Course Title: Captivating Your Readers: How to Write a Compelling Opening
Course Code: EGL 62
Instructor: Ron Nyren

Course Summary:
Whether you’re writing a novel, short story, or nonfiction piece, this course is designed to give you tools and inspiration for writing a compelling opening. In each class, I’ll provide a handout on a specific topic, and we’ll talk about ways to apply craft strategies. In-class writing exercises will help you explore different approaches to writing openings. Along the way, we’ll read the beginnings of published short stories, novels, and nonfiction and discuss the ways authors draw the reader in while setting up the urgent concerns of the work. Everyone in the class will have the chance to share with the class an opening to a published work they love, as well as to turn in an opening of their own to be workshoped. In workshop, we’ll provide constructive feedback, focusing on what’s working well and what possibilities for further development lie within.

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

Grade Options and Requirements:
- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - 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)
  - To receive credit, you will need to attend class regularly and contribute to the discussion of the readings and workshop pieces.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - Grading is based on your regular attendance and contributions to the discussions; in addition, you’ll need to bring a published opening to share with the class and turn an opening of your own for workshop.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

Format for Turning in Work for Workshop:
When you turn in your opening—up to 5,000 words—for workshop, please make copies for everyone. Make sure it is stapled, double-spaced, page-numbered, with margins of one inch, in a typeface that’s easy to read (like 12 point Times Roman). Indicate if it’s a short story, novel, or work of nonfiction.
**Attendance:**
Since this is a discussion class/writing workshop, regular attendance is key. The class depends on you and the particular experiences and knowledge and ideas you bring. If an emergency prevents you from coming to class, please email me as soon as you can, before class if possible.

**Readings:**
- *Beginnings, Middles & Ends*, Nancy Kress

- At the first class, I’ll bring in copies of some openings for us to read and discuss. I’ll also pass out a sign-up schedule so that over the rest of the course, everyone can have a turn sharing with the class an opening they love from a published novel, short story, or nonfiction piece. In this way, we’ll build a class-specific “anthology” of openings to study.

**Tentative Weekly Outline:**

**Week One: Bringing Characters to Life**
- Questions: How can the opening give readers a sense of who the characters are right away? How can the piece begin to suggest relationships and challenges/conflicts?
- In-Class Writing Exercise: “Attitude in Action”
- For discussion: Three openings
- Sign up for workshop and for sharing an opening you love

**Week Two: Raising Narrative Questions in the Reader’s Mind**
- What keeps readers turning pages? How can an opening balance mystery and clarity to cause readers to want to know more? How can writers control the release of information and back-story for maximum effect?
- In-class writing exercise: “The Catalyst”
- For discussion: Kress, Chapters 1&2; shared openings
- Workshop

**Week Three: Unlocking the Dramatic Possibilities of Point of View**
- Questions: How do writers choose which point of view to use for a particular work? How does the choice of the point-of-view character(s) alter the very nature of the story being told?
- In-Class Writing Exercise: “The Switch”
- For discussion: Kress, Chapter 3; shared openings
- Workshop

**Week Four: Inviting in the Reader: Setting and Sensory Details**
- Questions: How can images embody emotions, themes, or memories? How do writers make sensory details (sight, smell, sound, touch, taste) so vivid the reader feels them?
- In-Class Writing Exercise: “Synesthesia”
• For discussion: shared openings
• Workshop

**Week Five: Shaping the Scenes**
• Questions: How do writers decide when to use scene and when to use summary? What makes a scene feel gripping and significant?
• In-Class Writing Exercise: “Fuse on Fire”
• For discussion: shared openings
• Workshop

**Week Six: Honing the Language: Making Voice and Style Compelling**
• Questions: What is the relationship between the style of a story and its content? What makes a sentence compelling?
• In-class writing exercise: “Possession”
• For discussion: shared openings
• Workshop

**Week Seven: Linking Beginnings with Endings**
• Questions: How can ending answer or address questions raised in the beginning in a way that feels resonant? How can the ending show a significant change or new perspective on the characters’ lives?
• In-class writing exercise: “Alternate Reality Endings”
• For discussion: Kress, Chapters 7&8; shared openings
• Workshop

**Week Eight: Revising Your Opening/Developing the Story**
• Questions: How can writers draw on their opening to give them clues for going forward? When should revision come into the process, and how can revision uncover the novel’s most urgent subject matters and possibilities?
• In-class writing exercise: “Rehearsal”
• For discussion: Kress, Chapter 9; shared openings
• Workshop

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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