Course Description

Whether you’re looking to move forward on a novel already in progress or to find what will become the main focus of your coursework in the OWC program, the Writing Life will make the practices of both writing and taking risks on the page central to the next two years of your life.

During the first five weeks, students will focus on connecting with one another—creating the community that will provide not only key feedback but the peer support and craft conversations that help writers understand why and how we do what we do. Elements of prose such as description, dialogue and conflict will be explored in discussion, helping each class member articulate their own values as a reader and storyteller. Each week prompts will ask you to either look hard at your own history of creativity or to branch out, often across the genres of poetry, nonfiction and short fiction in addition to novel writing.

Between weeks six and nine, each student will present a longer work in any genre for supportive group critique, during which we’ll also dialogue about the workshop process, creating the kind of language and the type of environment group members want for the long term. During week ten, you’ll be asked again to evaluate your process, allowing you to notice how you write, how your writing habits have changed, and to articulate the goals in the areas of both production and process you intend to accomplish while in the OWC program.

You will be asked continually to consider how you learn, write, find inspiration and create structures for sustaining writing community, all in an effort to allow you to exit the class with a firm sense of yourself as a confident, connected and productive writer ready to take on the novel as a form.

Required Reading:

*Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: Work from 1970 to the Present* edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone

The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction: 50 North American Stories Since 1970 edited by Lex Williford and Michael Martone
http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1416532277/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=0684857960&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1JFMJN54S5HCRVZ0BCBK
(There are two editions of this text with the same title. Please be sure to get the one with the red and white—not the blue—cover.)

Recommended text: The War of Art by Stephen Pressfield
http://www.amazon.com/War-Art-Through-Creative-Battles/dp/0446691437
We will not be using this book much week to week, so it is not required. But this an excellent motivational text that I suggest reading before the program begins. It comes highly recommended by myself and many previous students.

In addition, the course reading will include PDF files, links to poems and essays on the web and short YouTube clips.

Grading:

You creative choices will not be evaluated and graded in this course. Grades will therefore be broken down as follows:
50%: Successful completion of assignments, creative risk taking and ability to self-challenge as shown by meeting assignment deadlines and posting newly written work that reveals significant engagement with the challenges the work itself presents.
50%: Participation in fostering a supportive, intellectually exciting environment for other writers, as shown by workshop response letters, shorter weekly peer feedback and overall board participation.

Weekly Schedule:

Monday: each new week officially starts

Tuesday: 12 noon (PST), responses to Discussion Points due

Wednesday: 12 noon (PST), Writing Assignment due—though the earlier you post the more time you’ll have to receive feedback

Throughout the Week: responses to Discussion Points accumulate into individual and group conversations. You drive and participate in these discussions. Also, you will respond to peer’s writing assignments and the discussions that happen around their work.

Weekend: Use the weekend to get a jumpstart on reading assigned stories, answering the discussion points for the next week 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 as far in advance as you’d like. The classroom is always open.
Your work for workshop will be due the Friday before the week it is to be discussed. Everyone will get their due date when we make the schedule together during week three.

This framework may sound complicated in theory but tends to flow quite naturally in practice with each participant getting to do the bulk of their work in a way that fits their particular schedule.

**Weekly Topics and Reading:**

*Week 1 Introductions and Process*

Key questions: How do we turn information—about the techniques of writing—into the experience of using them on the page? What has limited our writing in the past and how can shift our mindsets to write more productively now?

**Writing exercise 1 due.**

Reading: “The Effort Effect” by Marina Krakovsky (web link), “Mirrorings” by Lucy Grealy (Touchstone), “Anybody Can Write a Poem” by Bradley Paul


*Week 2 Using Objects to Uncover Character*

Key question: Where do we find inspiration? (Answer: objects). What is the relationship between the concrete and the inscrutable?

**Writing exercise 2 due.**


Supplemental reading: “A Real Doll” by A.M. Holmes, “Souls on Ice” by Mark Doty (webpage)

*Week 3 The Sound of the Story*

Key questions: Where do we find inspiration? (Answer: voices). How do we listen to, transcribe, invent and in general get the most out of the sound of people’s voices?

**Writing exercise 3 due.**

Reading: “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid (Scriber), “Reading History to My Mother” by Robin Hemley (Touchstone), “Hot Ass Poem” by Jennifer Knox (webpage)


*Week 4 Photos, Documents, Art…and Suspense*

Key questions: Where do we find inspiration? (Answer: photos and documents). What keeps us reading a work of literature? How do writers create suspense?

**Writing exercise 4 due.**

*Week 5 A Slice of the Arc*

Key questions: How do you choose how much ground to cover in a poem, essay or work of fiction? How do you figure out where the story begins and ends?

**First four submissions due for workshop Friday.**
Reading: “My Shape” by Joan Silber (Scribner), “Sadie and Maud” by Gwendolyn Brooks (webpage), “The Unwanted Child” by Mary Clearman Blew (Touchstone)

*Week 6 The Ethics of Storytelling*

Key questions: How do you know when it’s ok to write about something or someone and when it isn’t? How do the rules for writing about real life differ in fiction, non-fiction and poetry?

Reading: “Repeat After Me” by David Sedaris (Touchstone), “I Go Back to May 1937” by Sharon Olds (webpage)

**Workshops begin, workshop submissions due for four students Friday.**
Supplemental reading: “Tiny Smiling Daddy” by Mary Gaitskill (Scribner)

*Week 7 And Now for a Something Entirely Different*

Key questions: How can we overturn the expectations we’ve established so far in both form and content? What are the benefits—to one’s work overall—of being willing to experiment?

**Workshops continue, workshop submissions due for four students Friday.**
Reading: “Jealous Husband Returns in the Form of Parrot” by Robert Olen Butler (Scribner), “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home” by Craig Raine (webpage),
Supplemental reading: “Son of Mr. Green Jeans” by Dinty W. Moore (Touchstone), “The Search for Marvin Gardens” by John McPhee (Touchstone)

*Week 8 Writing About Trauma*

Key questions: Why do certain fiction and non-fiction narrators tell stories the way they do? How do psychology and the study of cognition inform the way we write poetry and tell stories?

**Workshops continue, workshop submissions due for four students Friday.**
Reading: “The Fourth State of Matter” by Jo Ann Beard (Touchstone); “Facing It” by Yusef Komunyakaa (webpage)
Supplemental reading: “Never Marry a Mexican” by Sandra Cisneros (Scribner), “Remembering Fire” by Rodney Jones (webpage)
**Week 9 Revision, Or Writing as Rewriting**

Key questions: How do we use the feedback we’re receiving? What are concrete strategies for revision?

**Final week of workshops.**
Reading: from Stephen Koch’s *The Modern Library Writers Workshop*, Chapter 7 (pdf), “A Conversation with My Father” by Grace Paley (webpage)
Supplemental reading: “Consider the Lobster” by David Foster Wallace (Touchstone), “The Author To Her Book” by Anne Bradstreet (webpage)

**Week 10 Moving Forward**

Key questions: How can we name and own our accomplishments over the previous ten weeks? How can we transform our experiences and insights into a lifelong practice?
Reading: “The Secret Goldfish” by David Means (Scribners), “For the young who want to” by Marge Piercy (webpage)
Supplemental reading: TBA—student’s choice. So read ahead in the anthologies and scour the web for things you’d like to discuss with the group!

**How All This Works:**

Please read the assigned reading for the week before each Monday’s class start. This will help me avoid spoiling the essays, stories and poems I’ll be talking about each week in the **Introduction** section of the materials you’ll have access to from me.

You’ll find the reading list in **To Read This Week.**

The **Writing Assignment** section has a number of exercises for you to choose from every week. It helps to set aside a time each week and begin work on your writing assignment as early as possible. Also to post them quickly, remembering they’re not meant to be finished or perfect.

Our group conversations begin when you post your musings and discoveries in the **Discussion Forum**, the bulletin board where the course’s main activity happens. This is where you’ll post everything from your work to your responses to **Discussion Points** to your own thoughts about writing and process, and where our workshop will take place.

Because there’s more to glean from each topic or published work then we can reasonably get to as a group, please also check out **Supplemental Resources** if you can make the time—I think each of these adds something to the required work and we’ll discuss as many as we can.

And also each week please finish with my **Final Thoughts**, designed either to provide a takeaway on what we’ve done together, or to ask further questions.

**Weekly Writing Assignments**
There will be a short writing assignment, between 250 and 1000 words, due each week for the first four weeks. These deadlines are for you, with the prompts designed to be just limiting enough to spark your curiosity, and the writing that results need not be polished or complete. The goal is simply to write! For those already at work on a novel, many of these prompts can be used to explore characters, scenes and motivations, moving you forward on an existing project if you choose to use them in the way, (and going your own way is always welcome as well). After you’ve posted, your peers will offer feedback as will I, helping you to evaluate what kinds of feedback work best for you and make you most excited to write.

Starting on week two, we’ll be using small groups to respond to each other’s work, and will shift group members each week so everyone gets a chance to form closer connections with and become better readers for one another.

**Word Limits:**

I ask that you keep your weekly writing exercises to 250-1000 words, and your workshop submissions to no more than 20 pages, double-spaced and in a 12-point font. If you turn in more than this, you will not receive feedback on the writing that goes beyond the maximum. If the class shows an interest, I will happily create a special forum thread for students who want to write and share more than this. Though I won’t be able to offer feedback beyond these limits myself, I’ve found in the past that connecting writers with others far along in projects even more useful. As the class progresses, keep an eye out for which other students might be good partners for your work over the long term.

**Workshops:**

During the second half of the course, students will post one longer piece (any length for a poem, 2-20 pages double-spaced Times New Roman 12 point font for prose, or up to 6000 words) for a supportive, energizing workshop discussion. This piece may be an expansion of one of your freewrites, a part of the novel you’d like to complete during your time at the OWC, or something else entirely.

In addition to turning in this work, your other main responsibility during the second half of the course is commenting on the writing of other students. We will divide into two groups beginning week five, and you will be responsible for reading and commenting on two workshop submissions each week. When you are workshopped, you will receive a detailed letter of response from each member of the workshop, and from me. We will each look at various aspects of what you’ve created, reflecting back to you our experience as readers, and offer you feedback and guidance to direct you forward in your writing. All students will be able to view these letters of response, and all members of the class will be able to post responses to each other’s comments.

**Workshop Feedback:**

Becoming a better reader is an integral part of your development as a writer. Workshop
feedback letters are designed to develop this skillset. Learning how to identify the strengths and unrealized possibilities in others’ work will help you recognize the growth process revealed by your own. With this in mind, I’ve given a lot of thought to how I respond to other writer’s work, and the following has worked well for those I edit and for my own learning process over the years:

When I’m responding to someone’s work, I like to read the piece twice – the first time through, I read for pleasure. What else is reading for? On the second read, I know what I enjoyed and use it as the basis for guiding the writer towards making the piece even stronger. I urge you to begin these letters by describing the writing back to the writer in concrete terms, to move on to what you liked and found especially strong, and to then use your own emotional experience as the basis for urging expansions, changes, clarifications or for making other suggestions with an eye towards supporting the writer’s vision. The technique of sandwiching a criticism between two compliments is an almost guaranteed way to get the writer to prioritize your critique when they move on revision.

I’ll send you a detailed email with suggestions on writing workshop letters during week five. It contains a host of starter questions that can help readers move from their immediate experience of a work to the ways we talk about exactly where, when and how a piece affected us—and based on this, how a writer can move forward. Because every reader experiences a work differently and comes in with their own values, history, passions and ideas, reading the workshop letters writers create for one another is one of the things I find most pleasurable about teaching online. Rather than imagining there’s one right set of responses to a work, I find I learn from each responder’s unique reading and approach. So even though we haven’t yet met, I’m looking forward to getting to know you—the deeper self, not just the surface you—by the individual way in which you read.

**My Commentary:**

I comment with a few sentences on your short weekly exercises, and with a longer letter in response to your workshopped piece. I post these responses in the forum where anyone can read them because in a live course I’d be making many of the comments during class where everyone would benefit from them. Although we aren’t sharing the same physical space, it’s helpful to think of the discussion threads as a the “room” where we spend time together. After posting your critique, it’s worthwhile to read other peoples’, as you may want to agree, jump in with new evidence or offer and different perspective. I read your comments to one another and when I see a divergence of interpretations about a piece, I tend to pipe in with questions I feel would be useful for framing the different readings. My questions are designed to help the writer evaluate and act on (or not act on) the feedback they’re receiving, and to help the editors add to the critical frameworks they have for responding to a work.

**Discussion Points Reflections:**

The questions and prompts I ask you to respond to outside your own writing each week run the gamut from describing as specifically as possible your own creative process and
your learning about that process, to analytical reflections on the essays and stories we read. I really encourage you to dig into all of these in whatever way seems most interesting and productive to you. But when responding to the published work, I’d also like to invite you to take the opportunity to expand your skill in reading as a writer.

What I mean by this is that writers are like all other readers—we read to be swept along, to experience the highs and lows of emotion, to see new worlds. At the same time, we also read to figure out how these effects are achieved—to figure out how another writer made us feel these things. This is a skill that we build over time, so don’t be afraid to hypothesize and play here. Even a basic, “this essay made me feel,” followed by, “I think this is because the writer did X…” can create a whole discussion. I really encourage people to speak off the cuff—which I suppose means posting after midnight when you’re exhausted and likely to find spelling errors in the morning! The point is, these posts about the published work aren’t intended to be mini English essays, so please just jump in and post. The more you discuss, the more you’ll learn and the more you’re willing to be inarticulate here, the more you’ll grow. There are simply no right answers and the discussion as a whole is enriched when as many people as possible contribute ideas and respond to one another’s ideas.

My Online Presence:

I’ll be online and actively responding to new posts three days a week, most likely Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I also check my email about 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, weekday or weekend. Just keep in mind that at the end of the week, on Sunday night, we move into a new week in the forum. If you are late with an assignment and you want to receive feedback, don't post it in the "expired" week or you run the risk of no one seeing it! Post it in the new week. I do one last sweep every Monday, to read and respond to posts that came in over the weekend. But after that I move on to the new week.

One Final Note:

The fabulous thing about the Online Writers’ Certificate program is that it brings together like-minded people from all over the world. You’ll get to know physicians and schoolteachers, green anarchists and commodities traders, Hollywood production assistants and Jungian analysts, all of whom share a passion for the written word.

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 exactly as good as you (and you and you and you and you and you…) make it.

So, please participate fully and generously in discussions. Read your classmates’ work with an open heart and a belief in the power of language. And please, let me know if there’s anything I can do to make this a better experience for you. I love student-lead detours into territory I hadn’t considered, and incorporating your ideas for assignments
and other activities. Let me know about your concerns, about material you’d like to see covered and your ideas for discussions by telling me (on the boards is always better than via email) or simply by posting and getting the ball rolling on them in forum. This is your class.

And since we’re on the subject of personal responsibility, it’s a good time to point out that writing workshops are built on trust. I think this is even truer in online workshops where we’re not all sitting together in the same room. To build this trust, it’s important that we all agree that the work you present here and the personal information you share stays within the workshop. If you love someone’s poem and want to print it out and hang it on the fridge (this has come up in workshops before), just ask the writer first. Chances are they’ll be touched and give you the go ahead. But please get permission first.

One final note: although students drawn to and accepted for admission by the OWC program tend to be highly motivated and have every intention of doing every assignment, changing professional deadlines, family needs, illness and other crisis can make this impossible. Sometimes, the frustration caused by not being able to contribute fully causes students to drop out of a course or the program. Rather than doing so, try to do what you can, when you can, with an eye toward building writing muscle for the long term. With the exception of replying thoughtfully to other writer’s work, especially during workshop, most other assignments and readings can be taken on a piecemeal basis when need be. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch to let me know how you’re doing and what your needs are. If its at all possible, we’ll work together to find a way to keep you participating in the course, and keep you writing.