English 5A/5B: Creative Writing

Welcome!
This course is an introduction to the major genres of creative writing, namely fiction, poetry, drama, memoirs and creative nonfiction (personal essay). We will begin with a look at creativity, the creative process, and the role of the writer/artist in his or her society. We will do a lot of experimenting with a wide variety of creative and technical exercises while practicing the formal and technical elements of fiction, poetry, and the creative essay. We will explore the social, cultural, and historical context of creative writing in order to read, analyze, and critique a variety of literary examples, both professional and your own (be prepared to share some of your work, to receive feedback and suggestions, and to give supportive, constructive criticism to your fellow classmates). In this course, you will compose personal essays, stories, poems, and dramatic or cinematic scenes, expanding and revising a selection of these for a final course portfolio.

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- recognize and employ various creative strategies for writing short stories, poetry, and creative nonfiction.
- recognize formal and technical elements of creative writing (fiction and nonfiction) through analysis of professional writing and one’s own writing.
- practice formal and technical elements of creative writing to produce a portfolio of work including poem(s), short stories, creative essay and a writer’s journal.
- critique their work and the work of others.

Required Materials:

- *Crossroads: Creative Writing Exercises in Four Genres*, Diane Thiel
- *Bird by Bird*, Annie Lamott
- notebook for journal and writing exercises (doesn’t need to be fancy, I find that a regular spiral notebook works great)
- copying fees: you may need to make copies for the class of work you present.
“Basically, if you want to become a good writer, you need to do three things. Read a lot, listen well and deeply, and write a lot.”
--Natalie Goldberg

What are workshops?
Workshops are one of the most widely-accepted means of teaching creative writing. The idea is that writers come together to share both their writing and the writing process, presenting their own stories, poems and other creative writing as well as critiquing and giving feedback on the work of others. The workshop is a place to bring work-in-progress and present it to the group for discussion. Each student is expected to present a minimum of two works-in-progress and two “completed” pieces for class discussion. Students will sign up for workshop days.

Presentations
It is a requirement of the class that you present at least two works-in-progress for workshop discussion and critiquing during the semester, generally, Thursdays will be workshop days. Remember that no writer writes in isolation—all writers are influenced and encouraged by a larger community of writer’s—whether through their own writing or their immediate feedback. This community of writer’s is a crucial element to the creative process. At the beginning of class on presentation days, students scheduled to have their piece considered for workshop will provide each class member and the instructor with a typed copy of the work.

How much writing will we be doing?
Lots! Work for class involves completing class exercises and composing and revising poems, short stories and keeping a writer’s journal.

- In addition to keeping a journal of notes and ideas, it is expected that you will compile a writer’s portfolio to turn in for a grade at the end of the semester. Please see the portfolio assignment sheet for details.
- A journal may take any number of forms. For this class, I’m asking you to make it a place for accounts of daily activities, ideas, notes bits of conversation, etc.

Will we be only writing?
No, although we will be doing lots of writing, and rewriting, the best way to learn good writing is by reading, so we will be reading and analyzing a variety of texts: poems, short stories, plays, essays. You may get a pop quiz here or there. We’ll see. And of course, class participation is an important aspect of any workshop/discussion. There may also be opportunities to attend author readings.

“Writing…is ninety percent listening. You listen so deeply to the space around you that it fills you, and when you write, it pours out of you. If you can capture that reality around you, your writing needs nothing else.”
--Natalie Goldberg

Grading Criteria for Creative Writing (yes, somewhat subjective although I will try to be as supportive as possible)

- technical proficiency (clarity, coherence, well-chosen language, clear sentence structure, consistent point of view, coherent use of metaphor, etc.)
• development/depth ("showing" rather than "telling," well-developed characters, well-developed plot, etc.)
• originality (risk-taking, stylistic innovation, independent thinking)
• personal/social insight (self-reflection, psychological depth, social/cultural perspective)
• improvement (how far have you taken your characters, tone, imagery, etc. since your initial draft? Since the beginning of the course?)

Attendance:
Because our course is, in part, based on workshop sessions, attendance is critically important. PCC’s attendance policy is that if a student misses more than two weeks worth of classes, he/she can be dropped. I typically follow this rule unless there are outstanding circumstances preventing you from attending. If that becomes the case, be sure to get in touch with me before, or at least during, your absence.

All work for presentations and final revisions must be typed.

Helpful Information:
I am always available during my office hours and am happy to spend that time with you discussing any work or questions you may have about the class. If you are not available during my posted office hours, email me or see me to arrange another time to meet. I will try to be flexible to meet with you.

Our class has a website where I will post course handout, useful information and occasionally your work (with permission). Be sure to check out the site each week for announcements or new information.

http://faculty.pasadena.edu/aslawlor/index.html

Also, if you find out about an author reading somewhere or a writing-related event, let me know so I can announce it to the class. I try to keep abreast of what’s going on in local literary circles, but because we live in such a vibrant creative community, it’s easy to miss events.

A special note:
Because good creative writing requires that we push ourselves to explore new ground and take risks in our writing and our expression, keep in mind that we should, at all times, practice the kind of respect that we deserve to receive.