Poetry as window on ourselves and the world

When we read poetry, we read the world around us. We read ourselves, our culture, other people and other cultures. The music of poetry also allows us to enter the world more richly alive. It reminds us of the importance of truth and beauty in our lives. “The lesson of official life goes rumbling on,” Nobel-Prize-winning poet Tomas Transtromer says, “[with poetry] we send inspired notes to one another.” Keeping these words in mind, this class will deepen your relationship to and understanding of this challenging and amazing art form. It will help you become better readers of and thinkers about poetry. If you are a poet, it will help you become a better poet. If you are someone who just wants to learn about the genre, it will open exciting new doors to language.

As we undertake this journey into the human heart, we will practice a variety of essay forms that extend beyond traditional academic writing. We will explore the personal form of the reflective essay, the craft annotation essay, the poetry review, website writing, and conclude with the social gaze of literary journalism.

Class Goals, Class Assignments

This semester we will work together to increase your confidence and skills in writing, as we move through a series of weekly topics, assignments and readings. The course will address the following areas:

• Rhetorical knowledge: a) analyzing the occasion and the purpose of a piece of writing; b) using voice, tone, and structure to improve understanding of how form and content work together to persuade an audience; c) studying the stylistic features of a variety of poets, including modernists, postmodernists, confessionalists, and surrealists. Since writing about poetry involves exploring the imagination, we will consider how essays may use alternative modes of argumentation to make their point.

• Writing process: a) generating ideas, writing and revising drafts of an essay, editing and proofreading those drafts; b) critiquing your own and your classmates’ work; c) doing effective research; d) using technology such as websites, Internet search engines, and electronic databases; e) reflecting on your writing in order to clarify the writing process. In the two-to-three weeks that we work on each assignment, we will demystify the writing process and practice writing as a manageable series of discreet actions that results in writing of which you can feel proud.

• Writing conventions: a) building on your understanding of writing issues explored in first-year writing classes, including further discussion of the use of claims, line of reasoning and evidence, paragraph structure, description and dialogue, appropriate vocabulary and other genre conventions; b) developing a better understanding of genre by exploring different academic and nonacademic sub-genres, such as reflective essay, craft annotation essay, poetry review, comparative essay, and literary journalism; c) developing a better understanding of grammar, syntax, and punctuation.

• Communication strategies: a) understanding the content and style needs of a specific audience for a piece of writing; b) writing to a variety of audiences in the literary world and adapting content and style to suit those audiences; c) giving
effective public readings of your work. Readers reading an essay or an audience listening to a presentation constructs meaning, reacts moment by moment, and responds according to the situation they are in.

As writers we must always think about the needs of our audience, so we will articulate and practice ways of responding effectively. Along with completing the reading assignments, reading and commenting on your classmates’ writing and contributing to class discussions, you will be evaluated on the following:

- Reflective essay (15%) This assignment asks you to reflect on a specific experience you have had with reading or writing poetry or what poetry means to you. Contemplative, even personal in tone and lyrical in approach, your essay will focus on connections and meanings you have developed while reading a particular poem or reflecting on the genre. Building on your ability to describe and use visual imagery, you will practice moving associatively through a narrative, as well as discerning description from analysis.

- Craft annotation essay (15%) In this essay you will practice analyzing the inner workings of an individual poem. You will delve into how a poem makes meaning through its use of image, metaphor, syntax, diction, rhythm, line, etc. The purpose is to pay close attention to the way a poem works and to pose an answer, make a discovery about what makes a poem effective.

- Poetry review essay (15%) Building on the craft annotation, this essay asks you to explore a poet’s work, analyzing and evaluating a group of poems the way a literary critic would when reviewing a book of poetry. Here you will choose a poet from our anthology whose work speaks to you and write an essay recommending or panning the poet’s work. What stands out about these poems? Why should readers want to read them? What is remarkable about the poet’s use of language? How do the poems speak to our culture? Answering questions like these will give you practice connecting poetry to an audience.

- Comparative essay/ website (15%) We live in a world wired by technology and increasingly reliant on interpreting and creating information used in an online environment. Poetry and essays about poetry have a home in the visual environment of the Internet, too, so for this assignment your task is to work with a partner to create, write and design a workable website that compares two things. Get creative, and compare a poem with a piece of music, a painting, another poem, a skyscraper or an airplane. And you don’t need to know HTML.

- Literary journalism essay (30%) Using techniques borrowed from fiction, such as scene-by-scene narrative, dialogue, attention to images, physical details and gestures, this assignment, a work of creative nonfiction, asks you to investigate the question “can poetry matter?” The question arises from your experience with poetry in the class, in life, on the CU campus, and in our culture. Seven to nine pages in length, this essay might explore questions about how poetry will survive in the twenty-first century and how it will capture a new audience of young people. You must include interviews and research to lend depth to your exploration. You will share your essay with the class by giving a 10-15-minute reading of the essay to the class.

- Class participation (10%) This class is collaborative and is designed with the understanding that all the work you do at the university requires that you consult with friends and colleagues. With that in mind, you will also be evaluated for your willingness and ability to assist your classmates in the work we do in class.

Get Involved, Be a Success and Contribute to the Success of Others
Since this class is a small, interactive seminar, you will be expected to raise comments, ask questions, and participate vocally in class. We will regularly break into small groups to workshop student writing, and we will also explore student work as a class. Both settings require you to bring in copies of your work and to comment actively on the work of your colleagues. I will regularly give you prompts to focus your comments, and I will ask questions to draw your attention to the strengths and weaknesses of the work we are examining. In addition, since we will be doing many short readings of poems and essays, occasional, unannounced pop quizzes will assure that everyone is keeping up.

Required Texts
- Contemporary American Poetry (eighth edition), A. Poulin Jr. and Michael Waters. This book presents broad coverage of poetry written in the United States since the 1950s. While poetry anthologies always have limitations and are no substitute for reading deeply a poet’s individual books, this anthology is one of the best of its kind—certainly something you will want to keep on your bookshelf for years to come.
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- *The Everyday Writer*, 4th ed., Andrea Lunsford. An invaluable tool, this book serves as a how-to guide for practical writing issues, giving you advice for grammar, usage, and mechanics issues, as well as insight into paragraph construction, critical thinking and writing, and effective library and Internet research.

- Duplicate drafts of your own writing for workshop discussions. Since your writing is the focus of our course, you will make many copies of parts of your work.

- Other poems, essays, and handouts. Other assigned poems and essays (found on e-reserve or that I will email to you) will serve as opportunities to talk about exemplary writing by masters of poetry and essay writing. I will provide frequent handouts and give occasional PowerPoint presentations to supplement our discussion of various topics.

Course Policies and Procedures

The following policies apply to this course.

1. Active participation in the reading and writing community of your class is required.

2. Regular attendance is mandatory. Only three excused or unexcused absences are allowed. After three absences your final grade will drop a third of a letter per absence.

3. Lateness to class is not acceptable. Any more than three late arrivals will count as one absence.

4. Late assignments will be evaluated but automatically receive a deduction of two letter grades.

5. You are also responsible for bringing in drafts of your writing and making copies. Failure to do so will affect your class participation grade.

6. Make sure your laptop computer is in good working order, because you will make frequent use of it in class.

7. Cellphones, iPhones, BlackBerries, and other PDAs are to be kept in your bag and not used during class. They are distracting to others and will negatively affect what we do in class.

8. Copies of your work sent via email will not be evaluated or accepted. Please turn in printed copies of all your work.

A Key Resource

Located in Norlin Library, E-111, the CU Writing Center is staffed by excellent writing coaches from the Program for Writing and Rhetoric. Consultants there can help you consider writing strategies, develop your ideas, organize your thoughts, and explain grammatical or mechanical matters. I highly recommend that you take advantage of this service; it’s free to all CU-Boulder students and will help you with any paper you’re writing for a CU class (not just papers for writing classes). Because appointments at the Writing Center are free and effective, they are popular; set up an appointment, and visit them early in your paper writing process. You may reach the center at (303)492-1690, via email at wrtghelp@colorado.edu, or on the Web at http://www.colorado.edu/pwr/writingcenter.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity Policies

Plagiarism. Claiming or suggesting that words or ideas of others are your own, or plagiarism, is a form of cheating. The university’s policy on cheating is clear and can be summed up as follows: Plagiarism is the appropriation of any other person’s work and the unacknowledged incorporation of that work in one’s own work offered for credit. It is like theft, and anyone caught plagiarizing will receive an automatic failing grade in the course and further disciplinary action may be taken.

Academic integrity. In addition, you are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity policy of this institution. Violations of this policy may include: cheating, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. All incidents of academic misconduct will be reported to the Honor Code Council (honor@colorado.edu; 303-725-2273). Students who are found to be in violation of the academic integrity policy will be
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subject to both academic sanctions from me and nonacademic sanctions (including but not limited to university probation, suspension, or expulsion). Other information on the Honor Code can be found at http://www.colorado.edu/policies/honor.html and at http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorecode/.

Other Policy Concerns

Disabilities. Any student eligible for and needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a disability should notify both me and the Disability Services Office in Willard Hall (303-492-8671) during the first two weeks of class. I will make every reasonable effort to meet your learning needs.

ESL issues. If you speak English as a second language, you should let me know so I can better assist you in the course or refer you to appropriate services on campus.

Religious observances. Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. In this class, please let me know when a religious holiday or custom requires you to miss a class so I can make other arrangements.

Classroom behavior. Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, gender variance, and nationalities. Class rosters are provided to me with your legal name. I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so I may make appropriate changes to my records. See policies at http://www.colorado.edu/policies/classbehavior.html and at http://www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs/judicialaffairs/code.html#student_code.

Daily Schedule

Note: Daily assignments are subject to change. Any changes will be announced in class, and you are responsible for being aware of them.

Week 1—January 17, 19

Topic: Defining and writing the reflective essay

T—Introduce the course. Get to know classmates.

Assignment for 1/19: Read “A Primitive Mind” (essay) by Madeleine Avirov and “Live Yak Pie” (essay) by James Tate.

Th—Discuss Avirov and Tate’s essays. Introduce reflective essay assignment and brainstorm topics.

Assignment for 1/24: Read four poems by Elizabeth Bishop in Contemporary American Poetry. Write the first two pages of your reflective essay, and bring three copies of the draft to class.

Week 2 – 24, 26

Topic: The power of good description, scene, and memory.

T—Discuss Bishop’s poems, and workshop drafts of first two pages.

Assignment for 1/26: Write the next two pages of your memoir, and bring copies to class.

Th—Watch first half of Voices and Visions documentary on Elizabeth Bishop, and workshop drafts of reflective essays.

Assignment for 1/31: Finish first drafts of reflective essays, and bring laptops and drafts to class.
Week 3—January 31, February 2

Topics: Constructing narrative with well-defined paragraphs and transitions.

T—Watch second half of *Voices and Visions* documentary on Elizabeth Bishop. In-class writing day.


Th—Introduce craft annotation essay assignment. Reflective essay due.

Assignment for 2/7: Read “Verse That Is Free” (essay) by Mary Oliver. Read “Memories of West Street and Lepke” and “Skunk Hour” by Robert Lowell and “The Elder Sister” and “The Lifting” by Sharon Olds. Write introduction of craft annotation essay, and bring it to class.

Week 4—February 7, 9

Topic: Defining and writing the craft annotation; understanding free verse and the use of line.

T—Workshop introductions of craft annotation essay. Discuss Oliver essay and Lowell, Olds poems.


Th—Workshop drafts of craft annotation essay. Discuss Addonizio and Laux essay and Levine, Goldbarth, and Gluck poems.

Assignment for 2/14: Read “Voice and Style” (essay) by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux. Work on the next two pages of craft annotation essay.

Week 5—February 14, 16

Topic: Creating a solid analysis; understanding a poet’s voice and style.

T—Workshop drafts of craft annotation essay. Discuss Addonizio and Laux essay.

Assignment for 2/16: Read “Where Does the Dance Begin, Where Does It End” and “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver and “Untitled” and “or anything resembling it” by Michael Palmer. Finish work on first draft of craft annotation essay.

Th—In-class writing day. Discuss Oliver and Palmer poems.


Week 6—February 21, 23

Topic: Becoming a good critic: defining and writing a poetry review.

T—Introduce poetry review essay assignment. Discuss Logan review. Craft annotation essay due.

Assignment for 2/23: Write the introduction of your poetry review essay. Read the complete selection of Frank O’Hara poems, as well as the responses to Logan’s review at http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/38937-william-logan-s-homophobic-review-of-frank-o-hara.

Th—Workshop introductions of poetry review essay. Discuss O’Hara poems and Logan review responses.

Assignment for 2/28: Write the next two pages of your poetry review essay. Read the complete selection of Charles Simic.
Week 7—February 28, March 1

Topics: Becoming a good critic: defining and writing a poetry review.
T—Workshop drafts of your poetry review essay. Discuss Simic poems.
Assignment for 3/1: Write the next two pages of your poetry review essay. Read the complete selection of Elizabeth Spires
Th—Workshop drafts of your poetry review essay. Discuss Spires poems.
Assignment for 3/6: Finish first draft of poetry review essay. Read “Images” (essay) and “Simile and Metaphor” (essay) by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux.

Week 8—March 6, 8

Topic: Creating a website: thinking visually; writing creative nonfiction in an online world.
T—In-class writing day. Discuss Addonizio and Laux essays.
Assignment for 3/8: Finish final draft of poetry review essay. Read “Sail On, My Little Honey Bee” (essay) by Amy Leach.
Th—Introduce comparative essay/website assignment. Find partner, brainstorm and discuss possible topics for comparison and website. Discuss Leach essay. Poetry review essay due.
Assignment for 3/13: Meet with your partner, and discuss what you want to compare for the assignment. Begin work on websites, and explore Apple website.

Week 9—March 13, 15

Topic: Creating a website: thinking visually; writing creative nonfiction in an online world.
T—Work on website. Discuss strategies for writing in an online world. Discuss the Apple website and poems selected for the assignment.
Assignment for 3/15: Continue work on websites.
Th—Work on website. Discuss design principles and using images to accentuate your writing. Discuss poems selected for the assignment.
Assignment for 3/20: Continue work on websites. Read “Style” (essay) by Becky Bradway and Doug Hesse.

Week 10—March 20, 22

Topics: Creating a website: thinking visually; writing creative nonfiction in an online world; developing a style that sounds like you.
T—Continue work on websites, and discuss Bradway and Hesse essay.
Assignment for 3/22: Continue work on website.
Th—Work on websites.
Assignment for 4/3: Finish final draft of website. Read “Run, Rudolph, Run” (essay) by Denis Johnson.

Week 11—March 27, 29

No classes. Spring break.
Week 12—April 3, 5

Topics: Literary journalism: doing research and conducting interviews.

T—Introduce literary journalism essay assignment. Discuss Johnson’s essay, and brainstorm topics.

Assignment for 4/5: Read “Can Poetry Matter?” (essay) by Dana Gioia, and research topic.

Th—Discuss Gioia essay, and continue research on topic.

Assignment for 4/10: Write introduction of literary journalism essay, and bring draft to class. Read “This Is Just to Say,” “At the Ball Game,” “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and “To Elsie” by William Carlos Williams.

Week 13—April 10, 12

Topics: Literary journalism: doing research and conducting interviews.

T—Workshop introductions of literary journalism essay. Watch first half of Voices and Visions documentary on William Carlos Williams.


Th—Workshop drafts of literary journalism essay. Watch second half of Voices and Visions documentary on William Carlos Williams.

Assignment for 4/17: Work on drafts of literary journalism essay and oral presentations.

Week 14—April 17, 19

Topics: Literary journalism: doing research and conducting interviews; preparing and delivering oral presentations.

T—Workshop drafts of literary journalism essay.

Assignment for 4/19: Work on drafts of literary journalism essay.

Th—Workshop drafts of literary journalism essay. Discuss creating and delivering listener-centered oral presentations.

Assignment for 4/24, 4/26, 5/1, 5/3: Prepare final draft of literary journalism essay and oral presentations.

Week 15 & 16, April 24, 26, May 1, 3

Oral presentation of literary journalism essays.

Evaluation Criteria for Writing Assignments

A  An essay that is excellent in content and form: original, substantive, insightful, persuasive, well organized, and written in a clear, graceful, error-free style. Although not necessarily “perfect,” this paper rewards the reader with genuine insight elegantly expressed. It is an ambitious project that engages interesting, complex ideas in a perceptive manner. It offers a nuanced, specific claim that responds to a genuine question at issue, follows a compelling line of reasoning, and provides ample and specific evidence in support. It engages and responds to questions and counter-arguments in a thoughtful manner. This essay does not repeat, but rather pushes forward through ideas that are new to the narrative and that enhance the reader’s understanding of the topic. Offering context and background for its ideas, it could be read and appreciated by someone outside of the class. It’s also very alert to the needs of a specific audience.
B  A clearly written, well-developed, interesting essay that shows above-average thought and attention to writing craft. It reaches high and meets many, though not all, of its aims. The writing is generally very solid, but may have some unresolved problems in argument and style, some thin patches in content, or some tangents that don’t fit in. The thesis is followed up by some useful claims, lines of reasoning, and evidence that occasionally needs adjustment or revision. Despite these problems, the essay does not have major flaws that compromise the general effectiveness of the case it presents or the overall readability of its prose. It’s generally aware of an audience, but not a specific one. OR An essay that is far less ambitious than an A paper, but reaches all its aims. This is an essay that may be well organized and clearly written, but whose reasoning and argument may nonetheless be somewhat routine or self-evident.

C  An essay that represents a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. It may be somewhat readable, organized at the surface level, and have a thesis, but it will have major unresolved problems in one or more key areas: conception, use of claims, line of reasoning and evidence, and language, style and grammar. It struggles to fulfill the basic requirements of the assignment, and says little of genuine importance or significance. It shows little attention to the needs of an audience. OR A competently written essay that is largely descriptive and focuses on summary. OR An essay that offers scant intellectual content and little more than personal opinion, even when well written.

D  An essay that is seriously underdeveloped or acutely deficient in content, form, style or mechanics. It may be disorganized, illogical, confusing, unfocused, or contain pervasive errors that impair readability. An essay that does not even come close to meeting the basic expectations of the assignment.

**Class Participation Grading Criteria**

A  You are always prepared for class, participate without being called on, and respond to other students’ writing in a way that shows insight and close reading. Your comments are clear, succinct, helpful, inspire others, and show a mastery of and strong commitment to an assignment’s goals. You always have done the reading for class and have the reading with you, referring to the text to support your points and elaborating on important ideas. When asked, you consistently bring to class multiple drafts of your writing, and those drafts are detailed and show you have taken the time to complete the assignment with care and enthusiasm. You are not afraid of questions and regularly ask them.

B  You are generally prepared for class, occasionally participate without being called on, and respond to other students’ essays in a way that demonstrates understanding of the assignment’s goals. Your comments are generally clear and help move the conversation forward. You have done the reading for class and have the reading with you but may not refer to the text to support your points or be able to elaborate on important ideas. When asked, you consistently bring to class multiple drafts of your writing. Although your draft may not be as detailed as possible, it shows you took the assignment seriously. You sometimes ask questions, generally when you need clarification.

C  You are sometimes prepared for class and only participate when called on. You show an understanding of an assignment’s goals, but you respond to others’ writing in a way that, although somewhat helpful, demonstrates a less than complete rhetorical awareness and an average understanding of the essay. You generally have done the reading for class, but your understanding of the text is cursory and not complete. When asked, you bring to class only one copy of the draft of your writing, and that draft shows you somewhat quickly and haphazardly completed the assignment. You don’t ask questions.
D You are inadequately prepared and never participate unless called on. You respond to other student essays demonstrating, at best, a superficial and usually inaccurate reading. Your comments demonstrate a failure to understand an assignment’s goals. You have not done the reading for class, or have glanced over the text in a way that reveals your lack of understanding of the text. When asked, you occasionally bring to class a draft of your writing, and that draft, usually just one copy, shows you barely tried to complete the assignment. “Questions? We could ask questions?”