Transporting the Reader: The Art of Description
EGL 72 W
Spring Quarter 2017
Instructor: Lewis Robinson

COURSE DESCRIPTION

On your couch at home, you open a book and are immediately transported to base camp on Mount Everest. The sights, sounds, and smells are shockingly recognizable. Have we been here before? How did this happen? Sensory details hurtle us into a story, and alert us to the physical and emotional experience of the characters. Even in small doses, description reveals why a story is being told and what is most relevant to those involved. Being mindful of plot, characterization, and point-of-view, we will practice finding the right balance of details, so a setting can become more than just a static backdrop, and objects can feel like more than just props. Attending to the precision and authenticity of details helps to make a short story, memoir, or novel all the more emotionally engrossing. In the first five weeks of class—by way of reading and writing exercises—we will generate new work and share our progress. In weeks six through ten, students will submit and workshop longer excerpts. We will discuss short stories, essays, and notes on craft by a variety of contemporary masters. This course is suitable for fiction and nonfiction writers. All experience levels are welcome.

REQUIRED TEXTS

The Best American Short Stories 2016,
Junot Diaz, Editor
https://www.amazon.com/dp/0544582896/ref=rdr_ext_tmb

The Best American Essays 2013,
Cheryl Strayed, Editor
https://www.amazon.com/dp/0544103882/ref=rdr_ext_tmb

RECOMMENDED READING

The Art of Description: World into Word by Mark Doty
http://www.amazon.com/dp/1555975631/ref=rdr_ext_tmb

Euphoria
Lily King
http://www.amazon.com/dp/0802123708/ref=rdr_ext_tmb

Drown
Junot Diaz
http://www.amazon.com/dp/1573226068/ref=rdr_ext_tmb
**Love and Other Ways of Dying**  
Michael Paterniti  
https://www.amazon.com/dp/0385337035/ref=rdr_ext_tmb

**A Note on the Recommended Reading:**  
These are books with vivid, controlled description. This reading is entirely optional!

**GRADING**

Writing assignments/exercises: 40%  
Workshop piece: 20%  
Forum/workshop participation: 40%

**Writing assignments/exercises:** timely completion of the short exercises during weeks 1 through 5, and thoughtfully answering at least one of the discussion questions every week.

**Participation in the workshop discussion and the forums:** timely responses to work posted by your peers (short pieces written during the first half of the course and longer excerpts delivered in the second half of the course). Initially these responses will be succinct and informal, but as we move into the workshop phase of the class, each student will write a “letter of critique” in response to the 2,000-5,000-word works-in-progress posted. Compassionate, constructive, specific feedback is what I’m hoping for.

**WEEKLY TOPICS AND READING:**

In each of the first five weeks, I will assign two-three stories/essays from our anthologies. Each week’s discussion questions and writing exercises will be based on a theme.

**WEEK ONE (April 3-7): Introductions, Source Materials, Beginnings**

Our first assignment is a meet-and-greet sampler. It’s a series of questions about your life, your reading proclivities, your tastes, what you find interesting/beautiful/unnerving. I’m hoping that by answering these questions, reading the answers that others post, and commenting on those posts, we’ll all begin to get to know each other and establish a class culture. (It won’t be long before you’re sharing your creative work; to make that process more meaningful and comfortable, we should begin to know each other as people and not just as sources of electronic text!)

When we as writers describe the world, we are asserting a specific, idiosyncratic sensibility. Week one will begin this work.

In this first week, too, we’ll identify sources of inspiration, and ways to begin new work.

Reading: anthology
**WEEK TWO (April 10-14): Visceral description**

The poet Baron Wormser describes his approach to writing this way: “I want the reader to be reminded of what it feels like to be alive in the world.” How does a writer do this?

This week, we’ll practice rendering sensory details. We’ll consider the impact of physical descriptions of the body. We’ll discuss the description of physical action.

Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK THREE (April 17-21): Details that Characterize**

How a narrator/speaker/character experiences the world determines who they are to your readers. Description is a portrait of the one who is looking; it’s a signature of perception. Whenever a detail is rendered, it’s as though the writer is asserting: “here stands a specific idiosyncratic sensibility.”

This week, we will practice writing short scenes—a necessary unit for most fiction and creative non-fiction—and we will discuss the impact of description when evoking a specific moment.

Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK FOUR (April 24-28): Point of View as the Engine of Engagement**

Whether you use a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd-person narrator, what is noticed—and how it gets noticed—goes a long way in helping your readers get emotionally involved in your narrative. Point of view is everything!

Description and setting and psychological complexity—and much more—are rendered by point-of-view. And point-of-view is rendered by way of description. How might a grumpy misanthrope describe the throngs at an amusement park? How would that image be rendered differently by a child?

In our writing exercise this week, we’ll practice getting more out of point-of-view. Close reading, too, will be essential this week. We’ll pick apart excerpts from stories and essays in the anthologies.

Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK FIVE (May 1-5): Battling Cliché**

Cliché comes in many forms. Clichéd description can sometimes be easy to identify (her lips were like rose petals), but some overly-familiar patterns of description can be harder
to root out. What makes description fresh and vivid? We’ll talk about the importance of details that provoke, inspiring the reader to reconsider.

Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK SIX (May 8-12): Workshop**
Workshop 1
Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK SEVEN (May 15-19): Workshop**
Workshop 2
Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK EIGHT (May 22-26): Workshop**
Workshop 3
Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK NINE (May 29-June 2): Workshop**
Workshop 4
Reading: fiction and non-fiction anthologies

**WEEK TEN (June 5-9): incorporating feedback, revision, finishing**

The goal of workshop is not to write “by committee,” but rather, to get energized for the next phase of the process: sharpening the details, bolstering the characterization, reconsidering the balance of summary and scene. Some feedback will make perfect sense to you, and some feedback may not be of particular use. That’s okay. The process is not democratic, it’s a monarchy. Ultimately, the buck stops with you.

This week we’ll have a chance to share plans for revision. After the first draft, we see which scenes are essential. What are those moments in the story when we have the best opportunity to “see” your characters? Broaden the impact of those scenes, and polish the details. Find the sharpest description in your story, and see if you can bring the other details up to that level.

Spring Quarter ends June 9th.

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

MONDAY: the class week officially starts with a Welcome to the Week email from me.

TUESDAY: 3pm (PST): Responses to reading discussion questions due.
WEDNESDAY: 3pm (PST): Writing exercise due (though if you’re able to post earlier, you’ll probably receive more feedback). I respond to these posts in the order in which they come in.

THROUGHOUT THE WEEK: Respond to posts, participate in discussion. We will schedule group Zoom chats every week, and once workshopping starts, we’ll schedule individual Zoom chats, too.

WEEKEND: If possible, use the weekend to get a head start on your weekly assignments or to write your workshop submission. The classroom is always open.

After we begin a new week, the previous week’s discussion ends and we won’t revisit those conversations.

MORE ABOUT WORKSHOP

A thoughtful and honest workshop atmosphere is worth striving for. Our goals for workshop will be: 1) to be compassionate in our attempt to understand a piece of writing from the inside, and 2) to separate the text from its author so that we can provide honest and constructive feedback. For example, each time we workshop we should be asking the following questions: what is the genius of the current draft? How might that genius be further capitalized upon and developed? It is important to remember that the more thoughtful and specific your written critiques are, the more you will hone the skills you need to revise your own fiction. (Each posted critique in weeks 6-9, should be 200-300 words, roughly.) The best workshops are compassionate, candid, and have a “quid pro quo” feeling.

**ALL STORIES/ESSAYS or EXCERPTS (OF UP TO 5,000 WORDS) FOR WORKSHOP ARE DUE TO ME VIA EMAIL, AS WORD DOCUMENTS, BY MIDNIGHT ON THE SUNDAY OF WEEK 5 (FEB 14).**

A final note about the work in this class:
It’s my hope, of course, that you’ll be able to do every single assignment throughout the quarter. Sometimes, though, life intervenes. It’s not the end of the world—and I won’t judge you—if you miss an occasional assignment. What I’d love to see, mostly, is that you have many opportunities to take creative risks. Write with abandon, and hope for both success and failure. Writers fail, we succeed; we succeed, we fail. And we try again. You will learn most in this class from putting yourself out there and trying.