Course Title: The Writing Life: Form and Theory of the Novel
Course Code: OWC 101 A
Instructor: Ammi Keller

Course Summary:

“Form and theory” are how we discuss what holds a novel together, the things that make a work of sequential prose feel like a three-dimensional reality. “The writing life” are the habits by which the novelist gets there, from the initial inspiration through the long haul of drafting, organizing and revising the material.

In this course, students will amass skills and concepts for understanding not only how successful novels are constructed but also for working with their individual creative processes. To this end, each week will ask a key question linking both form and process, and will offer writing prompts to support the writer in penning new novel pages while at the same time enlarging their toolbox of both applicable techniques and productive habits of mind.

Writers will read a book on craft alongside two novels, and will analyze the choices these authors made with an eye to what is transferable to their own projects. During the last week of the course, students will look both backwards and forwards, considering their own experience in order to create a working plan for the adventure of writing their novel over the next year and a half.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.

Required Texts:

REQUIRED:

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**Element of Fiction: Beginnings, Middles and Ends** by Nancy Kress  

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**My Name is Lucy Barton** by Elizabeth Strout  
[https://bookshop.org/books/my-name-is-lucy-barton/9780812979527](https://bookshop.org/books/my-name-is-lucy-barton/9780812979527)

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**The Vanishing Half** by Brit Bennett

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions  
365 Lasuen St. Stanford, CA 94305  
continuingstudies@stanford.edu  
650-725-2650
https://bookshop.org/books/the-vanishing-half-9780525536291/9780525536291

RECOMMENDED:

Saves the Cat! Writes a Novel by Jessica Brody
ISBN: 978-9780399579745
  • Optional pages to read will be offered from this book during Week 10 of the course.

Olympus, Texas by Stacey Swann
ISBN: 978-0385545211
https://bookshop.org/books/olympus-texas-9780593414095/9780385545211
  • Author Stacey Swann (who is a former instructor of this course) will attend a Zoom session Week 9 to answer questions about the process of writing her novel. Attendance is optional and the session will be recorded.

Grade Options and Requirements:
  • Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)

65% completing your required creative and critical work in a timely fashion. This includes: doing the weekly writing assignments and posting in response to at least one discussion points question each week.

35%: creating a welcoming and productive atmosphere while responding to other writers. This includes responding to your groupmates posted writing and responding to other students’ discussion points answers.

Each week, I will make it clear which components are required. Though other activities and readings are offered, completing them or skipping them will not impact a student’s grade.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week One: How to Write a Book in 45 Minutes

How do initial inspirations become fully-realized novels?

Reading: Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Introduction and Chapter 1
Live session: Wednesday 9/22 at 4 pm PT/6 Pm CT/7 pm ET

Week Two: Looking for Trouble
How can we invite meaningful conflict into our fiction?

*Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, Chapter 2

*My Name is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout, first third - pages TBA.
Live session: Wednesday 9/29 at 4 pm PT/6 Pm CT/7 pm ET

Week Three: Anatomy of a Scene
How can we gain facility with the modes of narrative prose?

*Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, Chapter 3

*My Name is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout, second third - pages TBA.
Live session: TBA

Week Four: Throughline
How can writers set up a powerful climax—even when they don’t yet know what’s going to happen?

*Beginnings, Middles and Ends*, Chapter 4

Finish *My Name is Lucy Barton* by Elizabeth Strout.

Week Five: The Week Long Writing Residency
No reading. No discussion questions. A full week to make and hit stretch writing goals.

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Week Six: Character

How can our characters surprise us?

*Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapter 5.*

*The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett to the end of Chapter 5.

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Week Seven: Stakes and the Writing Journey

How can you best support your unique writing process?

*Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapter 6*

*The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett to the end of Chapter 11.

Live session: Q&A with Kelly McGonigal, author of *The Willpower Instinct*, on the creative process.

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Week Eight: Reverse Engineer Your Ending

When should you move through events rapidly and when should you relay them moment to moment?

*Beginnings, Middles and Ends, Chapter 7 and 9* (Chapter 8 is optional)

*Finish The Vanishing Half by Brit Bennett.*

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Week Nine: The Beginning of the End

What makes an ending feel satisfying or final? How does one reverse engineer the most powerful end series of scenes?

Reading: Optional links only. If possible, read the optional novel *Olympus, Texas* sometime before this week.

Live session: Q&A with Stacey Swann, author of *Olympus, Texas.*
Week Ten: How to Write a Book in Two Years

How will your initial inspiration become a full-fledged novel?

Recommended/optional reading: *Saves the Cat! Writes a Novel* Chapters 1-3 and your choice of a subsequent “genre” chapter.

**Weekly Schedule:**

Monday: each new week officially starts. I will send a welcome back email.

Wednesday: 5 pm (PST), Writing Assignment due though the earlier you post the more time you’ll have to receive feedback.

Thursday: 5 pm (PST), responses to the Discussion Points questions due, though it’s ideal to get these up early in the week, to allow for more conversation.

I will hold a live Zoom session with a lecture and a writing prompt most weeks, often on Wednesday or Friday, at 4 pm Pacific (6 pm Central/7 pm Eastern) time or at 12 pm (2 pm Central/3 pm Eastern) time. All live sessions will be recorded, so students unable to attend can view them later.

Throughout the Week: responses to Discussion Points accumulate into conversations. You drive and participate in these discussions. During most weeks you respond to several of your peers new novel freewrites with supportive comments.

Weekend: Get a jumpstart on doing the reading, answering the discussion points for the next week, writing to the coming week’s prompt and/or working on your novel. I won’t be visiting the discussion boards or answering email on Saturday or Sunday, but you’re welcome to start posting for the coming week. The classroom is always open!

This framework may sound complex in theory but tends to flow quite naturally in practice with each participant doing the bulk of their work when it best fits their schedule. The magic of an asynchronous class is that each student can work when their schedule permits; there’s no need to work 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 course material and on the discussion boards. What this means is that if you’re a weekend worker, you should plan to post up work for week that is about to arrive (as opposed to the one ending) on the weekend.

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Weekly Writing Assignments:

Discovering and completing a novel requires constant drafting and, for many writers, extensive experimentation. To this end, you will be asked to create new novel writing from a choice of prompts, posting up to 750 words of the result during Week Two through Four and Week Six through Nine.

Although students sometimes express an understandable urge to post previously written pieces of their novels, it’s better for both the individual and the class when each person drafts something new. First, because posting polished work can make the rest of the group feel insecure about putting up messy new writing. Secondly, because growth as writer comes from both getting as many new words down on the page as possible. So if you already have pages of your novel written, save those for workshops in Novel 1 and the courses that follow.

Weekly Writing Assignment/Mini-Workshop Feedback:

The pleasure in joining a community of writers is in getting to know one another’s work—and struggles, and triumphs over these struggles—over time. To this end, you will be responding briefly to a few other writer’s work each week with an eye to helping them see the long-range possibilities in their new writing.

During Week Two through Four you will work with a variety of people. During Week Six through Nine I will put you into multi-week groups so you can get to know a few novels/novelists better.

Word Limits:

I ask that you keep your weekly writing exercises to 750 or less words (or the stated limit if different). Individual students may decide to outside of the course and share more, but it is beyond the scope of this course to ask fellow students or the instructor to engage with work that exceeds the stated limits on class assignments.

My Commentary:

I approach this work from a book coaching mindset. This means I will be offering primarily brief supportive comments on your weekly exercises, as I believe the main benefit to these is you getting fresh writing onto the page, and receiving encouraging engagement from myself and others. Please know what am learning about your rough draft writing will inform any substantive suggestions I make during our private conference.

Discussion Points Reflections:

Each week you will be asked to dig deep into the published novels, and to use your own
ideas, the course lectures and the craft book to analyze how each novel is working in a nuts and bolts way. The discussion points questions are designed to make you flip back, reread and cite specific scenes to make your arguments about why you feel as you do about the characters and story. You’re welcome to enjoy the novels (or not), but our focus will be on moving beyond impression to analysis. If you haven’t done this kind of focused study of fiction before, don’t be intimidated! There’s no one right way to talk about how novels work. Just get in there, and work out your ideas by writing through them on the boards.

You will also be asked to reflect on your creative process. Though I do not respond to each of these individually, I read them all and make a comment or two on the entire thread when it applies. These also inform my understanding of you as a writer.

**Discussion Board Use:**

In my experience using this platform, I’ve learned that board conversations end up most generative and satisfying when students couch their answers to the discussion points questions in response to existing posts.

So if another student or students has already responded when you arrive at a forum, read their posts to see if you might be able to add your thoughts as a way of building on what they’ve already said. Copying and pasting a sentence or two from the previous post and then adding your own thoughts—the ways you’d acknowledge that someone has spoken in a physical classroom before moving on—works great.

The ideal board shape tends to feature several main threads, each with a number of replies and counter-replies. More than just creating good conversation in the moment, it will be on this platform and through these back-and-forths that you create the community that will sustain you over the length of the program.

There is a 250-word limit on discussion points posts. This exists because in the past students have felt others answered every question before they could get on there, leaving them nothing left to say! I ask a lot of broad questions, and it would be impossible to answer all them succinctly. So think about all of each week’s questions but just post about one or two, keeping the weekly workload down for yourself and others while you continue to turn over the larger issues in your mind.

**My Online Presence:**

I am online four to five days a week, reading new posts and responding when I can best stimulate conversation and underscore key concepts (though I often will not respond to board posts until late in the week to allow students to respond to one another’s ideas). I check my email about once a weekday, and will respond as promptly as I can. I will not be online or answering email during weekends or holidays.

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Time Management:

As a writer, you should not be online all the time. It’s not good for your creative process to treat this class as a 5 day-a-week or 24/7 commitment. More than two or three days per week spent online for class—one day to post assignments and one or two days to follow up with comments from others—is not necessary for grading purposes and, honestly, may not be in the best interest of your novel. Turn your wireless function off when you’re writing, and work on your book first thing every day, putting it before class work. If you produce a page a day you’ll have a first draft in a year, and if you produce 500 words a day, you’ll have a short novel nearing completion within six months. While this is more than the requirements of this class, it’s important to see it as a viable option. Don’t let internalized social pressure lead you to focus on class at the expense of your book.

In practice, I have found that students have vastly different reserves of time to devote to this class and their novel projects.

Because of this, I will make it clear each week which assignments are required and which are optional. If you’ve posted in response to at least one discussion question, and posted creative work and brief responses to others, you can feel free to ignore the rest of the week’s material.

Because all writers—especially successful ones—face lifelong drains on their time, it is important you become skilled at setting a schedule, putting the writing first and then selecting from the optional activities those that seem most likely to support your writing and development.

Also, if illness, changing professional deadlines, family needs and life crisis get in the way of your ability to stay up to date in the course, please check in with me via Canvas message or email ASAP so I can support you and we can find a way to help you stay on track for the class and program.

One Final Note:

The Online Writers’ Certificate program attracts like-minded people from all over the world, and brings them together after careful consideration to create a cohort. So you may find yourself in a group with physicians and schoolteachers, stay at home parents and gigging musicians, Hollywood production assistants and environmental activists, all with a passion for the written word.

The program belongs to you all.

I am your facilitator for this first course. But the curiosity of the discussions and the character of the mutual support will be what determines the quality of your experience during this fall and the two years to come.
So, please, participate authentically and generously. Take risks while completing your creative assignments and while trying out new ideas. 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. Tell me about your concerns, about your ideas for discussions, or simply post a question for others to answer in the Questions and Comments forum. This is your cohort, and your program.