

WR 30: Beginning Poetry Writing

Instructor: Inez Tan

Class: Twice weekly, 80 minutes per class

Office Hours: Two hours weekly and by appointment

“The poet is like a mouse in an enormous cheese excited by how much cheese there is to eat.” –Czeslaw Milosz

“What poetry does is it puts us in touch with people who are different from ourselves—and it does so in a way that isn’t violent. It’s a way of listening. When you’re reading a poem, you’re listening to what someone else is thinking and feeling and saying. It’s not a debate, where somebody punches back at it... And, in that, you don’t have to be anything other than what you are. The poem is a catalyst where you’re bringing two different kinds of people together. And at its best, when it works, there’s a kind of spark, and everyone comes away illuminated by what the spark has ignited.” –Don Share

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this class, we will be reading and writing poems, paying special attention to how craft and technique contribute to meaning. We’ll consider questions such as: What makes a poem interesting? How do we develop an early vision into a finished work, through the process of revision? And how do the choices we make as writers shape what the reader experiences?

Through reading a wide range of contemporary American poetry, we will strive to broaden our understanding of what poetry can be, and what poetry can do. Moreover, we will seek to connect *what* a poem conveys to *how* it does so by studying poems that employ particular elements of craft in service of the whole. Through weekly short written responses, you’ll acquire techniques for your own writing: image, sound, metaphor, lineation, and more. Since all writing is a gradual process of thinking and discovery, emphasis will be placed on class participation and the revision of your work.

Think of this as an art course: you’re a part of a community of writers who will be creating and exploring together. Throughout the quarter, you will participate in class workshops, where you’ll get a chance to read and respond to your classmates’ poems and receive feedback on yours. Expect to spend several hours in and out of class reading, writing, and thinking about poetry, as well as how you can contribute to the community of writing that exists today.

LEARNING GOALS

- To *explore* the craft of poetry by creating new work and developing it over time through the process of revision
- To acquire strategies of reading like a writer, in order to *analyze* and *critique* poems

- To develop these strategies in *workshop* by giving and receiving constructive feedback on works-in-progress
- To *reflect* on your own writing process

IMPORTANT NOTES

1. **This class is not an easy A.** If you are taking this class simply to avoid 39C, a word of warning: This class will require more of you. More pages, more reading, and more daily focus. You will have reading and writing assignments for *every single class*. That said, if you are up to the challenge, it should be a lot of fun!
2. **This is not a lecture course.** Our class will be built around seminar-style discussion and participation. We'll be reading poems together in a discussion format, and we'll workshop the poems you write in a discussion setting as well. **If you do not participate on a daily basis (this means speaking, listening, reading, and writing) you will not pass this course.**

REQUIRED TEXTS

You must bring hard copies of these texts to every class (no Kindle/digital versions). I expect you to engage deeply with your reading by marking up your texts: annotate them, underline or highlight interesting passages, as well as passages that might have confused you or that you want to discuss with the class.

1. *The Poet's Companion* by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux
2. Additional Poems and Critical Essays available on our class website labeled *Course Readings*. NOTE: Please budget ~ \$25 for printing additional course materials. This cost should cover the assigned poems, the required essays, and poems for workshop.

CLASS EXPECTATIONS

A Note on Participation:

This is a discussion and workshop-oriented class. The more you put into the class, the more you will get out of it, and the more successful the class will be for everyone. I value your time and attention, and I expect the same in return.

Workshop may be new to many of you. I intend to guide you through that process as much as possible, though some of your best learning will probably come from simply getting your feet wet. I expect you to come well-prepared and willing to engage in open and thoughtful classroom conversation.

As writers, we will strive to cultivate a lively interest in a variety of subjects and points of view, including one another's. I value the social virtue of intellectual generosity: the willingness to engage honestly, critically, and in good faith with the work of your colleagues and the pieces of the world they bring into focus. Workshop often involves frank, sometimes hard conversations around artistic choices and personal beliefs. It is not a place for any speech or action that creates

a hostile, offensive, or intimidating environment based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or anything else. Instead, let's make this a welcoming and inclusive space for all.

- Please bring to class: a notebook, a pen, your books and any other assigned readings (NOTE: All additional readings, including workshop poems, must be printed out for class when they are up for discussion).
- Cell phones must be turned off and put away during class. No laptops unless otherwise specified. Using electronic devices in class affects our ability to listen and participate, and will result in you being marked absent for the day. Please contact me if you have special needs (e.g. an arm injury that prevents you from taking notes by hand).
- Class Participation: Class participation is factored into your grade, and will have a huge impact on how well you do in this class. If you get nervous about speaking in class, the best defense is to be prepared: Read all assignments and take good notes while you read.
- **Some tips for success:** Spend time with the material we read. You are expected to read each poem more than once. Look up words you don't know in the dictionary. Apply the technical terminology from our readings. The close reading of poetry takes practice. Also, writing bad poems is an important way to learn! Putting in the time the poem requires is how you will grow as a writer. I am more than happy to comment on honest attempts, but I ask that you put in your best effort.

ASSIGNMENTS/GRADE BREAKDOWN

Class and Workshop Participation	30%
Short Responses	25%
Quiz (Week 3)	5%
Poetry Event Response	10%
Personal Anthology Project (Week 10)	10%
Final Poetry Portfolio (Week 10)	20%

Class and Workshop Participation (30%)

Active and thoughtful participation is essential for class discussions and workshop; this means both attendance and engagement are necessary. This portion of your grade will account for the timeliness and quality of all your written assignments as well as the depth of your discussion contributions. Part of participation is also commenting on your peers' poems submitted for workshop. Group work and in class writing assignments will also count toward your participation grade.

You will be required to write **one** draft of a poem starting the second week, due on Thursdays. **Upload your poem to Canvas and submit a printed copy in class.**

You will submit a total of two poems for workshop. You are responsible for bringing printed copies for every person (including me) on the Tuesday before your scheduled workshop date. **If you do not bring printed copies on time, you will miss your workshop slot and your participation grade will be affected.**

Short Responses (25%) (due each Tuesday, Weeks 2-9)

We will read a lot of poems and essays in this class. To help you process this constant deluge of ideas, you will submit a weekly short writing response. These will be 250-350 word responses (MLA format, double-spaced, 12 pt. font) to be submitted on Canvas before the beginning of class.

Quiz (5%) (Week 3)

Since we need to build up a shared vocabulary of terms and concepts in order to discuss poetry more richly, you will turn in a short, open-book quiz testing your knowledge of what we've covered so far on Canvas during Week 3.

Poetry Event Response (10%)

As a member of the Irvine writing community, you are expected to attend at least one writing event this semester. There are many readings hosted by the MFA Reading Series and local bookstores. I will post a schedule of suggested events on Canvas. If you're not sure what constitutes a poetry or literary event, run it by me beforehand.

Bring your notebook to the event and take notes! After the event, please email me a brief (200-300 words) response with the following information about your experience: date, location, name of reader, subject matter (just a general idea is fine), anything that you liked and why, any ideas the reading may have given you for your own writing. Note: Sometimes readings aren't everything you hoped they would be. If you learned something you don't want to do, that's okay too, but no trash-talk, please. These are not meant to be busy work, but to expose you to different work and hopefully inspire you to learn more about yourself as a writer.

Please write and send these responses to me as soon as you can after attending the readings. The longer you wait, the less you will remember making it harder to reflect meaningfully. This assignment must be turned in no later than the last Tuesday of Week 10 via email to me.

Personal Anthology Project (10%) (Due Week 10)

The purpose of this anthology is threefold: First, for you to develop a pool of influences as a poet; second, to practice writing the way other writers write; and third, to begin thinking about how particular poems teach us something about poetry and our own tastes. As part of this project, you will expand your reading by including at least two poems that you found on your

own during this quarter. Look at the reading list of contemporary collections for suggestions. You can always look up poems by poets we've read online, but I strongly recommend that you visit the library and look for their books.

I *highly recommend* that you type each poem out, rather than copying and pasting. The goal of this assignment is to learn kinesthetically by writing in a particular person's style and/or voice.

Your Personal Anthology Project will include:

1. At least ten poems. Up to eight may be drawn from our class texts; at least two must be poems that you found on your own during this quarter.
2. A 2-3 page introduction (MLA format, double-spaced, 12 pt. font). In this introduction you should address the following: **why** you chose the poems you chose, **what** you admire about them, and **how** you applied this knowledge to your own poems and/or understanding of poetry. Try to identify common threads among as many poems as possible. What draws you to them? Is it their voice? Thematic concerns? Point of view? The way they make you feel? This introduction is also an opportunity to cultivate the aesthetic principles that govern your taste in the art.

We will be reading broadly in this class; it is up to you to decide what you like and don't like and to be able to articulate why. A strong Personal Anthology Project will explore the ways in which other people's poems have influenced your writing and deepened your understanding of what poetry can do and can be. **Upload to Canvas.**

Note: I would strongly suggest spreading the work involved in this project over the length of the course. It does not benefit your own writing and critical thinking to save all of this until the end. I would recommend adding a poem from our reading each week. This will lead you to think deeper about that poem, and you may find that you have more to say in your short responses (which will also likely help you write your introduction).

Final Poetry Portfolio (20%) (Due Week 10)

The purpose of this assignment is for you to compile and showcase the poetry writing that you have done for the entire class. You must include:

1. A two-page (double-spaced) introductory statement to your poems and your writing/revising process,
2. At least **two** drafts of each least **five** of the poems written for class, and
3. A short reflection paragraph for each of at least **three** poems. You may discuss your process of revising that poem, or how you learned something significant about poetry through writing that particular poem.

Grading Standards:

I will provide written feedback on the writing you bring to workshop, as well the writing you include in your final poetry and fiction portfolios. While I will naturally take into account your writing's merits, I will evaluate your work primarily on the basis of:

1. **Revisions:** your process of developing an early vision into a finished piece, taking into account peer and instructor feedback. Is your writing vivid and particular (e.g. describing, in sensory details, things you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste)? Is it specific, rather than clichéd?
2. **Craft:** your ability to employ craft elements we covered together in class.
3. **Originality and risk-taking:** your willingness to try new things. Is your writing unique, surprising or unexpected?

Upload to Canvas.

WR 30 - Poem Prompts

On Thursdays when a poem is due, **upload your poem to Canvas AND bring a printed, stapled copy to class.** Please submit homework as .docx, .doc, or .pdf files, as I cannot open Pages documents. Always use “Save As” to save drafts as you go!

Poem 1: Image

Make a list of five concrete nouns. Next, make a list of five abstract nouns. Pick one word from each list. Write a poem describing the concrete noun in such a way that a reader will think of the abstract noun, *without* including the abstract noun in your poem. Be as descriptive as possible of what you can see, smell, hear, taste, and touch. Turn in both lists, as well as your poem.

Poem 2: Sound, Meter and Rhyme

Write a poem using *at least three* of the sound devices in poetry listed on the handout we used in class. Be sure to read your poem aloud as you work on it – your goal is to make the reader/listener feel something through the sounds of the words.

Poem 3: Simile and Metaphor

Write a poem that uses a long simile or metaphor (spanning at least five lines – see how far you can go!).

If you like, you may also include a different draft of the poem that uses a shortened version of that metaphor. If so, include 1-3 sentences explaining why you made the revision, and which draft you prefer.

Poem 4: Lineation

Go to a new, interesting, or unusual place. (Your dorm room doesn't count!) While you are there, write a poem from your observations what it's like to be in that space: what you see, smell, hear, touch, and taste, what you think of, how you feel, etc.

Next, create three differently lineated versions of the poem:

1. Very short OR very long lines
2. Two- OR three-line stanzas
3. The weirdest lineation you can think of (this should not be something obviously silly, like one word per line: the objective here is to find an unusual but plausible new lineation for your poem)

Turn in all four poems, plus a brief paragraph explaining what you were trying to do with each lineation, what you have learned about your own lineation habits, and which draft you prefer.

Poem 5: Saying the Unsayable

Poet Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon asks her students, “What are you pretending not to know today?”

Set a timer and freewrite for ten minutes in response to Lyrae's question. Don't pause to edit, and don't censor yourself in any way. (You will not turn in this freewrite, so be honest!)

Next, write a poem using something you came up with in the freewrite or inspired by the freewrite in some way. You may wish to express it in a weird way, as the poems we've read recently have done.

(Incidentally, Kim Addonizio, one of the writers of *TPC*, has a great poem that fulfills this prompt titled "Eating Together" that you can find online.)

Poem 6: A Daring Revision

Reread *TPC*'s chapter on revision (p. 186-192).

Next, choose one of the five poems you've turned in so far. Challenge yourself to make a daring revision of that poem:

- Drastically alter the poem's images, sound, voice and style (including point of view and pronouns), similes and metaphors, lineation, or title, *and*
- Use at least three suggestions from *TPC* to revise the poem.

Save drafts as you go, and be bold! The goal here is to practice letting go of first ideas so you can discover something even better.

Turn in the poem, along with a brief paragraph describing how you revised the poem. What did you learn from this re-vision? What might you try the next time you revise a poem?

(Remember that for your final portfolio, you must include revisions of *at least five poems* written throughout the quarter, so you should be getting into the habit of revising!)

Poem 7: Repetition and Rhythm

Write a poem that does one or both of the following:

- Anaphora: Start all or many lines with the same word or phrase.
- Repetition: Use the same word in every line, or at least ten times.

Poem 8: Witness and Response

Write a poem about something you've witnessed – big or small, public or private. Address the poem to a specific person.

OR

What small, strange thing are you an expert in? What do you know how to do that no one else can? Think about an action, ritual, or hobby that is your secret specialty. Write a poem that includes directions for this activity suitable for a complete novice.

WR 30 – Short Response Prompts

On Tuesdays when a short response is due, **upload your response to Canvas**. You do not need to bring a copy to class unless specifically told to do so. Please submit homework as .docx, .doc, or .pdf files, as I cannot open Pages documents. Always use “Save As” to save drafts as you go!

SR #1:

Attach a poem you liked/loved/remember from before this class. (If you can't think of one, you may use one of the poems from today's reading.)

Write a short response to that poem, discussing what you notice, what you liked about it (and why: be as specific as possible), and any other reactions you have. You may wish to discuss how you encountered the poem, what personal significance it has to you, and so on.

300-400 words (MLA format, double-spaced, 12 pt. font).

SR #2:

Respond to one of the poems assigned for today (the day this assignment is due), discussing:

1. **About and also about.** What is this poem about, on the surface? What is it *also* about – symbolically, implicitly, thematically? (Don't Google this! What I am looking for is your interpretation and impression. If you're not entirely sure after several earnest readings, that's okay - some poems are slower to reveal themselves. You may certainly use phrases like “I think,” “This poem might be about...” Just answer as best as you can.)
2. **Your response to its content and craft.** What craft elements from our readings do you notice in this poem? What effects do they have on you? Consider alternative choices the poet could have made: why are these particular choices better? Does something confuse, frustrate, or inspire you? You may wish to make connections to another poem or essay we've read.
3. **What you'll steal for your own writing.** What is this poem doing that you could try yourself? This can related to content, craft, or anything else: Does it have an unusually long title? Does it tackle a taboo subject in a humorous way? Explain why this is a technique you might want to try out in your own poetry going forward.

At least three paragraphs, 300-400 words (MLA format, double-spaced, 12 pt. font).

SR #3:

Since your quiz is also due, today's SR is especially short: After closely reading today's assigned poems and TPC, write three metaphors. Upload them to Canvas **and print and bring them to class**.

SR #4:

Go to the SR# assignment on Canvas to download a poem, “I Have This Fantasy” by Heather Bell, which has had its line breaks removed. **Without** looking up the poem’s actual lineation, lineate the poem yourself. Read the poem aloud as you go!

Next, respond to your own lineation in a short paragraph or two. How does your lineation change your reading of the poem? What effects were you trying to achieve with your lineation? What techniques did you apply from TPC or other poems we’ve read?

Upload your lineation and response to Canvas, **and print and bring it to class.**

SR #5:

Respond to one of today’s poems. Refer to SR #2 for the prompt.

SR #6:

You may respond to any one of today’s readings. Discuss what you learned about revision from the reading, what was striking to you, and what techniques you’d like to steal for your own writing. 300-400 words (MLA format, double-spaced, 12 pt. font).

SR #7:

Find a poem **not** in our assigned readings and respond to it, following the prompt for SR #2. Upload to Canvas, **and print and bring it to class.**

SR #8:

Respond to “Witnessing” (TPC), discussing:

1. **Summarize key points.** What is this text about? What is its thesis? Purpose?
2. **Your response.** Do you agree/disagree with the author? What was striking, interesting, or memorable? Does something confuse, frustrate, or inspire you? You may wish to make connections to another poem or essay we’ve read.
3. **What you’ll steal for your own writing.** How can you apply what you’ve learned to your own poems? How does this text affect your understanding of any of the poems we’ve read for today, or for this class?

At least three paragraphs, 300-400 words (MLA format, double-spaced, 12 pt. font).

SR#9:

Respond to “I Will Love You in the Summertime” by Christian Wiman. (If you’re interested in reading the full essay, it’s online at <https://theamericanscholar.org/i-will-love-you-in-the-summertime/>.) Refer to SR #8 for the prompt.

WR 30 CLASS SCHEDULE, FALL 2017

WEEK 0	Reading Due (to be completed before class)	Assignments Due
Class #1 - Welcome and Introductions!	(none)	(none)
WEEK 1 Class #2 - Image: Sight, Sound, Smell, Touch, Taste	TPC: "Introduction" (11-13) "Images" (85-93) Essay: "Twenty Strategies for Reading a Poem" by Mark Yakich "The Antenna" by Mia Anderson "Clam Ode" by Dean Young "Ode to the Cat" by Pablo Neruda "ICU" by Spencer Reece	SR #1
Class #3 - Things Seen Are Things As Seen	TPC: "Writing and Knowing" (19-29) Essay: "Aimee Nezhukumatathil on Naomi Shihab Nye" "Fruit Cocktail in Light Syrup" by Amy Gerstler "My Brother My Wound" by Natalie Diaz "Ingredients for Memories That Can Be Used As Explosives" by EJ Koh "Lowering Your Standards for Food Stamps" by Sheryl Luna	Poem #1 (Image)
WEEK 2 Class #4 - Sound, Meter, and Rhyme	TPC: "Meter, Rhyme, and Form" (just 138-145) Handout: Sound Devices in Poetry "Easter" by Jill Alexander Essbaum "Falling" by Li-Young Lee "Not My Bones" by Marilyn Nelson "Recovery" by Marie Howe "Hippopotomonstrosquiddealiophobia —The fear of long words" by Aimee Nezhukumatathil "Cloudless Snowfall" by Franz Wright	SR #2
Class #5 - Voice and Style	TPC, "Voice and Style" (115-128) Essay: "The Average Fourth Grader is a Better Poet Than You (and Me Too)" by Hannah Gamble "All That is Limitless" by Hannah Gamble "Interview with a Policeman" by Ai	Poem #2 (Sound)

	<p>"Yoshi (A Pastoral)" by Hannah Faith Notess "Revenge" by Elisa Chavez</p>	
<p>WEEK 3</p> <p>Class #6 - Simile and Metaphor</p>	<p>TPC: "Simile and Metaphor" (94-103)</p> <p>"To Beg for Food in a Contemptible Way" by James Tate "9 Ways Pac-Man Speaks to the Human Condition" by Katie Willingham "Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath "Soup" by Boey Kim Cheng</p> <p>Handout: "What is Workshop?" (guidelines)</p>	<p>Quiz (upload to Canvas)</p> <p>SR #3</p> <p><i>Workshop #1 poems</i></p>
<p>Class #7 - Workshop #1</p>		<p>Poem #3 (Simile and Metaphor)</p> <p>Annotated copies of Workshop #1 poems</p>
<p>WEEK 4</p> <p>Class #8 - Lineation</p>	<p>TPC: "The Music of the Line" (104-114)</p> <p>"A Myth of Devotion" by Louise Glück "Nobody Fails At Meditation" by Michael Bazzett "Everything Every Time" by Brian Russell "Almost a Figure" by Katherine Larson</p>	<p>SR #4 - upload to Canvas and print and bring a copy to class</p> <p><i>Workshop #2 poems</i></p>
<p>Class #9 - Workshop #2</p>		<p>Poem #4 (Lineation)</p> <p>Annotated copies of Workshop #2 poems</p>
<p>WEEK 4</p> <p>Class #10 - Weirdness / Saying the Unsayable</p>	<p>TPC: "The Shadow" (56-63)</p> <p>"Pool #3" by Arda Collins "Tarantulas on the Lifebuoy" by Thomas Lux "Using a Hula Hoop Can Get You Abducted by Aliens" by Matthea Harvey "Pocket" by Matthew Zapruder</p>	<p>SR #5</p> <p><i>Workshop #3 poems</i></p>
<p>Class #11 - Workshop #3</p>		<p>Poem #5 (Saying the Unsayable)</p> <p>Annotated copies of Workshop #3 poems</p>
<p>WEEK 6</p>	<p>TPC, "The Energy of Revision" (186-192) "Self-Doubt" (195-198)</p>	<p>SR #6</p>

Class #12 - Vision and Re-vision	<p>"Slowly" by Donna Masini, with interview "Experience" by Carrie Fountain, with interview</p> <p>Reread the student poem and revision (on elephants) from the practice workshop</p>	<i>Workshop #4 poems</i>
Class #13 - Workshop #4		<p>Poem #6 (A Daring Revision)</p> <p>Annotated copies of Workshop #4 poems</p>

<p>WEEK 7</p> <p>Class #14 - Repetition and Rhythms</p>	<p>TPC: "Repetition, Rhythm, and Blues" (151-160)</p> <p>"Soldier, Home Early, Surprises His Wife in Chick-fil-A" by Solmaz Sharif "Jubilate Agno, Fragment B" ("For I will consider my cat Jeoffry...") by Christopher Smart "Bilingual Instructions" by Harryette Mullen "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes</p>	<p>SR #7: upload to Canvas and print and bring to class</p> <p><i>Workshop #5 poems</i></p>
Class #15 - Workshop #5		<p>Poem #7 (Repetition and Rhythm)</p> <p>Annotated copies of Workshop #5 poems</p>

<p>WEEK 8</p> <p>Class #16 - Witness and Response</p>	<p>TPC: "Witnessing" (64-73)</p> <p>"The Colonel" by Carolyn Forché "Armistice" by Carl Adamshick "Dear Basketball" by Kobe Bryant "To Our Miscarried One, Age Thirty Now" by Sharon Olds</p>	SR #8
THANKSGIVING - NO CLASS		

<p>WEEK 9</p> <p>Class #17 - The Personal is Political</p>	<p>Essay: Excerpts from "I Will Love You in the Summertime" by Christian Wiman</p> <p>"You Fixed It" by Zeina Hashem Beck "Home" by Warsan Shire "Gate A4" by Naomi Shihab Nye</p>	<p>SR #9</p> <p><i>Workshop #6 poems</i></p>
Class #18 - Workshop #6		Poem #8 (Witness and Response)

		Annotated copies of Workshop #6 poems
WEEK 10 Class #19 - What We've Covered This Quarter	(none - work on your Final Poetry Portfolio!)	Personal Anthology Project LAST DAY to turn in Poetry Event Response (via email)
Class #20 - Everyone's Poetry Reading!	Handout: "How to Give a Great Reading"	Bring one of your poems (not more than two pages long) to read to the class! (Practice it beforehand!) Final Poetry Portfolio