

# AWP 2014 – Seattle

## Thurs, Feb 27, 4:30-5:45 PM

### How Can You Grade a Poem?

#### Creative Approaches to Assignments, Assessments, and Student Assumptions

What's the point of grading a poem? Is it antithetical to the creative process to assign a grade for works of the imagination? This panel—comprised of college instructors, editors, and practicing writers—will examine the complexities of evaluating creative work, including assessment strategies for newer creative writing programs and innovative assignments that challenge student assumptions about writing. Panelists will share time-tested prompts and investigate various methods of measuring student, instructor, and programmatic accomplishment.

#### Moderator

**Stephanie Lenox** (slenox@willamette.edu) teaches creative writing at Willamette University and composition at Chemeketa Community College, both in Salem, Oregon. She is the author of *Congress of Strange People* (Airlie Press 2012) and founding editor of *Blood Orange Review*.

#### Panelists

**Janet Bowdan** (janet.bowdan@wne.edu) is the director of the undergraduate creative writing major at Western New England University and the editor of *Common Ground Review*. Her poems have been published in *APR*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Verse*, *Tinfish*, *Poetry Daily*, *Best American Poetry 2000*, *Pinch*, *Clade Song*, and other places.

**Matthew Kelsey** (mk@poetrynw.org) teaches composition at Everett Community College and creative writing for the University of Washington's Robinson Center. He serves as managing editor of *Poetry Northwest*. His poems have appeared in *Best New Poets* (2010), *The Monarch Review*, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, and elsewhere.

**Joshua McKinney's** (jmckinne@saclink.csus.edu) most recent book of poetry is *Mad Cursive* (Wordcraft of Oregon 2012). His work has appeared widely in such journals as *Boulevard*, *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Kenyon Review*, *New American Writing*, *VOLT*, and many others. He teaches at CSU Sacramento.

**Sean Prentiss** (prentiss@norwich.edu) is the editor of *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* (Michigan State University Press 2013) and an assistant professor at Norwich University where he runs the Norwich University Writers Series.

# “Encouragement is the most demanding form of criticism.”

-- Poet William Olsen

## Assumptions

- Creative writing is a “fluff” course/an “easy A.”
- Creative writing must be inspired.
- Creative writing must be free of limits.
- Creative writing must be free of influence.
- Creative writing is an in-born talent.
- Creative writing is a “left brain”/intuitive process.
- Creative writing must be personal/natural/instinctive.
- Creative writing cannot be taught.
- Creative writing cannot be graded (objectively).
- Creative writing should not be graded (period).
- Creative writing is anything you want it to be.
- Creative writing should be therapeutic/cathartic/dramatic/private.
- Creative writing does not require awareness of grammar rules.
- Creative writing (poetry) must rhyme; fiction must have plot, paragraphs, etc.
- Creative writing is an activity/discipline distinct from the study of literature and/or theory.
- Creative writing cannot be changed or improved upon.

## Stephanie Lenox’s Rubric and Prompt

A (100 – 90)	B (89-80)	C (79-70)	D/F (69-0)
Your use of creative techniques is complex, clear, and deliberate. Revision should entail enhancing these elements.	The structure and complexity of your work is becoming clear. Revision should be aimed at developing and/or fine-tuning your use of creative techniques.	The structure and complexity of your work need further development or refinement. Revision should involve adding, cutting, reorganizing, and/or restructuring.	Your work is unfinished, missing one of the major requirements, or does not demonstrate a deliberate engagement of complexity or structure. Revision should include a meeting with the professor.

**Here’s a prompt called “Hate Mail”** that I give to students to address the assumptions that poems must be lovey-dovey and do not require awareness of grammatical rules: Goethe has said that “a poet must know how to hate.” What drives you crazy? What keeps you awake at night? Take the full force of your rage and channel it into poetry. But wait, there’s a twist. The object of your contempt must be an inanimate object: a parking meter, the blank page, your holey sock. Furthermore, to avoid the poem turning into a rant, you must organize your wrath syntactically into one long grammatically complete sentence. Take that, you jerks!

## Janet Bowdan's Prompt

I divide the semester into five sections: for each section, they must choose a subject to write at least 6 poems about. The sections are Muses, Myths, Saturation, Activism, and Truth. I assign them in that order so that the students can start (somewhat classically) with an Invocation to the Muse, figuring out what skills and strengths they are requesting, and studying a figure they either admire or find to be an example of what not to do, what not to be. My students have almost free range (they can't choose a friend, a relative, or God), and they have used it—choosing Muses like Alfred Hitchcock, Walt Disney, Frank Sinatra, the mind, Warren Zevon and Jesse James, Tupac Shakur. This semester, one of my students has decided to choose an entire country for his muse; another is thinking his muse might be the potato.

After they write an invocation to the Muse, I give them various assignments related to their Muse, either directly (write a poem in praise of your Muse—can be ironic; research your Muse and write a poem about a problem your Muse grappled with) or indirectly (write a poem while music composed by your Muse or a movie directed by your Muse or a speech given by your Muse is playing in the background; take something written by your Muse, choose 10 key words and use them in a poem); it can use form (write a sonnet where you do not love your Muse sufficiently, or your Muse does not love you enough; write an acrostic poem using your Muse's name or a phrase your Muse is famous for—but try not to use end-stopped lines until the last line) or be based on situation (imagine that you are in the mall or at a supermarket or walking downtown when you see your Muse. What is your Muse doing? will you approach your Muse and say something?)

They turn the drafts of these poems in to me as a Notebook (which can include poems written about other things, too), and then they have time to revise before they turn in the Muse section. I comment on that, and they have one more chance to revise before they turn it in for a grade.

## A Poet's Questionnaire

Are you (thinking habitually like) a poet?

1. Do you carry writing materials: notebook; iPad/iPhone; back of receipts or old envelopes?
2. When you listen to NPR, do you have to take notes (which become a prompt or tangent in your current poem) all the time; sometimes; never; while stopped at red lights; while driving; no, I repeat it over & over hoping I will be able to recall it when I get some paper & a desk.
3. Do you privately think your writing is more valuable than your spouse's paychecks; your teaching; getting groceries; getting exercise?
4. When a catastrophe happens (to you/others/the world), do you think (relatively quickly) I have to write about this? vs. planning, how can I write about this?

### **Matt Kelsey's Prompt**

I find that *all* of my students, whether they're 20-year-olds or 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, have felt anxiety over being influenced by other writers. The world tells them (through fashion, social media—parenting, even) that they're supposed to find a voice uniquely their own. It's the Snowflake Complex. The "Anxiety of Influence." When writing, they feel unoriginal and unsuccessful if any influences creep into their poems.

I try to abolish this myth right off the bat. I ask 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders to collaborate often (to write "Exquisite Corpses"), and to imitate unabashedly the writers whose work we examine in class. I've asked my older students to perform imitations, too, but after committing to close readings of a particular author. In fact, when I was an undergraduate, Maggie Dietz asked us to select one author—I chose David Ferry—and maintain a journal in which we gather careful observations. The idea was to commit to knowing an author intimately, to know their styles so thoroughly that we could 1) behold the craft behind whatever we thought was enigmatic and inspired by some unreachable muse, 2) understand that writer's influences and similarities to other writers, and 3) perform imitations of that author. The next time I teach a college level class, I plan on implementing this course-long assignment.

More simply, I've also asked students to memorize poems and perform recitations of them, so that they understand the importance of voice/oral traditions, and so that they can understand what it's like to internalize poetry they love, and to retrieve it at will.

### **Sean Prentiss's Prompt**

Science has proven that creativity blooms best within constraints. So I almost never ask my students to just write an essay, story, or poem. Instead, I ask them to do a certain project for me that forces them to write a piece within a constraint. I may ask them to read Richard Hugo's poem, "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg." Then I'll ask them to write a poem entitled "Degrees of X in X," which forces writers to understand much of their poem before they begin the writing because they understand the color (tone) of the poem as well as the poem's location. I'll also ask them to make their poem follow the structure of the poem we are reading in class.

The hope here is that by giving students a few constraints, they learn new skills that they may not have practiced. We normally rely on our strengths as writers. Forcing students to work within constraints forces them to create new skills, to see creative writing from new angles, and to try on new voices.

**The Nuts and Bolts of Deliberate Practice:** a scientifically based way to practice that can be used for sports, music, chess, or writing.

- Practice what you are not good at rather than relying on your strengths.
- Work hard and practice often.
- Love what you do.
- Receive outside feedback.
- Engage in self-critique.

## Joshua McKinney's Prompt: An Assignment to Challenge Student Assumptions

The biggest assumption my students make is that writing poetry has no relationship to theory; for them, poetry is a matter of emotion rather than thought. They rarely consider that a poet's craft is governed by aesthetics grounded in theory and that theory generally accounts for the wide variety of poetic styles—the difference between Wordsworth and Williams, between Billy Collins and Charles Bernstein. Therefore, my recent prompts ask students to allow theory to guide their practice. One of my most successful prompts involves Keats's concept of *negative capability*. Students read Keats's letters discussing *negative capability* and the "camelion [sic] poet." The assignment: to write a poem using negative capability. Results show significant changes in subject matter, point of view, and descriptive detail. The interesting and varied results always lead to profitable discussion.

In my classes students operate under the assumption that that there are four basic levels of learning:

- Unconscious incompetence. In this stage the learner is so ignorant that she makes mistakes without knowing it. She may even mistake an error for a success.
- Conscious incompetence. In this stage the learner, now less ignorant, makes errors but realizes she is making errors.
- Conscious competence. In this stage—where most poets reside—the learner can write a "good" poem with considered effort.
- Unconscious competence. In this stage the writer creates successful poems without apparent effort. Decisions are made intuitively, naturally.

## Resources

### Creative Writing Teaching: Theory and Practice ([www.cwteaching.com](http://www.cwteaching.com))

This is resource site for teachers of Creative Writing and those who are in the process of training to become teachers of Creative Writing. The site is not currently publishing new articles, but it contains full text of previously published peer-review articles on creative writing pedagogy.

Behn, Robin, and Chase Twichell, eds. *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*. New York: Harper, 1992. Print.

Day, Cathy, Anna Leahy, and Stephanie Vanderslice. "Where Are We Going Next: A Conversation About Creative Writing Pedagogy." *Fiction Writers Review* (Feb. 2011). Web. 12 Aug. 2013.

Hoagland, Tony. *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft*. Graywolf Press: Saint Paul, 2006. Print.

Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*. Norton: New York, 1979. Print.

Leahy, Anna, ed. *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*. New York: Multilingual Matters, 2005. Print.

Roethke, Theodore. *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*. Ed. Carolyn Kizer. Copper Canyon Press: Port Townsend, WA 2001. Print.

## Professor Sean Prentiss' "The Nuts and Bolts of Deliberate Practice"

Deliberate Practice is a scientifically based way to practice. It comes from years of research and from a multitude of scientific studies. It can be used for sports, music, chess, or writing.

### The Keys to Deliberate Practice:

- **Practice what you are not good at rather than relying on your strengths.**

Once a writer has a strength, it is easy to retain it. So ask students to work on new styles, new tones, new voices rather than relying on their old techniques.

To get students working on their weaknesses, use writing prompts/writing constraints that force students to try new things. Offer feedback on these poems so students can see their weaknesses. Provide grades so students see if/where they have weaknesses.

- **Work hard and practice often.**

Students need to learn that great writing doesn't magically appear due to the Muses visiting us. It comes from sitting in a chair and writing and revising often. This is why we should require students to write lots of poems and to revise so many as well.

How can we do this? By asking students to write many poems in class. Grades will help some students stay motivated to work hard.

- **Love to write.**

People normally only work hard if they love what they do. So a key to deliberate practice is to help students love to write. Let them take risks. Let them try new things. Reward them for the effort. And teach them how to improve.

We can help students love to write by beginning the semester by rewarding students with easy grades as they learn the expectations of the class and the genre so that they worry less about success and more about taking risks and working on their weaknesses.

- **Receive outside feedback.**

Feedback from professors and peers allows students to learn more about their weaknesses.

Grades, feedback, peer review, and workshop all offer outside feedback. Further, begin with small amounts of feedback and easy grading and then increase both as students learn and master the foundational ideas taught. This will allow students to not be overwhelmed with feedback.

- **Self-critique.**

Writers must be able to self-critique to improve. They cannot always rely on outside feedback.

How can we teach students to self-critique? One way is to use vast amounts of revision, which forces students to examine their own work. Also you can have students write reflective letters at the end of the semester so they are forced to learn and examine their own writing.

Grades can help motivate students to revise often and well (which is a big part of self-critiquing) to write a smart portfolio letter.

## **One Basic Way to Structure a Poetry Classroom (Courtesy of Sean Prentiss)**

Below is one way to design a poetry classroom. This design asks students to write, revise, and receive outside feedback often. It also focuses on process over product, until the end of the semester.

### **1. Daily Poems:**

**Idea:** Have students turn in a poem a class period. So for every class period, they should turn in one poem. These should almost always come from a writing prompt rather than from free writing because the power of creative comes from constraints.

**Grading:** I grade Daily Poems very easily. Though my grading gets a bit harder by the middle of the semester. By that stage, students should have a good understanding of the foundational ideas of poetry.

### **2. Peer Review Poems:**

**Idea:** Peer Review allows students to receive feedback from their classmates while also allowing them to see the style and the strengths and weaknesses of their peers.

**Grading:** I grade these very easily. If a student revises their Daily Poems for peer review, I give them full grades. I also give students a grade for writing critiques for their peers.

### **3. Weekly Poems:**

**Idea:** I ask students to turn in one of the Daily and/or Peer Review Poems at the end of each week. This should be a revised poem that is relatively strong.

**Grading:** I grade these a bit harder than Daily Poems. After going through two revisions, these poems should be somewhat successful and should be using our foundational ideas.

### **4. Workshop Poems:**

**Idea:** Workshop allows students to receive feedback from their classmates and me while also allowing them to see the strengths and weaknesses of their peers.

**Grading:** I grade these relatively hard. I expect these poems to be strong since they've received much feedback and many lessons throughout the semester.

### **5. Portfolio Poems and Reflective Letter:**

**Idea:** The portfolio offers students one chance to focus on product over process. Further, the reflective letter allows them to show they can think like a writer.

**Grading:** I grade toughest here. I expect poems to sing on the page and the reflective letter to show that they think like writers.