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On Method: Research and Revision for Creative Writing
Spring 2019, CEH-GA 3042
Thursdays, 5:30–8pm

This is a course on method and writing. In other words, it is a course on how we can develop working strategies that will allow us to produce fluent, complex texts—and how we can return to pieces we have already written in order to see them anew and, perhaps, to alter them. Method, etymologically speaking, has to do with the cultivation of a metaphorical road or way. Thus, this course will focus on techniques that are adjacent to the art of writing, if not always identical to it. This is not a workshop, in the sense in which that term is often used in relation to literary endeavors; that said, this *is* a workshop, radically speaking, in that it will provide you with a set of concrete practices, an improved conceptual vocabulary regarding research and revision, and models for researching and revising your own creative work.

Speaking of method, ours will be unusual this semester, in that I will be asking you to identify a complete (or, very nearly) piece of writing you would like to revise—and then to revise it. I will also be asking you to develop a plan for a new piece of writing. However, you will not actually write this new work as a final assignment for the class. Rather, you will write *a plan* for writing this new work. This plan, along with your completed revision, will constitute your final assignment. In addition to these requirements, you will complete short writing assignments and make a presentation over the course of the semester.

A few further remarks: In spite of our relative familiarity with the term, method is not always something we recognize readily in ourselves or in our own actions. For this reason, in attempting to describe what method *may* be, we will have recourse to works of art and literature. Many technical handbooks on how to write and perform research exist; I will provide with you an annotated bibliography of those I consider the best in the field. However, I will not be assigning you such readings, though I expect you will find them useful. Rather, we will be considering method from a variety of points of view over the course of the semester. I will attempt to make the case that method is something that is already variously present in your work and ask you to consider how an exploration of method as a guiding theme may aid you in developing a more deeply engaged relationship with the fields of art and literature. How does our work change when we change our methods—and, pursuantly, how does method unfold in relation to lived time? In examining these matters we will, I hope, begin to be more attentive to the ways in which we practice writing.

Readings (selections from):

- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Fourth Edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.
- Boltanski, Christian, and Annette Messager. *L'Album photographique de Christian Boltanski, 1948-1956*. Brussels: Editions Hossmann, 1998.
- Carrington, Leonora. *The Complete Stories of Leonora Carrington*. Introduction by Kathryn Davis. Translated by Kathrine Talbot and Anthony Kerrigan. St. Louis, MO: Dorothy, a Publishing Project, 2017.
- Gladman, Renee. *Calamities*. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2016.
- Keene, John. *Counternarratives*. New York: New Directions, 2015.
- Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility." *October*. 1, no. 129 (2009): 51-84.
- Philip, Marlene Nourbese, and Setaey Adamu Boateng. *Zong!* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.
- Piper, Adrian. *Out of Order, Out of Sight*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.
- Queneau, Raymond. *Exercises in Style*. Translated by Barbara Wright. London: Alma Books, 2015.
- Shōnagon, Sei. *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*. Translated by Meredith McKinney. New York: Penguin, 2006.

Course Requirements:

1. Attendance at weekly meetings of the course; completion of assigned readings (listed below, with date *by which time they should be completed*) before course meetings.
2. Attendance of at least one session of the professor's office hours.
3. Short writings assignments at professor's discretion.
4. Presentation.
5. Two final assignments.

Classroom Policies:

1. Bring relevant readings to weekly meetings of the course.

2. Turn phone ringers, laptops, and tablets off prior to beginning of each class and do not utilize electronic devices during class.
3. Texting during class, for any reason, is not permitted. If you must send a text message or look at your phone, please leave the room and return when you are done.
4. Please do not eat during class. Covered drinks are OK.
5. Though this probably goes without saying, rudeness and/or hostility of any kind will not be tolerated. If you find that I or anyone else has said or done something of an unfair or in any other way distressing nature, please alert me so that we may address it.
6. If you have need of any accommodation regarding course materials, classroom space or discussion, deadlines, etc., please let me know.

Grading Distribution:

1. Participation in and preparedness for in-class discussion: 20%
2. Presentation: 25%
3. Participation in and preparedness for workshop sessions: 25%
4. Final assignment: 30%

Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Week 1: January 31st – Introduction

IN CLASS: We'll meet one another and go over the syllabus. After this, I will give a short talk about the subject of the course and why I think this way of proceeding is useful for our work as writers. Finally, I'll explain the assignment for the following week.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Select a piece of writing (by you) that you would like to revise over the course of the semester. Hand in a hard copy to me at our second meeting with a cover sheet/letter in which you assess the piece in detail. Read selections from Piper, to be distributed electronically.

Week 2: February 7th – *Is there a method?*

IN CLASS: In this class we will discuss how we will organize class time for the remainder of the semester. I will assign presentation topics, based on the reading assignments. We will discuss the Piper reading.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Gladman selection, to be distributed electronically. Do short writing assignment, to be assigned.

Week 3: February 14th – *Research I: Beginning*

IN CLASS: Presentation on Gladman. I will return the pieces to be revised to you, with notes, and will also prepare a packet of everyone's pieces, which we will be reading for the rest of the semester (please take good care of it!) We will establish a workshop schedule.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Shōnagon selection, to be distributed electronically. Do short writing assignment, to be assigned. Prepare for first workshop session.

Week 4: February 21st – *Research 2: List, Schema, Form*

IN CLASS: Presentation on Shōnagon. First workshop session.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Philip selection, to be distributed electronically. Do short writing assignment, to be assigned. Prepare for second workshop session.

Week 5: February 28th – *Research 3: Searching*

IN CLASS: Presentation on Philip. Second workshop session.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Lambert-Beatty selection, to be distributed electronically. Do short writing assignment, to be assigned. Prepare for third workshop session.

Week 6: March 7th – *Research 4: Worlds*

IN CLASS: Presentation on Lambert-Beatty. Third workshop session.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Bal selection, to be distributed electronically. Do short writing assignment, to be assigned. Prepare for fourth workshop session.

Week 7: March 14th – *Research 5: Narrative*

IN CLASS: Presentation on Bal. Fourth workshop session.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Queneau selection, to be distributed electronically. Prepare for fifth workshop session. Prepare, to hand in after break, a draft overview of your proposed writing plan.

****SPRING BREAK****

Week 8: March 28th – *Revision 1: Overview*

IN CLASS: Presentation on Queneau. Fifth workshop session.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Carrington selection, to be distributed electronically. Do short writing assignment, to be assigned. Prepare for sixth workshop session.

Week 9: April 4th – *Revision 2: Texture*

IN CLASS: Presentation on Carrington. Sixth workshop session. I will return your proposed writing plans to you, with notes.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read special handout on line editing and the sentence, to be distributed electronically. Prepare for seventh workshop session. Prepare to hand in, with reference to your proposed writing plan, an annotated bibliography.

Week 10: April 11th – *Revision 3: The Line*

IN CLASS: Line editing. Seventh workshop session.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Boltanski selection, to be distributed electronically. Do short writing assignment, to be assigned. Prepare for eighth workshop session.

Week 11: April 18th – *Revision 4: Transformation*

IN CLASS: Boltanski presentation. Eighth workshop session. I will return your annotated bibliographies, with notes.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Read Keene selection, to be distributed electronically. Prepare for ninth workshop session. Revise your proposed writing plan and annotated bibliography, to hand in.

Week 12: April 25th – *Revision 5: Facts*

IN CLASS: Keene presentation. Ninth workshop session.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Do publishing research exercise. Continue to work on final project.

Week 13: May 2nd – *On Publishing*

IN CLASS: Publishing workshop.

ASSIGNMENT FOR THE FOLLOWING MEETING: Prepare for roundtable presentations and discussion of your work this semester.

Week 14: May 9th – *Method, revisited*

IN CLASS: Roundtable presentations.

Final versions of both parts of your final project are due on Monday, May 20th.

APPENDIX: Some Useful Titles on Writing and Editing

Although the texts included on this syllabus are, in my opinion, excellent object lessons in how to think and write, I wanted to include a few other (eclectic) titles here. I hope that along the way of the course we may add to this list; you're warmly invited to offer your own suggestions or make requests for titles on topics I may not have thought of. [Please note that these texts are not organized in alphabetical order!]

Rabiner, Susan, and Alfred Fortunato. *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction—and Get It Published*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.

This is not the most literary book, but it's incredibly informative. Useful to anyone who wants to write professionally (not just authors of "serious nonfiction").

Dillon, Brian. *Essayism: On Form, Feeling, and Nonfiction*. New York: New York Review Books, 2018.

An unusual book with lots of thoughts on why we write essays. Has a heartfelt bibliography.

Delany, Samuel R. *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

A classic account of how to live and write.

Duras, Marguerite. *Writing*. Translated by Mark Polizzotti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

On process.

Marcus, Ben, ed. *New American Short Stories*. London: Granta Books, 2016.

One of the best anthologies I've ever read. Highly recommended.

Scarry, Elaine. *Dreaming by the Book*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

In theory, this is a work of literary criticism. In practice, it's a text about how to write convincing imagery.