

## Course Syllabus

**School Name:** The Greenville Fine Arts Center

**Course Name:** Creative Writing I, II and II Honors, III Honors, IV Honors

**Instructor:** Sarah Blackman      **Office Room Number:** 221C

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**Class Time/Room Number:** 9:15-11:05, 1:30-3:20, Room 221A

**Credit Units:** 2

### Required Texts:

The majority of class required texts will be available in the Creative Writing Library. These include, but are not limited to, a wide selection of contemporary prose, poems and essays, assorted anthologies, and a comprehensive collection of current literary reviews and publications such as The New Yorker, The Georgia Review, Ploughshares, The Black Warrior Review, The Writer's Chronicle, Best New American Voices, The Pushcart Anthology, Best New American Poems, etc... This will be supplemented by access to on-line literary magazines and resources such as DIAGRAM, Pool, Octopus, Verse Daily, Poetry Daily and newpages.com. In addition to these resources, students will receive three or more additional books a year—one collection of poetry, one short-story collection or novel, and one essay collection or play—depending on the program's funding.

### Required Materials:

- Notebook for journals (any size, any shape, any color) with **WHITE** pages.
- Blue or black pens or other colored pens. Please do not write in pencil in journals.
- A portable storage system (like a jump or flash drive) that is compatible with our Dell PCs. We use Microsoft Office Word 2003, which is compatible with most Microsoft programs but sometimes runs into trouble with Vista or has trouble converting from Mac processing systems. A simple solution: save your files as a richtext (.rtf). If you have questions about what this means, please ask me.
- Some kind of storage system—binder, folder, what have you—that will be brought to class EVERY DAY
- Three ring binders for final portfolios
- \$25.00 student fee
- Contests fees will be announced as the deadlines approach
- All students must be at least minimally proficient at keyboarding.

Additional supplies and materials will be provided by the Fine Arts Center, but please be willing to augment your supplies as the need arises. You are responsible for making sure you have the required materials for this class and using them according to my guidelines. Please take class requirements—like saving to the Common File and making reliable use of your flash drive—seriously.

### Course Description:

Behind every good writer is an exceptional reader. Behind every exceptional writer is a brilliant observer. Behind every brilliant writer is a child of the world, invested with all their senses, quizzical, analytical, brave. These are our goals, in this class as well as in our lives as working artists. We seek to be exceptional, brilliant, brave, and in order to achieve these goals we will have to learn how to be diligent and driven. We will have to learn the principles of craft—when to utilize them and when to break their rules—and we will have to learn the principles of our own aesthetic—our strengths, our crutches, our habits. In this class we will experience literature, that of our classmates and of contemporaneous and great past masters, from the perspective of writers instead of solely as students. Our understanding will be that, much as Eliot describes in his metaphorical sculpture garden, the process of literature is an ongoing conversation as apt to be affected by what has come before as by what will happen in the future. Over the course of the year, our voices will become increasingly knowledgeable and nuanced and contribute, each in their separate way, to that conversation.

The first grading period will be the poetry unit. In this unit students will attain a growing proficiency, understanding and ease of use with poetic techniques such as trope, lineation, syntax, form and so on. The second grading period will be the fiction concentration, in which students will develop a sense of characterization, plot development, necessary detail and narrative compression among other techniques. In the third grading period, playwriting, students will read and try their hand at various kinds of writing for the stage, ranging from one-act plays to more complexly structured assignments. Finally, in the fourth grading period, students will apply the skills they have learned throughout the year to the development and revision of a portfolio of their original work.

Though the basic structure and goals of these units will remain the same from year to year, each term (Fall and Spring) we will have an overarching idea that structures our class reading and discussion. These will be new every term and are designed to help us focus our investigations into the literature and our own aesthetic, both as a class and as individuals. For the 2011-2012 school year, we will be investigating world literature in context with the cultural development of the area from which the literature came. Students will be assigned a country from a list provided at the beginning of the year. In the first term, the student will read a work given to them from that country, research the author and another element of artistic culture from that author's country, and prepare a presentation in which they present their findings to the class. In the Spring term, the student will read a different author from that same country with an eye toward examining both the literature and the tell-tale traits of that country's culture that show up in the texts. The student will give a second presentation at the end of the year. These two projects will each count as the semester exam so it is wise to be actively and independently involved in working on them throughout the semester, even if the deadline seems very far away.

In addition to our regular work of reading, discussion and writing, students will also be polishing, or reimagining, old work, preparing for and presenting public readings to the community (both in the FAC and beyond), and learning about aspects of the writing profession, contemporary literary journals and small publishers, scholarships and college programs and so forth. To this end, attendance at and participation in scheduled Fine Arts Center readings is a **REQUIREMENT**. All reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate student's schedules, but I also expect there will be a reasonable effort made to accommodate the schedules of the visiting artists who are, after all, here for you. Over the

course of the year, I will also post various literary or other artistic events happening around Greenville. Though I do not require students attend extracurricular non-FAC events, I strongly suggest it and will be giving extra credit to students who provide proof (a brochure, reading schedule, coffee-stained napkin, and so on) of their attendance.

The underlying theme for this course is the Modernist dictum that process is often more important than product. Thus, while students will be expected to craft and revise “finished” pieces, the focus here is on experimentation. As Samuel Beckett said: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

### Requirements

In a typical nine-week unit, the grades are broken down as follows:

- Quizzes: 20%
- Weekly Writing for Workshop: 20%
- Workshop Participation: 20%
- Journal Work: 20%
- Deadlines: 10%
- Unit Exam (in the fourth unit this will be the portfolio): 10%

At the end of the second and fourth units students will also present their long-term project, which they will have been working on all semester. Each of these long-term projects will count as 20% of the **semester grade**.

60% of year’s grade will be composed of the daily and weekly grades listed above. 40% will be composed of the long-term project grades.

**Attendance:** Please see the Fine Arts Center Handbook for our official attendance policy, but as a general note please remember that this class will not help you if you are not here to participate in it. Please don’t mistake the studio atmosphere for an “easy class.” If you are not here on a regular basis you are not only cheating yourself of an opportunity, you are cheating someone on the waitlist who could have made better use of your spot. While I can be flexible in terms of tardies for students who have conflicting schedules or are driving from long distances, these special situations need to be cleared with me at the beginning of the school year. Students who are consistently tardy without a pre-approved reason are disruptive to the classroom environment and may be asked to excuse themselves from the program if they can’t find a solution to their problem.

**Writing Portfolio:** At the end of the year, each student will hand in a portfolio of at least thirty pages of “completed” pieces that represent the concentrated effort of a year’s worth of study. Portfolios should show evidence of thoughtful revision and incorporate the knowledge acquired through reading and workshopping, though, of course, all decisions on a piece of writing are solely the artist’s to make. There are no specific requirements for the number of pieces in a final portfolios, though please remember they are reflective of a year’s worth of work. If you tend to write short pieces, make the portfolio a substantive collection of them. If your stories or poems tend to be on a more epic scale, a few highly polished pieces may suffice.

**Journal Work:** All students must get in the habit of keeping some sort of daily journal. The nature of this is dependant on the student's individual needs and tastes. These could consist of observations, ideas, recorded conversations. They could be art pieces filled with collage or sketches. They could be lists of plot ideas, character names, diagrams, journals, books, quotes, or whatever else suits the writer's fancy. Please remember, however, that these are writing tools, not simply diaries. While personal detail has a definite place in the writerly life—read Virginia Woolf's diaries if you don't believe me—these journals should be invested in production rather than just reportage. Journals will be asked for randomly at least once a unit, so please keep up with them.

**Quizzes/Tests:** Every Monday, students will be quizzed on the week's assigned readings. Quizzes will be idea, rather than plot driven, but will be designed to test comprehension of the reading as well as to give students an opportunity to marshal their thoughts in preparation for class discussion. Quizzes will consist of five questions, four of which will be specific about the piece's form or events. The final question will be in the form of a very short essay regarding the student's opinion or experience with the reading.

**Participation:** In addition to keeping up with the reading and writing assignments, students are also expected to be thoughtful and effective readers of each other's work. Students should arrive in class prepared to discuss the readings, willing to engage in class discussion and able to discuss peer work with the attention and respect their efforts deserve. Everyone has a voice in this class and those voices should all be heard on a regular basis. To that end, please remember your workshop etiquette. Workshops are not platforms in which to rewrite a fellow student's piece, or to air personal grievances. Our job as readers is to try to understand the direction in which the author **intends** to go and help the work best attain those goals. This does not mean we cannot speak our minds, or that a piece of writing won't sometimes change course in mid-journey. But it does mean we must be respectful of intent as well as actuality. Comments that are inane or so kind they actually say nothing (Don't Change a Thing ☺) are just as unhelpful and inappropriate as those that are cruel or personally directed. Please remember, no artist improves without being able to view their own work critically. You may sometimes feel like you are protecting a friend, or doing someone a favor, by praising their work over your better judgment or shielding them from workshop criticism to spare their feelings. In fact, this is the most hurtful thing you could do to a fellow artist. It means you either don't have faith they can improve, or you are so bored by their work you can't find anything of substance to say. In the end, tactful honesty is the best policy. If you think someone is doing something really exciting or skillful: say it! If you think someone isn't getting their point across or is missing a key element in their craft: say it!

**Independent Reading:** There is a substantial amount of reading required each unit, both inside the classroom and, necessarily, at home. While I understand your busy—sometimes insane!—schedules and am sympathetic, I must insist that all readings are done **before** the date on which we will discuss them. Everyone has off weeks, including me, but these deadlines should hold firm. Any student who is consistently unable to keep up with the readings, or who does so in a perfunctory manner without really understanding what they are ingesting, will be given an official warning. If the problem persists the student may be asked to leave the Creative Writing Program.

**Crashtest Magazine:** Last year we were excited the launch the Fine Arts Center's first online magazine for high school students: Crashtest, which you can check out at [www.crashtestmag.com](http://www.crashtestmag.com). Every Creative Writing student is also a reader for Crashtest and, as you move through the program, it will be possible for you to run for an editorial position with more responsibilities if you so choose. On the common file there is a folder labeled Crashtest, and within that folder every student has their own folder marked with their name. New work will be put in your folder by one of the editors on a regular basis and you are responsible for reading and commenting on each piece (using the editor's comment sheet provided) within one week of the time it is placed in your folder. I will explain this in much more detail, so don't worry, but please be aware that during the school year we can get up to fifty new submissions a week in poetry, fiction, playwriting and creative non-fiction from students from around the world so it is very important that you remain consistent in the performance of your readership duties and check your folder regularly.

Within each of these grading platforms there will be other projects, such as public readings, scholarship and journal submissions and student led lessons. In addition, students will be responsible for the production of an on-line literary magazine (Cripple Creek Review) and will be asked to be responsible for the editing and formatting of work submitted to the required regional and national high school literary contests. These are: National Foundation for Advancement of the Arts, Scholastic Art and Writing, the Nancy Thorpe Poetry Contest, and others. When possible, students are expected to attend off-campus literary events as announced, such as the Emrys Foundation Reading Series on the last Monday of each month at 7:00 pm. All major projects and deadlines will be assigned in plenty of time before the due date and explained more fully as they arise. If you ever have questions about anything—a due date, an assignment, how to decipher my handwriting—ask, ask, ask!

**Due Dates:** Though this schedule is subject to change depending on the unit and assignment, a typical week will look like this:

- Monday: Quiz. Class discussion of reading. Assignment of weekly written assignment.
- Tuesday: Further discussion. In-Class writing.
- Wednesday: In-Class writing and reading.
- Thursday: Weekly written assignment due **at the beginning of class**. Workshop of student writing.
- Friday: Workshop of student work. Next week's reading assigned.

**Student Conduct:** All students are, of course, expected to abide by the guidelines for student conduct established by the Greenville County school system and by the Fine Arts Center (available in the FAC Handbook). In addition to this, however, there are specific classroom rules for the Creative Writing Studio. Students are expected to bring their journals, pens and reading material to the class each day. They should be courteous in sharing classroom computer time and other resources with their classmates and in sharing the classroom creative space. This means understanding that a certain level of space and quiet are required for the creative process. Voices should be kept low and everyone's personal space respected. Students must maintain a high level of professionalism in presenting and critiquing one another's work and must refrain from eating and drinking the classroom at all times. Any damage to computers that may occur from breaking this rule is

the student's responsibility. At all showcases and performance events, both on and off-campus, students will dress appropriately, arrive on time, give full attention to the performing artist(s) and refrain from such behaviors as slouching down in the seat, propping legs up on the seat in front, eating, drinking, chewing gum, talking, whispering, giggling, texting, and acting the fool.

Students at the Fine Arts Center come from a wide variety of economic, social, religious and ethnic backgrounds. The Creative Writing Studio and the Fine Arts Studio in general are safe places where discrimination of any sort is not tolerated. Many of the readings for this class will be challenging, both as texts and ideologies. Our goal is to synthesize these texts and understand how they speak to one another, and to us, reaching beyond the traditional boundaries of culture, race, class, religious affiliation, gender and sex. Though your personal feelings are always a consideration as you explore the texts, please bear in mind that we are studying the ways in which the limits of the world are challenged, not the ways in which the texts do or do not fit with your personal beliefs. If you are truly troubled or challenged by something we have read, remember my door is always open and I am happy to discuss it with you.

**Plan for Routine Communication with Parents:**

- Quarterly FAC newsletter is mailed to all parents
- Parents are contacted promptly in the event of academic or disciplinary problems
- A log of parent calls is maintained in the teacher's office
- Report cards are sent four times a year
- Progress reports, when necessary or advisable, are sent mid-quarter, and must be signed and returned
- Attendance is monitored in accordance with state policies
- Students who do not comply with weekly assignments are given a verbal warning. If work does not improve, parents are notified and a conference may be arranged