THE WRITING LIFE: FORM AND THEORY OF THE NOVEL  
OWC 101 A  
AMMI KELLER  

Online Certificate Program in Novel Writing  
Stanford Continuing Studies  
Fall 2015

Course Description

“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 in both time and space.

“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 so that their own novels become realized. To this end, each week will ask a key question linking both form and process, and will offer writing exercises that encourage students to advance on their novel drafts while at the same time enlarging their toolbox of both applicable techniques and productive habits of mind.

Writers will read a book on story structure alongside two novels, and will analyze the choices these authors made with an eye to what is transferable to their own projects. Supplemental craft essays will be available on core fiction components such as dialogue, plot design and approaches to revision, while supplemental material on process will help students consider day to day necessities such as willpower and time management.

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.

Grading:

Your grade will be not be determined by the content or perceived quality of your creative work, but by your meeting the course requirements.

65%: completing your required creative and critical work in a timely fashion. This includes: doing the first week’s collaborative assignment, posting short writing assignment during weeks 2-4, posting a workshop submission, and posting in response to at least one discussion points question a week.

35%: creating a welcoming and productive atmosphere while responding to other writers. This includes writing feedback to group-mates short writing assignments, workshop letters 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.

**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 office hour every Thursday for the first five weeks and in Week Ten, often at 4 pm Pacific (6 pm Central/7 pm Eastern) time or at 12 pm (2 pm Central/3 pm Eastern) time. But I also ask students what works for them and move some sessions so that most students can attend at least one. You’re not required to come, and feel free to drop in for shorter periods of time within that hour. All group chats will be recorded, so students unable to attend can view them later. In the second half of the class, we’ll switch to one-on-one conferences to discuss your work and workshop. (These conferences are also optional.)

Throughout the Week: responses to Discussion Points accumulate into conversations. You drive and participate in these discussions. Also, you respond to two or three of your peer’s writing assignments.

Weekend: Get a jumpstart on doing the reading, answering the discussion points for the next week, experimenting with the coming week’s writing prompts/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 next week starting Saturday morning of the week before. 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.

**Weekly Topics and Reading**

Week One: How to Write a Book in 45 Minutes
How do initial inspirations develop into full-fledged novels?

Week Two: The Way Beginning
What are the components of a successful novel opening?

Week Three: But I’m Still Beginning
How do novels sustain momentum after their openings?
Week Four: “Problems of the Second Act”
How do novels gain in tension and complexity as they move through their middles?

Week Five: Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?
How can writers set up a powerful climax—even if they don’t know what’s going to happen yet?

Week Six: Honing in on the Heart of Your Novel
How do writers identify their character’s stakes from the outset? What kind of novel are you writing?

Week Seven: Backstory vs. Frontstory
How do novelists choose when and how to use backstory? Also, how does one decide between summarizing events and showing them in scene?

Week Eight: But My Family is Going to Kill Me!
Where does the emotional energy to continue drafting a novel come from? How should you handle personal material?

Week Nine: The Moment(s) We’ve All Been Waiting for
What makes an ending feel satisfying or final? How does one reverse engineer the most powerful end series of scenes?

Week Ten: How to Write a Book in Two Years
How will your initial inspiration become a full-fledged novel?

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 freewrites from a list of prompts, posting 200-600 words each week during weeks two through four.

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 everyone drafts something new. First, because posting polished work can make the rest of the group feel uncomfortable about putting up messy drafts. Secondly—and more importantly—because growth as writer comes from both getting as many new words down on the page as possible and tackling your novel from new, unexpected directions. So if you already have pages of your novel written, save those for workshop in the second half of the class.

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, after you’ve posted, you will offer about 50-100 words of feedback to two or three other writers, with an eye to helping them see the long-range possibilities in their fresh writing.
Workshops:

During weeks six through nine, students will post one longer piece for discussion by a larger group. As the Program in Novel Writing moves forward, the MFA style workshop will become a key component. Our version of the workshop will involve shorter submissions and flexible responses in order to help writers at different stages in their process get useful attention. To this end, workshop submissions may be up to 4000 words and should be either an excerpt of a novel in progress or other work the writer is considering using for a novel project. You are welcome to use an expanded version of writing you did for an earlier prompt, and will be free to tell us “what happened so far” in the story that precedes your post. You will receive detailed feedback from me and other students, with an eye towards both helping you continue to draft and to prepare for your workshop in Novel 1, which focuses on openers. Because Novel 1 asks students to post their novel’s beginning, you may want to select a different, later section to share with this course—or you might want to use the workshops in both quarters to focus on what needs to happen in the first section in order to get your novel off the ground.

Workshop Feedback:

Becoming a better reader is an integral part of your development as a writer. Writing editorial letters to other writers and offering them in line comments are ways you teach yourself how prose impacts you and to gain insights into how to make it stronger. That said, there will be as many intents, genre and styles in the room as there are writers, so it’s also important to read each work not as yourself but as that work’s best reader—a habit that will also give you a bird’s eye view of your own style and passions over time.

We will divide into two groups for workshop. You will be responsible for reading and responding to two workshop submissions each week with a 200-400 word letter to each writer. This means half the class will respond to your work and you to theirs, a structure chosen to keep your workload low enough for you to continue doing your own drafting.

I’ll be sending a response letter writing primer via email week five. It contains lists of starter questions and suggestions for those who haven’t done this kind of critique writing before, or anyone looking for new approaches for how to offer helpful feedback.

Word Limits:

I ask that you keep your weekly writing exercises to 200-600 words, and your workshop submissions to no more than 4000 words. If the class shows an interest, I will happily create a special forum thread for students who want to share more pages than this. Though I won’t be able to offer feedback beyond these limits myself, I’ve found that offering a place for prolific writers to connect can prove useful. That said, 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 will be offering only very brief comments on your weekly exercises, as I believe the
main benefit to these is you getting fresh writing onto the page, and to receive encouraging engagement from others. My comments on your workshop submission will be more constructive and detailed. Though I will be offering far less detailed commentary on the earlier freewriting, please know that what I am learning about your rough draft writing will inform the suggestions I make during workshop.

**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 and essays 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, dialogue and details to make your arguments about why you feel as you do—or why you know what you know—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 self evaluate and talk about process: to describe how your writing is going and what you notice about your habits as you draft. 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 your workshop work.

**Discussion Board Use**

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

What this means: 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 agreeing with, respectfully disagreeing with or 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.

If your ideas have a different focus, please do feel free to start a new thread. But if you’re repeating ideas without showing you’ve read what’s up there, other writers don’t feel heard. And who wants to inhabit a room where everyone is talking and no one is listening?

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 board reading load down 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 week day, and will respond as promptly as I can. I will not be online or answering email during weekends or holidays.

The magic of an online 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, its best to get ahead of the game and focus on the coming week’s work over the weekend.

**Time Management and Travel**

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, it 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. You will be a better student, have more fun participating in class, and give more incisive feedback to your fellow writers if you are writing as much as possible. Plus, you’ll be happier!

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 (or done your workshop response letters) 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.
An important note: although students who come to 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. Please check in with me if you are having personal difficulties that make it hard to keep up with the required assignments.

**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 commodities traders, Hollywood production assistants and Green Anarchists, 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.