

Teaching Philosophy

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Every writer requires two forms of support: one, the comfort in the knowledge that thoughtful peer feedback and critique are close at hand, and two, guidance through the lonely process that is writing. The best creative writing class is the perfect blend of both. As a creative writing teacher, my aim is to nurture the budding relationships among the students, while fostering a trustworthy one-on-one bond with each writer.

My classroom is as safe as well as a brave space for my students: Here, they are free to experiment, fail, and repeat the process. Every craft lesson is accompanied by carefully constructed, out-of-the-box writing prompts and exercises that would give them the opportunity to test drive the skill that they just picked up. One of my exercises on building three-dimensional characters has students generating a list of behavioral traits and other key characteristics that would make a character more believable and real. These are not just physical descriptions or basic attributes. This drives the class to think deeply about other character-related things, such as motivation.

Writing is as much about reading as it is about writing. I encourage my students to read exhaustively, widely, and diversely—across genders and ethnicities of authors, as well as genres. While they read the classics and the essential American stories by authors who are considered canon, such as Joyce Carol Oates and Flannery O'Connor, I also make sure to assign a wider range of more contemporary and experimental fiction. The writers I make my students read come from a variety of diverse backgrounds and rich cultures that they draw from when telling raw and honest stories, like Celeste Ng, Jhumpa Lahiri, Helen Oyeyemi, and Carmen Maria Machado, to name a few. By pushing them to read in an array of genres including fairy tales and genre-bending literary fiction, I help them think beyond the familiar and challenge them to question, bend, and break the dictums of writing that are often tossed around. What do “show, don’t tell” and “write what you know” mean to them? Should they follow these “rules” blindly just because they have been frequently directed to do so?

In their journey as writers, it is crucial for students to learn how to process a piece in a way that is meaningful. Every week, my students are required to submit one reader response report on a story they read that week. This report includes a brief summary of the story, what the story did well, what the story could do better, and concluding thoughts. This approach achieves multiple things. It introduces them to close reading and forces them to go beyond merely “liking” or “disliking” a story; it makes them reach for vocabulary to describe and elaborate on how they feel about a particular piece; and lastly, it prepares them for workshop, where they must respectfully and constructively articulate their thoughts and feedback on their peers’ stories.

At the end of the semester, I ensure that they leave my class with a “toolbox” of techniques — developing well-rounded characters, creating tension in scene, writing difficult conversations, and so on — that they can consciously employ in their future writing endeavors.

With due emphasis on editing, research, and experimentation, I encourage the class to view their own work with a critical eye. I focus not only on the students' theses and assignments, but also on generative writing. Liberating the writer within, as Natalie Goldberg suggests in *Writing Down the Bones*, and giving yourself the freedom to “woodshed” are just as rewarding as finishing a manuscript.

Ultimately, it is not talent alone that makes a successful writer, but also the discipline to put pen to paper even on days when it is the hardest thing to do, and I strive for this to be one of the key lessons my students pick up from my teaching.