# ENGL 446: Form and Theory in Creative Writing: Prose/Poetry

**Spring 2017**

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**Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to noon, and by appointment.**

-- *Station Eleven*, by Emily St. John Mandel, Vintage Books

--*Best American Essays 2016*, Mariner Books, Jonathan Franzen and Robert Atwan, eds.

--*Tijuana Book of the Dead*, Soft Skull Press, by Luis Alberto Urrea.

--NOTE: I WILL BE HANDING OUT, WORKS OF SHORT FICTION, and WORKS OF THEORY to SUMPLEMENT THESE REQUIRED BOOKS

**Course Description**: This is a creative writing course, but one in which we will be studying the craft with a close critical eye. We will base our study largely on imitation—by closely studying the style of other writers and then writing prose and poetry in the same style. By imitating other writers, we learn tools of the craft and eventually our own individual style emerges. **This is also a graduate level course, a course meant to train you for the rigors of graduate-level study in literature and creative writing. This means my expectations for your writing and your class participation are high. Do not make the mistake of showing up in my class unprepared—without the reading in front of you and completed.**

We will read and write fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, but we will also take apart our work and the work of others to determine what works and what fails. To do this effectively, we’ll have to look at how the genres of fiction and nonfiction have evolved in theory and practice. We will look at the tools writers use to tell stories in both genres and the stylistic differences that help separate writers as individual artists. So, through our reading, the various papers and exercises, and in spirited discussion we’ll break down how writers use characterization, detail (research is important to both fiction and nonfiction) dialogue, setting, point of view, and how writers manipulate voice in a story. We will study these issues in the art of fiction, through both the novel and the short story, and in the art of literary journalism, which borrows so much from the techniques of fiction. While it’s true that fiction and nonfiction should be understood as separate genres, it’s also true they borrow much from one another. For that reason, we will study them together, including in our examination the benefits and risks of this uneasy relationship. Finally, we will also pay close attention to language, literally to how writers work with words and sentences in different ways to reflect a certain “technique” and “voice,” as well as a certain rhythm in their writing.

**Graded Requirements:**

Four Papers

1. Fiction imitation/critique (3 pages of fiction/2 pages of analysis) 15%.
2. Rhetorical Analysis of work of fiction or nonfiction (2-3 pages) 15%.
3. Poetry imitation (1-2 pages of poetry/1 pages of analysis) 10%
4. Final Project: Work of creative writing produced during this semester. This is at least 5-10 of new creative nonfiction, fiction, or poetry. This creative work will be accompanied by an 8-10-page critical analysis of the literary works that inspire your own work.

When you add this up, the entire final project is 15-20 pages and worth 30% of your final grade.

**The 10-page critical analysis is not a work of academic literary criticism**, the likes of which you have written many times**. This is a work of personal literary criticism** or what is also known as “public intellectual” literary criticism, the sort of criticism you might see in large circulation literary journals such as *The New Yorker*, *Harpers*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, The New York Review of Books, *Guernic*a, *The New* *England Review*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and many other journals. In this piece you will draw from your own personal understanding of literature and your own experience with the literature that inspires you to help make your argument for what inspires your own creative work. To research this essay, you will dig into the writers who are your models. This will mean investigating the writers and writing styles that light your creative fires. What writers do you most admire or want to write like? We will read many models for this assignment, but you should also pay close attention to **the literary models you choose**. **You will present your final project to the class in a formal setting during the last two weeks of class.**

\* Participation (attendance, discussion, exercises, including weekly reading reports) 30%.

**Grading Standards:** Although this course is intended for creative writing students, grading standards for the analytical writing this course demands are necessarily different from those used in straight creative writing courses. Students in this course are expected to write in focused, logically organized prose that is crisp, clear and clean, though I encourage you to take stylistic risks. Students must do thorough research for every paper and sources must be carefully cited. Evidence derived from thorough research is critical for the papers students will write.

Papers will be graded on the “A” to “F” scale as defined in Rule 90 of WSU’s academic regulations (available in the Washington State University General *Catalog*. Briefly, those standards state that an “A” represents excellent scholastic performance, “B” superior scholastic performance, “C” satisfactory performance, and “F” unsatisfactory performance.” Class participation is also assigned a letter grad on this scale in calculating the overall course grade.

**ABSENCES/LATENESS:**

**This is a graduate school level class. If you are more than ten minutes late for class, I count you absent.**

**Students must follow the absence policy laid out here: I no longer allow absences. All absences must be preceded with a note in advance of your absence from class. You will lose a letter grade for every unexcused absence. Students who simply disappear—meaning those who miss numerous classes without explanation and then show up begging forgiveness—must drop the class. Extended medical absences require a medical excuse and will probably require you to take an incomplete. I require that all students taking an incomplete grade to retake the class.**

**\*\*\*\*\*ALSO UNDERSTAND THAT AS WRITERS WE OFTEN DEAL WITH DIFFICULT ISSUES. THIS IS PART OF THE WRITER’S JOB—TO EXPLORE DEEPLY AND ASK DIFFICULT QUESTIONS. IN THE LITERATURE WE READ AND DISCUSS, AND IN OUR WRITING WORKSHOPS, WE WILL DEAL WITH UNCOMFORTABLE ISSUES, INCLUDING CONTROVERSIAL SITUATIONS DEALING WITH RACE, GENDER, SEX, POLITICS, ILLNESS, ABUSE, LOSS OF LIFE, ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS, EVEN MURDER, TO NAME A FEW. I RUN AN OPEN WORKSHOP ENVIRONMENT. THIS MEANS THAT IN CLASS WE DISCUSS THE FULL SPECTRUM OF ISSUES THAT DRIVE THE STORIES WE WRITE.**

**\*\*\*\*\*BRING THE ASSIGNED READING TO CLASS EVERY SINGLE DAY. THIS IS MANDATORY. IF YOU ARE PRESENT IN CLASS WITHOUT THE READING, I HAVE TO ASSUME YOU HAVE NOT DONE THE READING AND I WILL ASK YOU TO LEAVE THE ROOM.**

***!!!! WSU policy effective August 24, 2015: I will ONLY be able to respond to emails sent from your WSU email address.  I will NOT be able to respond to emails sent from your personal email address.  The WSU IT Department will switch the “preferred” email address in your myWSU to your WSU email address.***

**Daily Class Schedule:**

**NOTE: Each date is followed by the name in parentheses of the writers we are focusing on during those weeks (MANDEL) or (URREA) or (BAE for *Best Essays*). Under the heading of “Read” for each scheduled day, various essays, short stories, and theoretical texts will be assigned from the anthologies listed on the reading list. I will also hand out copies of additional readings in class.**

**\*\*\*\*FICTION**

**Week One—Jan 9, 11, 13, 2017 (Mandel and handouts)**: Introduction to the course, including an overview and discussion of prose storytelling’s classic techniques through narrative arc, development of human character, dialogue, and setting. Writing visually is a key tenant of creative prose, not to mention poetry Read:Assigned stories (stories and essays will always be assigned in handouts).

Assigned reading from Mandel)*.*

Explanation of the **Paper One** **(FIVE PAGES)** and **Final Project** (paper #4) and how to define personal literary criticism.

Paper One is an imitation exercise. You will write a 4-5-page story in the style voice of Emily St. John Mandel. You will tell your own story (science fiction or not, it does not matter), but you will write it in her style and her voice. You will also write a one-to-two-page accompanying analysis of how you did the imitation and what aspects of Mandel’s style you borrowed in order to write your imitation.

Final Project Research --FIRST: Personal history and literature. SECOND: Connect your own writing style to your reading and the literature inspires you as a writer. THIRD: How does your reading connect to your own creative writing?

**Handout from literary critic Francine Prose** with assignment of **Paper One** in connection with one of the assigned story readings. You will also have a **reading** handout from **Nicholas Delbanco**—novelist and founder of the University of Michigan MFA program—on learning to write by imitation**.**

In class discussion we will break down a chapter of Mandel’s novel

**Week Two, January 16, 18, 20 (Mandel)**: **Read: Mandel and another handout from the critic Francine Prose**. We will also look at another work of short fiction.

Introduction to techniques of editing as a way of examining stories more closely. With this class we will begin the gradual process of focusing on issues of language and style. Discussion of editing processes.

In-class writing exercise followed by editing exercise connected to Paper One. Students will spend 20 minute editing each other’s papers.

We will do several in-class writing and editing exercise.

More discussion of the techniques of prose fiction, with more focus on language and style comparing Mandel to other writers. We will draw from how Prose concentrates on writers’ styles in her essays. Focus on comparisons between fiction and nonfiction. We will also do a short editing workshop on Paper One, which is due during the next class period.

In-class writing exercise

**Week Three, Jan. 23, 25, 27 (Mandel): Read: Mandel and a third handout from the critic Francine Prose.** We will continue discussion of style with regard to Mandel and other writers. **Paper One Due January 25.**

**Mandel uses a particularly unconventional structure. How does the structure support the focus of the story? How would you describe the structure.**

We will work on the issue of Status Detail as a feature of characterization and setting in fiction and nonfiction. We will also focus on the pattern of narrative arc in essays and fiction.

Begin work on **Paper Two, Rhetorical Analysis.**

In-class writing exercise connected to Rhetorical Analysis paper.

Discussion of literary journalism technique and how its relationship to the short story. Discussion of rhetorical analysis. We will do an in-class rhetorical analysis of Mandel as an exercise. **We should be in the last third of Station Eleven.**

How do nonfiction writers solve problems to get access to a subject in order to develop character and setting? Did this on-the-ground work translate into good writing? **FINAL PROJECT HANDOUT**

In-class writing exercise connected to Rhetorical Analysis Paper

**\*\*\*\*FICTION and CREATIVE NONFICTION**

**Week Four Jan. 30, February 1 and 3 (Mandel, final week): Read: We will finish with Station Eleven and we will read assigned essays.** We will spend half the class discussing more on research issues in essays and fiction, using our reading as the dominant example. We will begin our nonfiction reading Joan Didion’s famous essay, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” which falls into multiple nonfiction areas, including TRUE CRIME and WRITING ABOUT PLACE. In our reading we will compare fiction and nonfiction techniques, looking at how good nonfiction borrows from the techniques of fiction.

**More on Rhetorical Analysis**. In discussion, we will do a rhetorical analysis of an assigned reading. Note that this paper is a language-based assignment designed to focus on issues of language use in storytelling.

We will look at the story “Human Snowball” by Davy Rothbart from *The Paris Review.* Rhetorical analysis exercise and discussion. Issues of punctuation, the comma as a tool of manipulating voice, uses of subordination and coordination in sentence structure. What is voice?

**Week Five Feb. 6, 8, 10 (Best American Essays and nonfiction handouts)**: Brief discussion of Final Project questions. Continue with **readings Prose, Chapter Six***.* Assigned nonfiction: Rebecca Solnit’s story “Medical Mountaineers” in *The New Yorker* and from “Human Snowball. Part of what we will focus on with these readings is the role of research in personal nonfiction.

Final Project Research -- FIRST: Personal history and literature. SECOND: Connect your personal writing style to your reading and the literature inspires you as a writer. THIRD: How does your reading connect to your own creative writing?

**In-class Writing Exercise connected to Paper Two**

We will examine the role of research in fiction and nonfiction. Should writers in each genre be thinking of research differently? How do the writers we have been reading reveal their research? Assigned Reading from Medical Mountaineers, Human Snowball, and a chapter from Brandon Schrand’s literary memoir, *Works Cited: An Alphabetical Odyssey of Mayhem and Misbehavior*.

Final Project Research Exercise--FIRST: Personal history and literature. SECOND: Connect your personal history to your reading and the literature inspires you as a writer. THIRD: How does your reading connect to your own creative writing?

In-class writing exercise—nonfiction: Related to Final Project

**Week Six Feb. 13, 15, 17 (Best American Essays and Nonfiction Handouts, including a reading from THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT, by John D’Agata and Jim Fingal).** This week focuses entirely on nonfiction, research, and your Final Projects. We will be using Brandon Schrand and other writers as models for the literary analysis part of your final projects.

Final Project Research Exercise--FIRST: Personal history and literature. SECOND: Connect your personal history to your reading and the literature inspires you as a writer. THIRD: How does your reading connect to your own creative writing?

**Paper Two Due February 15.**

**Introduction of Paper Three: Write a poem imitating one of the poets we will study in class, or an imitation of one of your favorite poets. (Two pages of poetry, one page of analysis)**

We will transition here from prose into poetry, though we will continue to keep prose in the discussion as we bring poetry into focus. We will return to discussion of Billy Collins’ work and how poetry influences writers of fiction and nonfiction.

Poetry Exercises.

**\*\*\*\*POETRY and PROSE**

**Week Seven Feb. 20, 22, 24 (Poetry by Luis Alberto Urrea):** In addition to Urrea we will look at the work of a few poets, including this semester’s visiting poet, Rebecca Gayle Howell. Focus on what prose writers can learn from reading poetry. Discussion of readings, including examples of personal literary criticism.

Possible class-visit with Rebecca Gayle Howell.

With an eye toward preparing for the final project, I will hand out more sample essays of personal literary criticism today. In-class writing: Beginning draft of Final Project.

**Week Eight Feb 27, March 1 and 3 (Urrea poems and poems from others)**: Read: Assigned *Best American Essays* and possible assigned short fiction for discussion. Wrap up Discussion of how poetry influences prose in our work and in the assigned reading.

**Paper Three Due: March 1**

Read: Discussion of ethical issues with regard to blending of fiction and nonfiction techniques. Case Studies: Masson vs. the New Yorker and The Janet Cooke case. Do the techniques of fiction have a place in nonfiction?

**FINAL PROJECT DISCUSSION:** We will, as an exercise, spend a good part of this class deconstructing FINAL PROJECT and the process of personal literary criticism. In-class writing: Beginning draft of Final Project.

Final Project Research -- FIRST: Personal history and literature. SECOND: Connect your personal history to your reading and the literature inspires you as a writer. THIRD: How does your reading connect to your own creative writing?

**\*\*\*\*FINAL PROJECT FOCUS**

**NOTE: Students should be focusing on the Final Project from this point on.**

**NOTE on READING: Readings from this point on will dip into the various fiction and nonfiction collections assigned for the course and, of course, into Francine Prose. Prose’s essays can be helpful. I will handout other works of personal literary criticism to give you more examples.**

**Week Nine March 6, 8, 10 (PROSE and Assigned BAE Essays):** In-class writing and editing exercises with focus on Final Project. REMEMBER THAT THE FINAL PROJECT IS IN TWO PARTS—FIRST THE WRITTEN 15-20 PAGES AND SECOND THE PRESENTATIONS DURING THE LAST TWO WEEKS OF SCHOOL.

In-class writing and editing exercises with focus on Final Project.

**March 13-17--SPRING BREAK**

**WEEK TEN March 20, 22, 24:** Preparation for the final project. **Discussion and exercises**.

Final Project Research Exercise--FIRST: Personal history and literature. SECOND: Connect your personal history to your reading and the literature inspires you as a writer. THIRD: How does your reading connect to your own creative writing?

**WEEK ELEVEN March 27, 29, 31:** Final Project mini workshops

First draft of final project due. Editing exercise. Focus on structure.

FROM THIS POINT ON THE FOCUS IS ON THE FINAL PROJECT: DISCUSSION, EDITING, AND FINALLY THE PRESENTATIONS BEGINNING THE WEEK OF APRIL 10, WHICH COINCIDENTALLY IS FIVE DAYS BEFORE YOUR FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL TAXES ARE DUE.

**WEEK TWELVE April 3, 5, 7:** Final Project editing workshop. This session will be focused on issues and problems of research.

DISCUSSION and EDITING EXERCISES.

**WEEK THIRTEEN April 10, 12, 14:** DISCUSSION and EDITING EXERCISES.

PRESENTATIONS.

**WEEK FOURTEEN April 17, 19, 21:** PRESENTATIONS

**WEEK FIFTEEN April 24, 26, 28:** PRESENTATIONS

**Monday May 1, 2015, Final Project Due.**