



## Department of Fine Arts

### ART101 Creative Writing

## Off-Center

A creative exploration of what it means to live outside the social norm

*Instructor: Jeff Shapiro*

*Office Hours: To be agreed upon with students each semester. Dialogue is always welcome!*

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### Course Description

ec·cen·tric

(ĭk-sĕn'trĭk, ĕk-)

*adj.*

1. Departing from a recognized, conventional, or established norm or pattern. See Synonyms at **strange**.

[Middle English *eccentrik*, *planetary orbit of which the earth is not at the center*, from Medieval Latin *eccentricus*, *not having the same center*, from Greek *ekkentros* : *ek-*, *out of*; see **ecto-** + *kentron*, *center* (from *kentein*, *to prick*; see **kent-** in **Indo-European roots**).]

**Course structure:** Of the two weekly sessions, the first is devoted to group discussion of at least one issue crucial to Creative Writing. Literary passages demonstrating the issues under consideration are read aloud and discussed in class. As homework, students write original pieces pertaining to the weekly issue at hand.

The second session each week is the workshop in which student homework assignments are read, critiqued, and discussed. Although the thought of sharing pieces with a group may initially seem daunting to participants without previous experience in writing workshops, students soon discover the pleasurable luxury of using each other as sounding boards. Writing improves once it is read by intelligent eyes.



## **Prerequisites**

Pen and paper, and a brain unwilling to settle for clichés.

## **Course Hours**

The course meets twice a week for a total of 3 1/2 hrs/week + 1 field trip, for a total of 45 hours.

Suggested credits: 3

## **Student Learning Expectations**

The goal of the course is to improve writing of every sort: prose, memoirs, poetry, fiction, academic papers. Good writing is good in all its manifestations.

The course is intended for future writers and non-writers alike. Doesn't everyone deserve a room full of eager ears?

## **Course Outline**

### ***Week by Week Description:***

#### ***Week I***

Preliminary considerations: Why write at all? Is there a difference between writing fiction and writing fact? How does writing (reading, too) expand the limits of our individual experience? What "idea" does a piece of writing seek to express? How many ideas should any single piece of writing try to convey?

#### ***Week II***

Can writing give a voice to the voiceless? How do the physical senses make writing more effective? How many senses can the writer call into play?

- Analyzing what others have written: How can we as readers appreciate a writer's technical skill without killing the writing through vivisection?

#### ***Week III***

Point of view: Through whose eyes does the writer invite the reader to watch the action within a story? How will viewpoint choice affect the entire piece? How important is empathy?



#### *Week IV*

Psychological distance: How far inside a character's head does the writer want to take the reader? (Filmmakers and photographers choose different lenses - wide-angle, zoom, macro - to show their subjects from a distance or in closeup. Which "lenses" may a writer use?) Character development: What makes characters come to life?

#### *Week V*

What is the difference between character (real or fictional) and caricature? What are a writer's moral obligations to characters?

- Dialogue: How does a writer go about making characters speak?
- Change: Must characters change during the course of a piece of writing?

**Midterm:** Individual student-teacher conference to discuss progress so far, set goals for remainder of course, and begin to discuss final project proposals.

#### *Week VI*

The psychology of conflict. How necessary is tension in writing? Why is disapproval such a commonly recurring theme?

#### *Week VII*

The shape of a piece of writing. How important is plot? Should stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end? How important is the element of surprise? Exploration of various forms.

#### *Week VIII*

Mythology: Can myths and fables serve as archetypal material to be drawn from? Why do myths continue to live for hundreds of years? What's up between Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf? What song did the sirens really sing?

#### *Week IX*

Love, sex, and sensuality: exploring ways in which intimacy can reveal, accuse, celebrate. Why is unsatisfactory human coupling often more interesting to write about and read?

#### *Week X*

Word, meaning, and music. How important is sound?

- Style: What are the pros and cons of writing with minimal vs. abundant description, long vs. short sentences, simple vs. esoteric words?



## *Week XI*

The meaning of "crisis"; and the importance of writing.

## **Exam Week - Final project due.**

### **Assignments:**

Students are required to participate in all workshops and discussions, to read all handouts, to write their own weekly assignments, and to prepare themselves to critique each other's work. Students are encouraged to weekly submit all re-worked material to the professor as a basis for ongoing dialogue to help each student gauge his or her progress throughout the course. At the end of the term, each student hands in a final project which should be a significant piece of work demonstrating the student's abilities to the fullest. All student work should be submitted in Word format.

### **Textbook and required materials:**

All reading material will be provided in class.

Texts read and discussed include passages from: Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks, "Introduction to American Short Story Masterpieces"; Mark Strand, "Dog Life"; Hiromi Ito, "Intercourse"; Koko Yamagishi, "Portraits of the Body"; Elizabeth Tallent, "No One's a Mystery"; Faubion Bowers, "Foreword to The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology"; Sardou, Illica & Giacosa, "Libretto to Giacomo Puccini's Tosca"; Pär Lagerkvist, "Barabbas"; Ernest Hemingway, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "Cat in the Rain"; Roy Blount, Jr., "Five Ives"; James Joyce, "Ulysses"; James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"; Evan S. Connell, "The Fisherman from Chihuahua"; H.E. Francis, "Sitting"; Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio; James Thurber, "The Macbeth Murder Mystery"; Kyra Ryan, "Sugar Bowl"; Henry Miller, "Tropic of Cancer"; Jeff Shapiro, "Head"; Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Sonnets from the Portuguese"; Robert Herrick, "To the Virgins, to make much of Time" and "Delight in Disorder"; Adrian Mitchell, "Celia, Celia"; Dorothy Parker, "Unfortunate Coincidence"; Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"; Junichiro Tanizaki, "Diary of a Mad Old Man"; John Updike, "Pygmalion"; Francesco Petrarca, "Zefiro torna"; Torquato Tasso, "Dolcemente dormiva la mia Clori," "Ecco mormorar l'onde," and "Mentr'io miravo fiso."

Interdisciplinary activities include explorations of the psychoanalytical concepts of Sigmund Freud, the Transactional Analysis of Eric Berne, the "I and Thou" philosophy of Martin Buber, the filmmaking techniques used in *Sea Bisquit*, the operas of Giacomo Puccini, the madrigals of Claudio Monteverdi, Thomas Morley, and John Bennet, the Masses of Josquin des Prés, the photography of Edward



Steichen and Miyako Ishiuchi, plus the occasional taste-treat from the pastry counter of the bar up the road.

***Recommended optional materials/references:***

N/A

## **Grading System**

Attendance and Participation 30%

Homework: weekly writing assignments 40 %

Final Project 30%

## **Course Policy**

### **Academic Integrity:**

Effective learning, teaching and research all depend upon the ability of members of the academic community to trust one another and to trust the integrity of work that is submitted for academic credit or conducted in the wider arena of scholarly research. Such an atmosphere of mutual trust fosters the free exchange of ideas and enables all members of the community to achieve their highest potential.

In all academic work, the ideas and contributions of others must be appropriately acknowledged, and work that is presented as original must be, in fact, original. Faculty, students, and administrative staff all share the responsibility of ensuring the honesty and fairness of the intellectual environment at the Siena Art Institute and Siena School for Liberal Arts.

### **Students with documented disabilities:**

Any student who has a documented disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her abilities should contact the instructor as soon as possible to discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and to facilitate the educational opportunity.

### **Participation and Attendance:**

We consider attending class a crucial part of gaining the most from your study abroad experience. For this reason, we allow only one unexcused absence per course during the 15 weeks of the program. This means that you are only allowed



to miss one lesson of each course for unexcused reasons. Reasons for an absence to be considered unexcused include absences related to personal travel (including delays, strikes, missed connections, etc.) or visits from family and friends.

In addition, being late to class on 4 occasions constitutes an unexcused absence. Please also consider that leaving before the end of the lesson or coming back late from a break is the equivalent of an unexcused absence.

Participation and attendance is worth 30% of the overall grade for every class.

Absences due to health-related issues are considered excused if the student informs the professor and office by email or phone before class begins.

No make-up exams or critiques will be considered unless warranted by extreme circumstances [for example, health, family tragedy] supported with proper documentation.

## **Excursion**

Though not an obligatory part of the course, a field trip is offered through the amazingly beautiful countryside to the south of Siena because the teacher, being in love with that part of the world, can't resist sharing the joy with his students.