

## Introduction to Course

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The following two syllabi are for Introduction to Creative Writing (Poetry). In this writing-intensive class, students completed a number of exercises to practice poetic craft elements and master close reading. Many of the exercises ask the students to engage directly with the assigned reading. I use a series of assignments to help the students build their technical skill with poetic craft while slowly learning to write independently and with fewer constraints. In this class, the students were also required to explore campus resources (the on-campus art gallery and planetarium) and the surrounding community (walks around downtown with historical maps.) The class culminated in a portfolio that emphasized revision and reflection. Students were required to attend public readings and had the option to collaborate on a group reading related to the off-campus activity.

I have included the syllabus with the weekly writing assignments, an explanation of workshop procedure, a handout related to revision, and the final portfolio assignment. The first syllabus is from a semester when we Rita Dove visited campus, so we read *Sonata Mulattica*, and completed writing assignments related to that. The second syllabus is from a semester in which we were participating in a reading related to a series of campus-wide events related to the cosmos. Because the course policies are the same for both courses, I included only one copy of the course policies and two different schedules of readings and assignments.

## Sample Syllabus: Introduction to Poetry (Spring 2015)

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### Syllabus Introduction to Creative Writing (Poetry)

**Overview:** *“We asked the captain what course/of action he proposed to take toward/a beast so large, terrifying, and/unpredictable. He hesitated to/answer, and then said judiciously:/‘I think I shall praise it.’”—Robert Hass*

This is an introductory-level course on the reading and writing of poetry. It is designed to introduce you to poetic forms, devices, and vocabulary. To that end, the course is organized into modules, each concentrating on a specific craft concept. This course is based on the philosophy that the writing process is inextricably linked to the reading process. I have assigned four books of poetry; this reading is meant to provide examples of how writers from various traditions have employed these craft concepts to create compelling work. I chose books written or edited by individuals who are coming to campus for the Furious Flower reading series, so you will have an opportunity to see them perform, ask them questions, and even sign your book.

At the conclusion of this course, you should be able to 1) define the major craft concepts of poetry (the image, metaphor, meter etc.), 2) identify how poets use those craft concepts as well as employ them in your own writing, 3) read contemporary poetry with a greater appreciation and understanding, 4) offer specific and helpful comments on your fellow classmates’ work, and 5) revise your own work thoughtfully.

In this class, you will be asked to write and read in ways that may be new and unfamiliar to you. I invite you to approach this “terrifying, and/unpredictable” process in the mode of Robert Hass with an open mind and enjoy what you can discover, even from a place of confusion.

In general, we will have reading response due on Monday and a poetry exercise due on Wednesday. Please come prepared—the readings done—in order to keep the discussion lively and productive. Please bring copies of the books as well as of your written assignments.

#### **Required work:**

**EXERCISES:** You will be asked to complete a writing exercise each week, due always on Wednesday. If you complete the exercise in good faith you will receive credit for it, if you don’t you will receive a zero. I don’t accept late exercises.

**RESPONSES:** You will write an approximately 1-page response to the reading, due each week on Monday. For your reading response choose *one* poem and respond to it by examining the way the author employs the craft element we are focusing on that week. Rely on *The Poet’s Companion* or the assigned supplementary text to illuminate

the craft element. These are graded on a 10-point scale. This is the scale: an 8 means you seriously engage with the assigned text by zeroing in on specific language and considering the choices the author made, a 6 means you write in general and vague language, and a rare 10 is given for outstanding work that offers original insight. I may show these in class. I also don't accept these late.

**PARTICIPATION IN WORKSHOP AND DISCUSSION:** Mandatory. If you find there are barriers to your full participation, please come see me in office hours so we can develop strategies to help you engage. Similarly to the reading responses, I am looking for serious engagement in the text, which means a willingness to be specific and concrete.

**PORTFOLIO:** At the end of the class you will give me a portfolio consisting of 8 *significantly revised* poems. Keep copies of your first drafts with my comments.

**ATTENDANCE OF TWO PUBLIC READINGS:** You will attend two public readings and write a one-paragraph response to your experience. In your response, please answer one of the following questions: If you attended a reading by a reader whose book you'd read for class, how did the reading shape and/or change your perception of the poems? How did the reading shape and/or change ideas you had about poetry in general? Describe something unexpected that happened to the reading and what you thought about it. The readings are posted on the course calendar, and I will announce more readings as the semester progresses.

**Attendance** is important. If you miss more than two classes, I will drop your grade a third of a letter grade. If you enter class after I have taken attendance, I will count you absent. Please turn off your electronic devices and put them away *before* you enter the classroom. If I see you texting, I will count you as absent.

### **Required Texts**

*A Poet's Companion* by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux  
*Sonata Mulattica* by Rita Dove  
*Black Nature* by Camille Dungy, ed.  
*Discipline* by Dawn Lundy Martin  
*Geography III* by Elizabeth Bishop

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **Introduction and Ways to Read as a Writer**

READ: Excerpts from Robert Pinksky's *Singing School*; and *Black Nature: Cycle I*

### **Grammar as Inspiration**

READ: *Poet's Companion: A Grammatical Excursion*; *Black Nature: Cycle II*  
 WRITE: Imitation: Choose a poem from this week's reading and imitate the writer's syntax using your own words. Experiment with using concrete language.

### **The Image**

READ: *Poet's Companion: Images; Sonata Mulattica* by Rita Dove, Page 15-51

WRITE: Stuff and Things: This assignment is part of a series of assignments that will ask you to "try on" Dove's writing technique of witnessing a historic time period by telling the story of someone who lived during that time.

Chose a photograph from one of these collections (or do research and choose your own historic photograph). [Course website links to various historical photo collections] Begin by listing concretely what is in the photograph. Next write a poem rich with images and at least 20 lines long using your list and other concrete descriptors.

### **Image and Meaning: Metaphors**

#### Part I

READ: *Poet's Companion: Simile and Metaphor; Black Nature: Cycle IX*

WRITE: Write a poem of at least 35 lines using the material you gather by researching the time period of your photograph. Refer to your metaphor handout for different metaphor techniques.

#### Part II

READ: "Left Behind" by Joy Katz (on course website); *Black Nature: Cycle IV*

WRITE: Write a poem of at least 35 lines full of metaphor using the language you collected when we visited the planetarium engaging in metaphor. There are a lot of cosmos-related cliché's so be careful! Optional: Use this language to revisit the metaphors in last week's assignment.

### **The Music of the Line**

#### Part I

READ: *Poet's Companion: The Music of the Line; Sonata Mulattica* by Rita Dove pages 55-97

WRITE: Write a poem using the material we gathered while visiting the Duke Hall Gallery. Draft two versions of the poem with radically different line lengths. Include a short paragraph reflecting on the differences in the two versions of your poem. As you changed the line lengths, did the writing also need to change?

#### Part II

READ: *Poet's Companion: More Repetition (Villanelle, Pantoum, Sestina); Sonata Mulattica* by Rita Dove, Pages 101-121

WRITE: Other Voices: This assignment requires you to do a bit of research. Find a text from the historical time period of the historical photo you have written on. Use a sentence or a phrase from that text as a refrain line for a villanelle. See the attached worksheet for detailed instructions on writing a villanelle.

### **Breaking Form and Line**

#### PART II

READ: Interview with Dawn Lundy Martin; *Discipline* by Dawn Lundy Martin

WRITE: On page 44 of her interview with *Denver Quarterly*, Dawn Lundy Martin asks

"why not have an ugly, messy poem." Write an ugly, messy poem without using a single cliché.

## Part II

READ: "Nearest to Naked: The Prose Poem" by Ellen McGrath Smith; *Discipline* by Dawn Lundy Martin (Yes! I want you to *re-read* it.)

WRITE: Go back to your poem you wrote on the historical photograph and use it as inspiration for a prose poem from the voice of the building or an object in the photo. Emulate some of the elements or characteristics of prose poems Smith discusses in "Nearest to Naked."

### **The Poetry of Place**

READ: *Poet's Companion: The Poetry of Place; Geography III* by Elizabeth Bishop

WRITE: Based on the walk we took today in downtown Harrisonburg, write a poetic guidebook to that neighborhood using the elements of "The Poetry of Place" discussed in *Poet's Companion*.

### **The Poetry of Witness**

READ: *Poet's Companion: Witnessing; Black Nature: Cycle VII*

WRITE: In the reading, you encountered poets responding to events that they found compelling and/or troubling. Respond to the events we learned about on our downtown walk and during our visit to the Institute for Visual Studies using some of the techniques discussed in *Poet's Companion*.

### **Revision**

READ: *Poet's Companion: The Energy of Revision; Black Nature: Cycle VI*

REVISE: Using the attached handout listing **radical revision** techniques, choose a technique and revise a poem you wrote for class. Write one paragraph reflecting on what you affect the revision technique had on your poem.

## Sample Syllabus: Introduction to Poetry Fall 2014

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### Required Texts

*A Poets Handbook* by Mary Oliver  
*Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson  
*Hoops* by Major Jackson  
*Precipitates* by Debra Kang Dean  
 Additional reading online

### Schedule

#### Week One: What's Expected?

Tuesday: Introduction and overview. "A Ritual to Read to One Another" by William Stafford read in-class.

Thursday: Reading: "Getting Started" and "Reading Poems" by Mary Oliver; "Ars Poetica: Some Recent Criticism" by James Wright; "Of Modern Poetry" by Wallace Stevens; "Ars Poetica" by Archibald Macleish). Write a statement of poetics/ ars poetica. Discussion of workshop procedure.

#### Week Two: "No Ideas But in Things"

Tuesday: Reading: "Imagery" by Mary Oliver; "Selections" by Etheridge Knight; "No Sorry" by Cathy Bowman. First reading response due.

Thursday: List poems. Write a poem that consists of a list of objects (use the Knight's "Idea of Ancestry" and Bowman's "No Sorry" as a guide.) List of objects on your desk, to do lists, lists of family members, lists of phobias, lists of state capitals etc.

#### Week Three: The Image

Tuesday : Reading: *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson (Pages 1-75) and Donald Justice, "Mule Team and Poster."

Thursday: Write a poem based on a work of art in the Fine Arts Museum. Start by simply describing the image as precisely as possible. FIRST WORKSHOP

#### Week Four: The Image

Tuesday: Reading: *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson (Pages 75-149), In-class exercise: Met an object.

Thursday: "Biography of the Object." Based on the writing you generated in class with your object, write a verse biography of that object.

**Week Five: Metaphor: The Image and Meaning**

Tuesday: CLASS VISIT TO THE PLANETARIUM

Thursday: Reading: "Imitation," by Mary Oliver; W.H. Auden, "The Shield of Achilles" and "At the Musée des Beaux Arts"; Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Bird"; and Raymond Patterson, "26 Ways of Looking at a Black Man." Write: Write a poem rich in metaphors based on the notes you took on our visit to the planetarium.

**Week Six: Metaphor The Line**

Tuesday: "The Line" by Mary Oliver; Robert Hayden, "Selections" Parables"

Thursday: Take a poem you have already written for this class and re-write it using radically different line lengths. Write a paragraph explaining how the different lines changed the poem.

**Week Seven: Orality and Song**

Tuesday: Reading: Mary Oliver, "Some Given Forms"; Gayle Jones "Deep Song"; Michael Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane"; Ezra Pound, "The Seafarer"; Elizabeth Bishop "One Art"; Muriel Rukyser, "Effort at Speech"; Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night"; Donald Justice "Villanelle at Sundown."

Thursday: Write a villanelle using a refrain from a traditional blues song. Blues recordings are on reserve at the music library.

**Week Eight: Cosmos Revisited**

Tuesday: Research poetry related to the cosmos and space. Bring examples into class.

Thursday: Write a poem borrowing language from a scientific article.

**Week Nine: Evoking Place**

Tuesday: Reading: "Diction, Tone, and Place" by Mary Oliver; and Major Jackson *Hoops* (Pages 1-54)

Thursday: Eavesdropping assignment. Pick a favorite spot in town where people do some talking. Hang out there for an hour or so, jotting down phrases you that attract your ear. Fashion them into a sonnet.

**Week Ten: Evoking Place Continued**

Tuesday: Reading: Major Jackson *Hoops* (Pages 54-end).

Thursday: Poetic guidebooks. Go someplace you have never been before and write a poetic guidebook entry, showing your reader around that place.

**Week Eleven: Source Material**

Tuesday: Debra Kang Dean *Precipitates*

Thursday: Bring a renku link

**Week Twelve: Reading Out loud**

Tuesday: Watch videos of readings by Andrea Gibson, Douglas Kearney, Ross Gay, and Yona Harvey. Write one paragraph on what makes a good poetry reading.

Thursday: Second revision of cosmos poem. Today we will practice with partners and as a big group for our cosmos reading.

**Week Thirteen: Saying Something**

Tuesday: Explore: Black Poets Speak Out Tumblr, read “about” statement and watch at videos; and Split This Rock website, read “about” statement and read 5 poems of the week.

Thursday: Poems based on newspaper articles.

**Week Fourteen: Revision**

Tuesday: Read: “Revision” by Mary Oliver. In-class revision exercises

Thursday: Revise a poem and write one paragraph on how you revised and what you learned in the process.

**Week Fifteen: Getting Ready, Going Forward**

This week we will workshop poems for the portfolio and have a end-of-semester celebration.