



L468: Advanced Creative Writing [Sample Syllabus]

Writing History

Amy Eisner

Contact information

Email is the best way to contact me: aeisner@mica.edu. To request a meeting, just send an email with your availability. I will also schedule individual meetings once or twice in the semester.

Course description

Histories are great stories, and there's no better way to learn about the past (and the difficulty of interpreting it) than to try to tell one of its stories fully, accurately, and with narrative drive. Students will read and discuss a range of historical writing, each with its own way of framing problems, presenting evidence, building credibility, structuring narrative, and delivering a good read. In the first half of the course students will experiment with a variety of writing techniques, and in the second half you will pursue an in-depth independent research and writing project with an optional visual component. Pre-requisite: a 300-level writing workshop or permission of instructor.

Course objectives

- Break down assumptions about history and the writing of history
- Learn from the work of exemplary and innovative authors
- Develop a sense of what you want to create and why
- Write constantly, trying new things throughout the semester
- Pursue a topic and meet its challenges to produce a final project you are excited about

Books

Whenever possible I will put books on reserve in Decker library, and if you are sufficiently organized you can do much of your reading there and online. However, you will need to own (and bring to class) *Voice and Vision: A Guide to Writing History and other Serious Nonfiction* by **Stephen J. Pyne**. For the first month of the course, you will also need your own copy (in class) of *The Return of Martin Guerre* by **Natalie Zemon Davis** and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by **Rebecca Skloot**. I also recommend the following:

- For grammar and usage: *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English* by Patricia T. O'Conner
- For defining your project, understanding sources, and writing sentences: *Writing History: A Guide for Students* by William Kelleher Storey and *Essaying the Past: How to Read, Write, and Think about History* by Jim Cullen

Course requirements and grading

1/3 **Participation – generosity, exactitude, judiciousness**

Read with a pencil in hand. Be alert and prepared for all discussions and workshops. Comment online and speak out in class; we need your voice.

1/3 **Assignments – quality, ambition, experimentation**

There will be frequent – almost constant – writing assignments. I will set a direction based on the ideas we are exploring, but you will need to follow the work wherever it leads.

1/3 **Final project – persistence, insight, excellence**

For the final project, you will need to choose a (small! focused!) topic you are willing to obsess about – to track down sources, immerse yourself in those sources, develop opinions and question them, and tell the story again and again, being at once selective and exhaustive, creative and accurate. You will submit a specific proposal during the semester, and it will be important to propose something that suits you, something you are really eager to do.

Attendance

If you must miss a class, please coordinate with me beforehand and follow up afterward. If you feel the absence should be excused (illness, family emergency), you must say so explicitly. If I do not say you are excused, you are not excused. If you have two or more unexcused absences, I will deduct 5 points for each from your final grade.

Plagiarism

How do we know what we know? This question is at the heart of this course. We will observe and discuss various ways of documenting where words and ideas come from. Whatever experiments we observe or engage in, however, you are responsible for documenting your sources fully and accurately. **If you cannot find a way to do this you cannot pass the course.** When in doubt, ask me. I want you to succeed.