus:**

**Week One: Introductions/ Getting To Know You**

To read: LaPlante, Chapter One “What is this Thing Called Creative Writing?” pages 23 – 38


Writing assignment: “I don’t know why I remember” free write or “I am a camera” free write

**Week Two: The Pleasures of the Poem**

To Read: Mary Oliver sections “Some Given Forms” “Verse that is Free” “Diction, Tone, Voice” “Imagery” “Revision” “Workshops and Solitude” and “Conclusion” pages 58 – 122.

Writing Assignment: Choose a poetry form and write a poem that grows out of last week’s free-write exercise. Lots of specific imagery and sensory detail, please!

**Week Three: The Pleasures of Narrative**

To Read: Alice LaPlante Chapter Two: The Splendid Gift of Not Knowing, pages 57 - 106

Writing Assignment: Character sketch

**Week Four: The Scene is King/Queen aka “Show, Don’t Tell”**

To Read: Alice LaPlante Chapter Three: “Details, Details” pages 107 – 130 and also pages 542 – 557 “Learning to Fail Better”

Writing Assignment: Render a tree, capture the forest
Week Five: Finding the Starting Point of your Story

To Read: Alice LaPlante Chapter Eleven “Raising the Curtain” pages 465 – 475 and Chapter Twelve “What is this Creative Work Really About?” pages 507 – 519.

Writing Assignment: Scene with Dialogue

Week Six: The Truth Behind the Facts/Workshop I

To Read: LaPlante pages 619 - 633

Read and respond to student writing

Week Seven: Workshop II

Read and respond to student writing

Week Eight: Workshop III

Read and respond to student writing

Week Nine: Workshop IV

Read and respond to student writing


Instructor Bio: Caroline Goodwin’s work has appeared in The New Republic, The Cimarron Review, Prism International, Puerto del Sol, Junction Box and many other literary journals. A short collection entitled Text Me, Ishmael was recently published by the Literary Pocket Book series in Wales, UK and her first full-length collection of poems, Trapline, will be published in May 2013 by JackLeg Press in Chicago. She received an MFA from the University of British Columbia, where she studied poetry and creative nonfiction.