

AHS Humanities 12: 2015-16

Creative Writing

12:10 to 1:09 p.m. (PEAK Wednesdays: 12:40 to 1:30 p.m.)

Instructor: Marcus Renner

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Office Hours: Thursday 1:13 to 2:13 (or by appointment)

Course Description

This course explores the magic in poems and short stories. You'll tap your imagination to create a digital story, a cycle of poems (or songs), and a traditional short story by the end of the semester. In the process, you'll learn about and practice the elements of creative writing-- imagery, character, plot, setting, point of view, and language. You'll read and critique the writing of well-known authors and one another in a way that makes everyone eager to share their writing and become better storytellers and poets. You'll practice different ways of coming up with ideas for what to write about and you'll gain valuable experience with revision, so that what matters to you shines through on the page.

The typical product of a creative writing course is a portfolio of polished work, ready to submit to journals, magazines, or perhaps to a college professor to gain entry into their creative writing course. While you will compile a portfolio and you will walk away with polished material, the focus of this course is on process over product. Reflection on your writing will count more than your finished stories and poems toward your final grade. Effort and risk taking are what matter most. Remember that the primary goal of this course is for you to own your own writing process.

Essential Question: How do you progress from idea to impactful writing?

- What are the elements of a well-told story?
- What is your preferred writing voice?
- How can you use words to create magic?
- How do you evaluate the quality of different types of writing?

Project Description

Staying with the metaphor of magic, I urge you to compare your work this semester to the students at Hogwarts seeking to become wizards and witches. Creating a character that fascinates is a spell. Designing a plot so that readers can't help but turn the page is a spell. Transporting a reader to a different place and time with a poem is a spell. Words have power; they change feelings and thoughts; they shape our reality and give people experiences. What else can you call this besides magic?

The project for this class will be for you to craft a **writing spell**, a set of words in the form of a poem, command, recipe, song, incantation, story, or letter that encapsulates one piece of knowledge about writing that you absolutely believe is true. Your spell can be about characters, plot, setting, point of view, meter, rhythm, or metaphor, just to describe a few of the magical elements of writing. People should be able to use your spell to take possession of imaginations, transport minds to alternate realms, activate senses, cause people to laugh, to cry, to throw things (hopefully not in frustration with the writing). Your spell will have a visual component as well—a particular image, format, layout or design that reinforces the message of the spell. The final spells will go into the *Magical Manual of Writing Instruction* that will serve as Animas High School's very own creative writing textbook.

As the final step in your magical education, you will use this spell as the basis for a **creative writing lesson** that you will teach to 9th grade students at Animas. You will most likely work together to team teach the lesson on one fine day at the beginning of December.

Major Assignments and Calendar

Writing Journal – The one constant throughout the semester will be your writing journal. You will write a lot about writing: about character, plot, image, and language; about things you want to try; about strong positive and negative reactions to what we read. You will write in your journal every week. These journal entries will be the basis for conferencing with me both formally and informally. You'll use these journal entries to decide what to put into your spell and what to teach the 9th graders.

Digital Story – A digital story is a video that mixes the voice of the author telling a story with photos, video clips, text, sounds, and background music to produce an original piece that has an impact on the viewer. The best way to understand digital stories is to watch some. You can go to storycenter.org and browse the archive. You get experience with every important aspect of creative writing by making a digital story, which is the reason we're starting the course with them. (Weeks 1-4)

Short Story – You'll take the skills you learn making the digital story and apply them first to the short story format. Narrative presents its own challenges and opportunities that I want you to struggle with. Your stories should be between four and ten double-sided pages. I recommend that these stories be fictional because it gives you the greatest flexibility. If you want adapt this assignment to your own needs, come talk with me and we'll try to figure something out. (Weeks 5 & 6)

Poetry Cycle – You will write a cycle of five poems addressing a question that is specifically important to you. The poems can take any format you wish. They can be song lyrics. This assignment is primarily about word choice and language. Again, if you want to adapt this assignment to your own needs let me know (Weeks 7 & 8).

Revisions – Revision is absolutely essential to this class. The quality of your revision counts more than the quality of your initial draft. You will need to change your drafts significantly in order to do well. It's in revising that you will find subject matter for your journal, which is perhaps the most important part of your grade. You will revise all three of the main writing assignments.

Workshops – An important part of this class is being attentive and supportive readers for one another. You will each submit either your poetry or story for the class to “workshop” or critique. Everyone needs to come ready to discuss the assigned reading and bring comments to pass back to the author. We'll talk about norms for workshop and will practice these norms on the work of well-known writers.

Outcomes and Rationale

This course might feel upside down because I'm emphasizing reflection much more than content. But that's by design. Much of creative writing instruction is about showing you what you don't know and pointing out “mistakes.” I want this course to help you recognize all the things you already do know about writing. We are born storytellers and poets. We have innate magical capacity. Your writing will improve more quickly the more you feel in control on your writing process. This is because you will feel confident about trying new things, about evaluating your work, and about knowing what feedback is useful and what you can ignore.

With this in mind, the outcomes I've built this class around are about increasing your

- ...knowledge of and skill with core elements creative writing
- ...ability to evaluate and discuss elements of craft
- ...understanding of and connection to their voice as a writer
- ...ease with turning inspiration into impactful writing
- ...love of writing

The Creative Classroom

You know by now that while all the teachers at Animas share a belief in project-based learning, we all have our own styles. My preferred style is to be a guide and support for what you want to do, especially in a class such as this where the focus is on imagination and craft. Here are a few things to note about what I call “the creative classroom.”

Open, unstructured time - This class is about creativity and so a good bit of class time will be set aside for you to work on your individual projects. I will check-in with you regularly and you should know that I'm always available to ask questions and talk through creative knots.

Skills-based - We are working on developing skills and so motivated practice is what's called for. The primary skill this class tries to cultivate is your critical thinking about your writing

process. Other hard skills: with language, character development, story structure, support this larger goal.

Self-censorship - In the course of creating stories and poems, it's important to follow our imaginations where they need to go. This means that characters and situations in our work might be disturbing or even vulgar. The language coming from our characters might be offensive. This is not a reflection on the identity or character of the writer. The question is always do these choices enhance or diminish the value to the work as a whole. Are these choices appropriate given the goal of the piece? This being said, language, action, and situation explicitly meant to provoke a response rarely rise above shock value and typically create a strong resistance within the reader.

Subjectivity – Creative writing is subjective. You are the ultimate judge of your writing. If something feels off, something probably is. You don't have to take my or others advice. But you should consider the feedback you get. Taking the stance that you only write for yourself and don't care what others think limits you and will make it difficult to get better. Writing is communication and you need to appreciate how others hear and react to your words.

Grading & Evaluation

Much of the reflection I want you do will come in evaluating your own work. For this reason, you will do a good deal of self-assessment of your work and we will compare notes in conference. You will tell me what's strong in your writing and what needs work. I might or might not agree, but you'll hear my reasoning, which should give you plenty to write about in your journal. We'll arrive at the final grade for your assignments together.

Here are a few things to note about grading in this class:

Your reflection is your summative assessment - This means what you recognize and learn about writing is more important than your ability to consistently demonstrate a particular skill. I am more interested in seeing you struggle to get something to work than for you to show me something you already easily know how to do.

Expectations are different for a revision – My expectation is that you will make major changes in your revision in response to the feedback you receive. If you don't agree with the feedback, or on the off chance that everyone is absolutely happy with your draft, try something completely different: write your story in first person, change the line breaks on your poem, etc. The original grade for a piece can go down if you do not take revision seriously.

Holistic evaluation – This means that I do not believe in assigning points for things like character, plot, language, etc. and then adding up those points to get a total for your entire piece. All the elements of creative writing work together. You can have an outstanding piece without strong images or with a disjointed plot if the other elements are so good that cast a

powerful spell on the reader. Part of what I want you to do is to make your own judgments about how all these elements come together and what's most important to you.

Here's the breakdown of the gradebook:

Community learning – This will encompass your participation in class activities, including contributions to class or small group discussions. Here is what goes into the community learning grade:

- homework assignments meant to help the class discuss and debate the topic at hand.
- participation in group discussion
- workshop of your fellow students

Formative assignments – Formative assignments prepare you for the most important work in this class, the reflection and ownership of your writing process. This category, therefore, includes

- worksheets
- reading annotations
- craft exercises
- drafts of your stories and poems

Summative assignments - Summative assignments assess you what you have learned about a topic (the sum of your knowledge at a point in time). In this class, I am evaluating your skills and rigor when thinking about your own writing. Summative assignments this semester include the following:

- your writing journal
- your individual entry into the spell book
- the writing lesson that you organize and teach

The exact weighting of these different categories will be something we decide in class.

Late work - I will accept late work. But it will cost you. I will deduct a 1/3 letter grade (e.g. a B- will drop to a C+) if the draft comes in a single day after the deadline. Beyond this you will drop a full grade each week (weekends are included in the count of days). This means if you turn in the equivalent of an "A" paper three days past the deadline, it will go down to a "B." If the same paper comes in twelve days after the deadline it will go down to "C" in its point total. If unavoidable circumstances warrant I will grant extensions. Come talk to me.

Extra Credit - This is rare. If I choose to give extra credit, everyone will have the opportunity to raise their score not just the people who need it.

Parental Questions - To encourage you to take ownership of your own grades, I ask that you please contact me directly with any questions about your assignments and grades. Please do not have your parents contact me regarding your grades until you have asked the questions

first, via email, speech, or writing. If you or your parents still have questions after you have talked to me, I would be happy to address your/their concerns

Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct - Plagiarism is the copying of language, structure, or ideas of another and presenting the work as your own OR the copying of your own work submitted for another class or assignment. Examples can include the following:

- copying information from the Internet
- allowing someone to revise your work and submitting it as your own
- copying from another student's work
- copying from your previous work without providing a citation

Plagiarism is a serious offense that will result, at the very least, in failure of the assignment with a grade of zero. Not understanding appropriate academic conduct is not an excuse. If you are in doubt about a particular situation, come speak with me.

If I suspect that you have committed an act of academic misconduct, I will discuss it with you and share it with the administration. Depending upon the circumstances, academic misconduct can result in suspension or expulsion. Please ask me before you turn in any work that might be problematic or raise questions in my mind.

Logistics

What to Bring to Class

- your laptop computer
- readings, handouts, worksheets assigned for the day
- paper and a writing utensil
- a binder with dividers for readings, documents, and handouts
- a library card (from Durango Public Library) – they're free and easy to get
- a USB storage device
- 100% of your effort, whatever that is for any given day

Attendance, Tardiness, and Absences – I take attendance at the start of class. If you're not in the room on time, you get a tardy. Absences must be excused for you to get extra time to make up assignments. You will generally get one additional day to complete an assignment for each day that you have an excused absence. If you have several excused absences in a row, you must check in with me so we can set new deadlines for your work.

Submitting Work – I will accept work by email but will most often request that you also give me a hard copy. Printing out your work at the last minute and frantically searching for a stapler is a time-honored tradition at college and one that you should start getting used to.

Formatting - All papers, including first drafts, must have 1-inch margins, use a Times New Roman, 12 pt. font, and have double-spacing. The first page must display the student's name and AHS Humanities 12.

Work submitted via email must use the following format: SMITH_STORY_ASSIGNMENT or SMITH_POETRY_ASSIGNMENT. **I will only accept 2-sided printing.** One-sided print-outs will go into my scratch paper pile.

Communicating with me - Email is the primary tool I will use to contact you between classes and is also the best way to contact me. I will try to respond within 24 hours. If you email me right before class, I will not read your message until after class.

Class Etiquette and Decorum

Respect – The best writing is personal and takes risks. While honest and authentic struggle with difficult feelings and concepts deserves wide latitude in a creative classroom, gratuitous expressions meant to provoke a response do not. It is important that you are tolerant, respectful, and considerate of your fellow classmates during discussion and in all online communication. We will set class norms for discussion early in the semester.

Food – You can eat in my classroom, but I will bust you if you leave a mess. Drinks and water bottles must have closed lids. I've put work into my classroom and having spilt coffee is not in the plan.

Work Time - If you finish the task at hand, my expectation is that you will use the time to continue working on other assignments, preferably related to our class. You can listen to music during work time but keep it at a volume so that others can't hear it.

Electronics - Turn off all electronic devices other than laptops (such as phones, iPods, iPads, etc.) before entering the classroom. I will ask you to use your laptops and sometimes your phones for specific tasks. Beyond this, I don't want to see or hear them. We will talk about this early in the semester.

In Conclusion

I believe words have tremendous power and am thrilled to be sharing this journey with you. Student voice is incredibly important to me, and I will check-in regularly about how the class is going and do my best to adjust my management of the course to your feedback.

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A Note to Students

I have drafted this detailed syllabus to answer questions or issues that might arise during the year. Please indicate you have read and understand the syllabus below by signing your name. If you have questions, please ask.

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

A Note to Parents

The education of your child is a task shared by parents, teachers, peer groups, and other community members. Please assist me in serving your child by reading the attached syllabus and acknowledging its content by signing in the space below. Please save my contact info or bookmark my digital portfolio (<http://marcushumanities12.weebly.com>) in case you have questions about the course. Also, feel free to use this opportunity to open a line of communication with me by writing in the space below.

I have read and understand the content in this syllabus.

Parent Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____

Parent Signature: _____ Date: _____

Is there anything else I should know about yourself, your family, or your son/daughter that will help him or her succeed this year in my classroom? (If you have any comments, questions, or additional information, please write them in the space below.)