

MFA Curriculum: Course Descriptions

MFA Core

The MFA journey begins with a core seminar course, "Writers and Readers, Creators Both." The course is a reading-intensive examination of the relationship between reading and writing. Students expand their knowledge of the craft of writing and the use of literary texts as guides for their own work.

Groundings in the Craft: Elements of Poetry

Writing Course

In this course, students study important elements of poetry: metaphor, simile, voice, forms and structures for poems, free verse structures, and the image.

Groundings in the Craft: Elements of Fiction

Writing Course

The focus is on the fundamentals of writing fiction: character development, scene, plot, narrative voice, structure, setting, and dialogue.

Groundings in the Craft: Elements of Creative Nonfiction

Writing Course

This foundation class explores the fundamental craft skills and broad structural subgenres of creative nonfiction. Our methods of study will be through readings, class discussion, and through intensive critical and creative writing on the part of all students.

Advanced Fiction: Craft

Writing Course

This is an advanced-level, thesis preparation class designed for students who have had substantial coursework and who are ready to begin the serious work of shaping a book-length fiction thesis. Through reading of creative and critical work, as well as exercises and discussion, students will engage in a rigorous study of craft intended to further their knowledge and authority as writers. We will consider craft issues such as authorial voice; urgency; creating multi-layered work; the relationship between setting and story; the artistry and impact of structure and plot development. Emphasis will be on creative exploration and experimentation within our work. In a non-workshop format, students will establish an independent artistic process and generate 10-15 pages of new fiction per week. Final projects (40-50 pages of revised thesis material) will be reviewed by peer groups at the end of the semester.

Advanced Fiction: Workshop

Writing Course

This is an advanced-level course for fiction writers approaching thesis. Students will generate a substantial amount of new work during the course, and workshop new /existing material toward a portfolio of revised work. We will look at the process of completing and structuring the thesis manuscript and address craft issues that arise from student's work. Students will prepare extensive written responses to one another's work, and the course will give advanced students an opportunity to refine workshopping skills.

Advanced Poetry

Writing Course

In this course we work toward the dual goals of preparing students to successfully complete a poetry thesis and become a poet in the world. The course is set up to let students engage with course materials and their writing as working artists. Students will work on full-length poetry manuscripts as we deeply immerse ourselves in the ongoing conversation of poets across time and place, through the study of both poetry and poets' thoughts on craft, influence, and process, as presented through craft essays and interviews. Poets studied will be a mix of the emerging, who may include Paisley Rekdal, Oliver de la Paz, Tung Hui Hu, and Kevin Young, and the established, who may include Brigit Kelly, Louise Gluck, Larry Levis, and Deborah Keenan.

Advanced Creative Nonfiction

Writing Course

This is an advanced-level thesis preparation class designed for students who have completed foundational coursework. As a sequel to *Groundings in the Craft*, this class is designed to build upon the fundamental knowledge acquired in that course. The primary focus of the class will be on student writing, and the primary class activity will be careful and intensive workshop of student works in progress. Each student will be expected to pursue rigorously the development of finished essays or chapters that reflect a coherent vision and advanced understanding of craft. Assigned reading, writing, and exercises will be designed to explore topics related to the practice and craft of creative nonfiction.

Writing and Elective courses vary by term. Sample course descriptions:

Currents in Poetry: Riding the Waves as Editor and Poet (*Water~Stone Review*)

Writing Course

What urgency moves a poem out of the pile and onto the page for publication? Contemporary poetry boasts multiple aesthetics and thousands of poems making the rounds of literary magazines. How do editors choose what to publish? How do writers navigate the currents of contemporary poetry, making a place in it yet remaining open to diverse influences and in turn influencing it? As members of the *Water-Stone Review* poetry editorial board, you will work from the perspectives of editor and writer to engage with the 'thrill of the big littles.' The 'big little' magazine or literary journal traditionally has determined the parameters of American poetry, both establishing standards and featuring edgy new arrivals; that process, one editor suggests, "keeps writers writing and their work flowing . . ." How will thinking—and seeing—as an editor influence your work? You will read, discuss, and select poetry submissions to *Water-Stone Review*, explore other literary journals, study essays on poetic craft, complete short writing exercises, and prepare poems for submission to journals of your choice. Students will revise and workshop at least one selection of their own work in this course as they prepare their journal submissions.

Creative Nonfiction Today: Navigating the Craft as Editor and Writer (*Water~Stone Review*)

Writing Course

Why is one creative nonfiction magazine submission forgettable, another indelible? What's right, and wrong, with nonfiction journal submissions? What gives your essays and memoirs the za-za-zoom that leads editors to love your work, pass on the others? What's the difference between workshop critique and editorial interrogation? How does contemporary editorial taste intersect with agreed-upon elements of literary quality, and which editors prefer which sorts of nonfiction form? Where does nonfiction live in the indie magazine scene now, and where might your work fit? Through lively and immersive work on the CNF editorial board of the *Water~Stone Review*, you will analyze and select from manuscripts submitted to the journal, study journals publishing nonfiction today as well as craft essays illuminating the contemporary conversation about the genre, and prepare your own CNF for submission to magazines of your choice. Students will revise and workshop at least one selection of their own work in this course as they prepare their journal submissions.

The Successful Story: Fiction through the Lens of Editor and Writer (*Water~Stone Review*)

Writing Course

What moves a story beyond first cut? What does it take for a story to beat out hundreds of others on the path to publication? What's the quality of fiction being submitted to national literary journals? Where does our own work fit into the wide range of publishing possibilities? How does editorial work change your fiction forever? In this dynamic, hands-on class, students will take on the role of fiction editorial board for the next issue of *Water~Stone Review*. Working as a team of editors and writers, we will ask the same questions of our own work that we ask of others: What does it take to succeed? Is quality simply a matter of taste? Is publication purely subjective? Class work will include submission screening, short writing exercises, and the study of national literary journals with an eye toward future placement of our own fiction. Students will revise and workshop at least one selection of their own work in this course as they prepare their journal submissions.

Form and Vision in Poetry (topic varies with instructor)

Writing Course

“Ode and Elegy” with Matt Rasmussen

The elegy and the ode are two ancient forms dedicated to exploring the heights and depths of our emotions and the vast field that lies between. Much of the greatest poetry we have comes from these two impulses—to celebrate and to mourn. In some of our finest contemporary poems, the two impulses merge in a remarkable way. This course will examine briefly the history of both forms, the ode and the elegy, but will focus primarily on modern and contemporary poets for whom these two impulses are crucially important. At the same time, students will write odes and elegies of their own, as well as poems that combine both forms. The professor will suggest writing assignments, as necessary, to help students try different approaches in their own poems. Students will read their work in class and have it responded to by the other students. Students will also present on a poet who has worked with either the ode or the elegy. In addition, there will be a final portfolio which will include both odes and elegies as well as poems that combine the spirit of both forms.

“Obsession” with Anna Meek

What can you not let go of? What can't let go of you? In this course, we'll examine how obsessions can serve as a muse, if we understand obsession as any prolonged and impassioned fascination or devotion. We will examine how devotion and obsession allow poets to generate material, to examine the material at close range (sometimes too close!), wrestle and revel in it, and finally to organize it into collected,

passionate work. We'll consider obsessive poetry's predilections for minutiae, for intensity, for great joy or shame, and what such passion and fascination in poems can offer a reader as well. In addition to looking at full-length volumes of poetry, we'll read and discuss several chapbooks and think about how the form's compressed space affects obsessive material. Students will also receive regular comments on their work-in-progress and on their reflections. By the end of the semester, students will have the draft of a chapbook.

Point of View in Fiction

Writing Course

Point of view is the most complex element of fiction. Through reading, writing, and discussion we will examine some of the infinite narrative angles available to fiction writers. Careful consideration will be given to the following questions: How does point of view influence and shape a story? To whom does the story belong? How do we know who has the best story to tell? What advantages/disadvantages do different narrators bring to a story? What are the demands and limitations of each point of view? From what position does the narrator tell the story? Can the narrator be trusted? We will look at contemporary fiction writers who have utilized point of view to layer and enhance dramatic action. This seminar is for students who are committed to broadening and enriching their fiction through extensive experimentation with point of view. Course requirements include weekly reading and writing.

Flash Fiction

Writing Course

This is a writing workshop in which we will explore various options for the short-short. We won't spend much time fighting about how prose poetry and short-shorts often converge, but we'll generally think of short-shorts as little fictions that tell a story or at least imply one. We will look at many contemporary published models, but we'll also see what can be learned from older traditions of tale-telling, including folk and fairy tales. We will write some short-shorts with specific guidelines for narrative structure and character portrayal, but since the form invites experimentation, that door will be open, too. We won't spend much time fighting about length, either, but a short-short should not require the reader to turn the page more than once. The condensation required in writing short-shorts also makes this a class in clarity and lucidity. The class will definitely require more time than paper. Expect to write at least two short-shorts per week, to read many published samples, to prepare useful critical responses to your peers' work, and to spend time revising and polishing at least two of your own stories.

Topics: Fiction: Fantasy

Writing Course

All fiction seeks to immerse readers in another experience--another world. But successful fantasy fiction allows readers to believe six impossible things before breakfast. It's the job of the writer to provide the convincing fictional elements that allow readers to suspend their disbelief for the length of the tale. In this course, students will learn narrative techniques that make for a truly immersive fantasy; read short fiction by contemporary writers in the field; write short stories in several different subgenres of fantasy; learn to build convincing characters and worlds; practice controlling the reader's experience through point of view, description, and language, and consider how structure affects fantastic narratives; and help each other solve problems and take chances in their fiction.

Writing the Book Review

Elective

This class explores that most popular mode of literary criticism, the book review. What makes a great review, and how does it influence publishing decisions, reader reception, and other aspects of literary culture? In this course, we will look at the history, ethics, and current “best practices” of reviewing, as well as write several reviews, with a special eye toward balancing the creative and critical sides of the intriguing and useful form.

The Novel

Writing Course

This is an advanced level fiction course for students who want to explore the novel form and generate work for their own novels. It is understood that the novel is a long, circuitous journey. Within the structure of this class, students will generate early material as well as develop an individual relationship with their work. Emphasis will be on the novel's possibility and potential as students develop their fictional dream. Early work will not be critiqued but will be shared informally with peers as time allows. As part of our exploration, we will read novels with a range of narrative strategies. Readings on craft will also be included. Students should expect to write at least ten new pages per week, participate in class exercises and discussion, write brief responses to assigned readings, and complete a final project.

The Personal Essay

Writing Course

One of the most open and provocative of prose forms, the personal essay derives its name from the French word *essai*, to attempt. Its roots lie in curiosity, and our focus will be on the questioning and questing nature of the personal essay in a range of forms. A beguiling form, it re-invents its structure and its possibilities with each new voice. However, through our course readings, we'll locate elements of style and structure (lyric, narrative, cultural criticism, reportage, the meditation) that can inform your own work. We'll read from classics of the genre (Woolf, Orwell, Baldwin, Didion, Wallace), but focus on contemporary essayists responsible for a resurgence of interest in the form (Eula Biss, Mark Doty, Lesley Jamison, Ander Monson, Elena Passarello, Lia Purpura, Claudia Rankin, Zadie Smith, John Jeremiah Sullivan, Toure, Sarah Vowell, Jerald Walker). Weekly writing and reading in a variety of forms will structure the course, with an opportunity to complete and revise one substantial essay during the course.

Topics: Speculative Fiction

Writing Course

This is a multi-genre fiction course that enters the worlds of fantasy, horror, and science fiction and focuses on creating a realistic story that grounds even the most unusual tale in a recognizable world. Inspired by the work of authors as varied as Octavia Butler, Italo Calvino, Kelly Link, Jeff VanderMeer, Margaret Atwood, and Sherman Alexie, this class will discuss multi-genre craft topics and use several in-class writing exercises to further investigate storytelling methods. Then, using what we have learned, we will read and reflect upon one another's work (either a short story or first chapter) in a workshop-style discussion. Together, we will go down the rabbit hole of slipstream fiction and discover the multitude of possibilities waiting on the other side.

Topics: Forms of the Sudden

Writing Course

Events seem to be moving rather quickly to me, and I think the response of many writers has been compression, and an exploration of the art of the paragraph, the fragment, the sequence. This course will explore various short forms as vehicles for expressive writing and conclude with individual projects constructed of a series of shorter works on a theme. Generally, the material will proceed from a consideration of the prose poem as a field of play, with an emphasis on the interior and on an understanding of the self, to brief non-fiction and an emphasis on the self and society as well as relational insight, to sudden fiction and an exploration of the other and empathic writing. The final week will be given over to the development and discussion of your projects and to hybrid forms of writing.

The Literary Memoir

Writing Course

All memoir begins with the challenge of transforming the personal moment for an impersonal reader. The literary memoir presumes the possibility of transforming human experience through an artistic vision. It uses structure, voice, form, and language to make literature from the constraints and complexities of personal experience. In so doing, literary memoir shares some of the strategies and ambitions of literary fiction and the personal essay. "All narrative is metaphor," wrote Mary Oliver, and that double vision will be integral to our approach in this class. We'll read examples of the literary memoir that represent excellence, innovation, and practical strategies in this evolving form. We'll examine and experiment with the process of confronting personal material with the intensity required by the art of memoir. This course will require students to focus on craft; as a result, the content of individual memoirs will not be our focus. Instead, we will look at strategies each writer can use to convey their particular material. Course requirements include substantial reading, weekly exercises, critical commentaries, and a major creative piece

Plot in Fiction

Writing Course

In this class, we will take on plot with a vengeance. We will look at how to open a story, the elements of plot, what makes a story have promise, how to keep the pace and drama at high pitch, and how to wrap it up in a satisfying way. We will also really explore our relationship to the reader, how we move them through the book. By the end of the class, you should know just about everything that happens in your novel. We will write flap copy, one-sentence narratives, and outlines. Whether you are just starting a new book, halfway through one, or trying to finish it, this class will show you how plot shapes a good novel. Workshopping will be a part of this class.

Composition Theory and Pedagogy

Elective

This course introduces students to the theory and practice of teaching writing at the college level. Students will examine a range of composition philosophies and pedagogies, including expressive, rhetorical, collaborative, cultural, and critical approaches. Through extensive reading and peer-reviewed demonstrations, students will learn and practice a process-based approach to teaching critical thinking, reading, and writing skills in the writing classroom. Students will learn strategies for designing courses and assignments, facilitating discussions and peer reviews, integrating technology and research methods, and responding to writing through tutorials and written evaluations. Readings and presentations by practitioners will also introduce students to the philosophies and practices of Writing Across the Curriculum, the Writing Center, and second-language and basic writing instruction.

Creative Process

Elective Only

"There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are." - W. Somerset Maugham

After all the courses, the critiques, and The Capstone, Hamline's MALS and MFA graduates move into their spheres of influence to participate as creators. A working relationship with the creative process is a vital part of that transition, as well as a foundation for the work students do as creators within their graduate program. This course is structured as an investigation and an experiment. Each student will identify the elements of "right practice" for a productive individual approach to generating, developing, and bringing new ideas to fruition. We'll study the testimonies of writers, artists, musicians, mathematicians, scientists, psychologists, philosophers and other creative minds for patterns and collective wisdom. We'll consider theories and models for the workings of the creative process across disciplines. Most importantly, each student will observe their own creative process through a series of exercises and experiments. Course requirements include an attitude of curiosity and a willingness to experiment, substantial reading and discussion, completion of a detailed process journal, and a critical essay which both makes a creative contribution to the conversation and reflects the theories, models, and experiments undertaken during the semester