Course Title: The Creative Habit: Cultivating a Daily Writing Practice  
Course Code: EGL 19 W  
Instructor: Malena Watrous

Course Summary & Note from the Instructor:
Each of us is born an artist. We all start out as creative beings, and we remain creative beings to the end, but all too often, life gets in the way. We begin listening to the critical voices that have told us that we’re no good and shouldn’t bother wasting our time, obeying the “shoulds” competing for our attention, and stop doing anything that’s creative. But it’s never too late to reawaken your imagination (and yes, you do have one!) and rekindle your sense of play. Writing is the perfect vehicle to allow you to express yourself creatively. This class will jumpstart your imagination and keep it going, by providing you with daily prompts accompanying lessons in the three major forms of creative writing: creative nonfiction, fiction and poetry.

Every morning, you will receive an email from me, containing a brief description of the day’s topic, a short reading assignment (a few pages, tops) and a prompt for you to do a piece of creative writing. You should set aside a chunk of time each day—between 30-60 minutes—to do this daily writing, which should be around a page.

In the first two weeks of class, we will begin with creative nonfiction, doing exercises designed to heighten our powers of observation and mine our memories. In the third and fourth weeks, we will read flash fiction, identifying elements that make short stories different from essays, and trying our hand at inventing characters different from ourselves, putting words in their mouths and making things happen to them. In the fifth and final week, we will read a poem each day, seeing how different poets push the envelope of what’s possible with form, meter and rhyme, and trying things out for ourselves.

While this class is designed to expose you to forms of creative writing and teach you a bit of craft associated with each one, the main objective is just to get you writing, expressing yourself creatively and having fun. There is never a wrong way to go about an assignment in this class. If you’re excited about an unfinished piece and want to keep going with it the next (and possibly the next as well) that is absolutely fine. You can treat a nonfiction assignment as fiction or vice versa. Everything you receive from me is designed to plant ideas in your head and give you inspiration. Where you take it is up to you.

On the weekends, you will not receive a full lesson, but I will send out micro-prompts so that if you want to keep up your daily practice and need the guidance you may do additional free writes or catch up if you missed a day during the week. There is no formal workshop component to this course, but students will read and respond to one other
person’s writing each day with just one or two sentences letting them know what was especially strong or compelling. If you choose to opt out and not give or receive any feedback, you may, but I encourage you to participate in the feedback chain if you have the time and interest, because this kind of collaboration and support can be a very rewarding part of a robust creative life and make the large format course more fun as well.

To receive credit in this class, you must submit a total of 15 pieces of writing. That breaks down to approximately 3 per week, though you may do more or less in any of the five weeks, as long as it adds up to 15 total.

This is an online course. For more information about the Online Writing Program, visit continuingstudies.stanford.edu

Grade Options and Requirements:
• No Grade Requested (NGR)
  o This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
• Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  o Score will be determined by student attendance and participation. Credit is given for completing 15 distinct pieces of writing in response to 15 different prompts. Whenever you submit in the day’s discussion thread, you will automatically receive credit for that day. At the end of the course, I’ll count and see if you have logged 15 submissions.

Required Texts and Materials:
• A notebook that you dedicate to this course.
• I will provide short pieces to read via Canvas and Internet links

Recommended (not required) Craft Texts:

Note: THESE BOOKS ARE NOT USED IN THE CLASS AT ALL. THE INSTRUCTOR PROVIDES SHORT PIECES VIA EMAIL/DISCUSSION THREAD, AND NO BOOKS ARE USED. THIS IS JUST A RESOURCE OF TITLES THAT MIGHT INTEREST YOU NOW OR LATER AS YOU WORK ON YOUR CREATIVE WRITING:

• Bird by Bird, Anne Lamott
• anything by Natalie Goldberg
• On Writing, Stephen King
• How Fiction Works, James Wood
• The Half-Known World, Robert Boswell
• The Writing Life, Annie Dillard (this one is—quite brilliantly—more narrative and lyrical)

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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• A good anthology such as The New Granta Book of the American Short Story, ed. Richard Ford or The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction, eds: Lex Williford and Michael Marton
• Annual anthologies, particularly The Best American Short Stories and The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories
• Story collections of any writer you especially connect with while taking this course

Participation and Instructor Involvement:
This is a high enrollment course, designed to work for students with very different amounts of feedback, which is fine. Every Friday, you will have the option of submitting one piece per week, up to 500 words, for light feedback (only positive) from the instructor, if you wish it.

If you want more communication and engagement, you may join a small group to give and receive feedback. As a group, it’s up to you to determine how to go about this, though I will set up the small group threads in week 1.

As an instructor in this large-format course, my primary role is that of facilitator and content curator. That said, I will also create an ongoing “thoughts/questions” thread that I will monitor, where you may raise and discuss any questions that come up for you concerning the daily readings and assignments. I will also read one piece per week (500 word) per student, on a thread labeled: “optional: submission for Malena to read.” I will also hold a weekly office hour on a video platform called Zoom where students can raise questions in person, and where we will try some “in-class writing exercises,” for those who need a little more support in forming and sustaining this creative habit.

Your imagination is fertile, even if it’s been dormant for a while. This course will provide the seeds and the soil. If you water this garden, it will grow!

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week One
Mining The Moment (creative nonfiction)

Week Two
Digging Up The Past (more creative nonfiction)

Week Three
The Lie That Tells The Truth (fiction)

Week Four
More Adventures in Storytelling (fiction)
Week Five
Demystifying Poetry

Zoom Sessions:
Zoom sessions will be held on Thursdays at noon, PT.

*Please note: the Zoom schedule is subject to change. Attendance at Zoom sessions is not required.

NOTE: The two sections of EGL 19 W are identical in format. The weeks have the same overall structure and titles. However, I have swapped out about 75% of the prompts so that students who wish to take both courses consecutively have some fresh content the second time they go through it.