The Creative Habit: Cultivating A Daily Writing Practice
EGL 19 W
Stanford Continuing Studies, Fall 2015
Instructor: Malena Watrous

About This Course:

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. Perhaps we start listening to the critical voices that have told us that we’re no good and shouldn’t bother wasting our time. Maybe we get focused on making money, raising kids, keeping a clean house or exercising. All of this is important, but it can sap our creative energy. There are so many “shoulds” competing for our attention, it can be easy to stop doing anything that’s creative at all.

Have you seen what happens to a kid when they’re not allowed to play? They get irritable, upset. Something that needs to express itself can’t, and they don’t feel right inside. Does that sound familiar? If so, you’re not alone. The good news is, it’s not hard to kick-start a creative writing habit. This course is designed to help you do just that!

Writing is the perfect vehicle to allow you—anyone—to do express their imaginations. (And you do still have one, I promise, even if you haven’t used it in a while). Writing is free. It’s portable. You can do it with a keyboard or (my favorite) a good old-fashioned pen. It’s infinitely adaptable. You can mine your own life for personal stories and essays, use that material to craft poems, or invent stories out of thin air, fueled by the power of your imagination.

This class is for everyone who wants to use creative writing to reawaken their imaginations and activate their sense of play. We will look at the three main genres of creative writing: creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, with a little dramatic (play) writing thrown in the mix. For 21 days (four weeks, weekends off) you will get a daily prompt, often accompanied by a piece of published writing or some work of art intended to trigger your imagination. You will always have the option to write in the form that inspires you, picking different genres from one day to the next or sticking to one form—as you prefer.

In terms of what’s expected of you, you will be asked to write and post one page of writing per day, or to spend about 30-60 minutes on your writing. Of course you may do more. Some people like to think in terms of pages, while others prefer to write on a kind of timer and stop when their time is up. While there will be a daily prompt, you will ALWAYS be allowed to go “off road,” writing from your own inspiration, in whatever form you wish. If you are working on a longer project, or if you start to work on one in this course (a story, an essay, a series of poems), you could definitely use the daily work and prompts to sustain that longer piece.
For the first 4 weeks of class, I will ask you to suspend your inner critic completely and just enjoy the process of creative writing. If you choose, you may join a 5 person inspiration and response group, which I will set up in the first week, and your task will be to respond to the other members of your small group in a constructive, positive manner.

In the fifth and final week of class, you will either be allowed to keep playing (I will post 7 more daily prompts) or else you may choose to revise your favorite piece from the class, with my guidance.

In terms of instructor feedback, you will get to choose 2 pieces of writing that you do in this course, that you may submit to me for feedback. You may choose which 2 pieces you would like to submit at any point in the first 4 weeks of class. If you do a revision in week 5, it should be of one of the pieces upon which you received my feedback. I will then look at your revision and tell you my final thoughts on the revised work. You will have a special “assignments” thread where you post your two pieces for me to see, and where I will post my responses to you. The other students will not be able to see the contents of the assignments thread, so it's a special spot for us to work one-on-one.

Note: This is not a workshop. The learning objective of this course is to teach you how to form and sustain a creative writing habit, inspiring and recharging you, as a result of trying a variety of exercises and reading a variety of creative writing samples.

**Recommended Reading:**

Writing Down The Bones, Freeing the Writer Within, by Natalie Goldberg  
Poetry 180, A Turning Back to Poetry, selected by Billy Collins  
Flash Fiction Forward, 80 Very Short Stories, edited by James Thomas & Robert Shapard

I will occasionally assign pieces from these books, particularly the poetry book, as inspiration. I definitely recommend getting them, especially since they are inexpensive and fun. We will not, however, have time to read them cover to cover.

**How This Class Will Work:**

Every weekday for the first 4 weeks of class, you will receive a writing prompt via email that will also be posted as a class announcement. Your task will be to spend 30-60 minutes and submit a 1 page (approximately) piece of writing by the end of the day (midnight) for 21 days or the first 4 weeks of class. Weekends you will be “off.” You may always substitute a piece of writing of your own choosing, going off-prompt. The only thing that matters is that you keep writing creatively, building a habit.

The prompts are intended to trigger your imagination, but there is no “right” or “wrong” approach. If, for instance, you love one of the forms—say, creative nonfiction, or
poetry—and find yourself wanting to return to it again and again, that’s absolutely fine. I will sometimes give 2 or 3 different prompts, so that you can choose between them.

This is not your typical “homework,” and there is NO right or wrong way to do creative writing in this class. If you are writing, you’re doing it right. The most important thing is that you’re having fun.

**Peer Response Groups:**

In week 1, I will set up groups of 5 people, appointing group leaders who will be in charge of keeping the group on track. You will have 3 choices, depending on the amount of time you have and want to spend on course and group work:

1) Groups of 5 in which you will each post daily and read and respond to 4 (everyone, not including you) pieces per day.

2) Groups of 5 in which you each choose 1 day of the week that is your designated day to post, so that you only have to read and respond to 1 fellow student per day. The group leader will help to create the submission schedule.

3) No group. While I think that you will get more out of this class if you join a response group, some of you may have limited time and just want to receive daily prompts and do your writing more or less on your own, posting it for accountability and submitting your 2 pieces to me. If this describes your situation, that’s fine. If, however, you know that you will get more out of the class if you form collaborations and receive supportive feedback, then I encourage you to join a response group.

That said, please don’t join a group and not participate. It will be discouraging to your peers who want and need this. You don’t need to write copious amounts of feedback to one another. You could simply start by identifying one line or part of the piece of writing that is working particularly well, and/or raising questions for the author. Questions are often more useful than evaluation, especially in a class of this nature and when looking at free writes and first drafts.

**Keeping a Notebook:**

Part of cultivating a creative practice is learning how to be a more observant person, and also learning to capture those observations in language before they evaporate. With that in mind, I will ask you to keep a notebook as you take this class. Carry it will you at all times if you can. Use it to jot down images, lines of overheard dialogue, impressions from your dreams, ideas for stories and poems, anything and everything that you notice. If you’d like, use it to do your daily writing. Lynda Barry believes that handwriting accesses creativity, because it’s individual and real and makes it much harder to self-edit during the creative
process, and I happen to feel the same way. If you haven’t handwritten for a while, try it and see if you’re not pleasantly surprised by what comes out!

**My Role As Creativity Facilitator:**

Because this is a larger format class, I will not be able to respond to everything you post in the forums, every day. I will respond to the 2 pieces that you choose to submit to me (up to 1000 words each) and I will help you with a revision in week 5, if you so choose. I will be online at least three days per week to answer any questions that you have in a “class bulletin board” thread, to cheer for you, to provide supplemental links to creative works and articles on creativity, etc…

**Week 5: Optional Revision:**

In week 5, you have the choice of continuing as usual—a new module will still release each day, with a new brief reading assignment and creative writing prompt—or else using the week to revise your favorite piece of writing from the previous 21 days. Or, if you’d like, you may do both! This is YOUR class, and it’s up to you to use it in the way that inspires you and keeps your creative engine going strong. I will read and offer feedback on 1 revision per student. Ideally, you will submit a revision of one of the 2 pieces you’ve already showed me, so that I can see how you incorporated my feedback into the revision.

**Grading:**

Your grade will in no way be affected by the quality of your work, but only by your participation in this class as structured. If you post at least 50% of the time (so 10 out of 20 days of the first 4 weeks) you will receive full credit. Anything less than 50% will not receive credit.

**About Your Instructor:**

Malena Watrous is a novelist, magazine writer and book critic. She is lead instructor for Stanford's Online Writers’ Studio, where she has been teaching since the first semester that they launched online courses. She helped to form the Online Writing Certificate Program in the novel, designed to help students write and complete a novel in two years. She lives in San Francisco with her husband, son and cat. When she’s not writing and teaching, she enjoys sewing, reading, cooking and dancing, which she does very poorly but loves in spite of an obvious lack of talent, in part because she thinks it’s a good idea to humble yourself on a daily basis.