

9/1/21

If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut. —Stephen King

Dear Scholars,

Welcome to your English class. I hope you'll feel a deep sense of belonging in our classroom, that it will become a space you can depend on for peace and inspiration. I'd like to tell you a little about myself, my writing life and my goals for this course, and then ask you to do the same.

This is my 15th year at WHS, after spending the previous 4 teaching in public schools in New York State and Boston, and a New Mexico juvenile jail. I grew up outside Philadelphia, and later studied at Vassar and Middlebury Colleges, and at the Rainier Writers Workshop in Washington State. I live with my wife Botum and 3 kids—Ella 9, Olive 7, Warren 4—in Holliston, and my favorite activities are reading and outdoor sports with them, cooking and tennis. I am also one of the tennis coaches here.

Best part of my summer was probably the rope swing we found on a small island while kayaking in the Ashland Reservoir. You should check it out if you like the whole jumping-and-swimming thing; you may see some snakes, but I don't think they're poisonous. Biggest disappointment was we were supposed to have a kitchen renovation completed by yesterday, but this delay led to that and the demolition isn't even starting until today, so we'll be at least 2 months now without a kitchen. If I start to look hungry, that's why.

There's always a range of emotion inside me this time of year, but I have two resounding sources of excitement. One is that my son Warren is coming to school with me—WHS Child Lab—starting next week. He was supposed to come last year but the program got Covid cancelled. If any of you are in Child Lab, I trust you'll take great care of him.

My other source of excitement this time of year: you. I'm counting on your energy and curiosity, as I know you're counting on mine. In this room, we fuel each other, we nourish each other—intellectually, artistically.

In addition to teacher and father, I also identify as a writer—more specifically, a poet. This is a struggle for me, because while I believe I'm a strong writer and have even published 8 poems in journals I consider respectable, I haven't made a regular writing routine—and thus haven't produced much—in the last 7 years. So I sometimes feel like a failure. Nothing fulfills me more, when I do it, than sitting down and at least trying to write for an hour or two a day—I got back into this groove for a couple weeks last year, but then slipped out. I think I'm good at starting pieces, but not at ending them; I'm good at making language engaging and clear, and making my lived situations sound entertaining; but I'm not good at breaking free of the first person, of taking up conflict beyond my personal experience. I'm a good editor, which is very good news for you. Part of why I enjoy teaching this course is that it forces me—I don't want to be a hypocrite—to complete many of the assignments with you, and this is good for my soul.

I'd like you, too, to identify as a writer, as an artist, even if you never have before. I know you have engaging stories to tell, authentic conflicts to fuel them, vivid language that will make them feel surprising—I will help you discover these matters within you, and the tools to

let them emerge. I believe seeing oneself as a writer also transforms one's *reading* experiences (more on that in this letter's appendix).

Why study literature and writing? My teaching philosophy is threefold: 1) If we read carefully enough, there are valuable lessons in literature about ourselves as human beings; 2) Great storytellers, essayists, playwrights and poets show us all we need to know about *how* to *write*; 3) Attention to both of these truths increases the likelihood we'll experience happy and fulfilling lives.

Let me explain that last one some more. In his book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, former Yale professor and admissions officer William Deresiewicz laments how our educational system has overemphasized quantifiable measures of success (i.e. grades and money) to the detriment of learning; he cites the consensus among studies that show no correlation of income increase with increased happiness—excepting the need for adequate baseline income to keep you from struggling. Those same studies show 2 things that do increase human happiness: meaningful work, and meaningful connections to other people.

What does this have to do with English class? a) The intellectual and emotional demands of reading and discussing literature—and writing our own—train us to think, doubt, self-examine, communicate between the mind and the heart. If through these means we come to better know ourselves, we're more likely to find our calling in life. b) Literature is as good a resource as any for understanding the complex ways in which other people think and feel. And that prepares us for the second source of sustainable happiness: meaningful connections to other people.

In addition to what I've summarized, I hope you'll find your own, unique ways to make your work in this class meaningful.

Best,
A. Bennett

Appendix: Traditional Syllabus

I've covered some conventional syllabus topics in the above letter; the rest are described below.

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Writing Lab Hours: Part of my job is to staff the Writing Lab (rm. 237) 4 blocks per cycle. Those are Day 1 Block A, Day 3 Block D, Day 4 Block B, and Day 5 Block C. No appointment is necessary, but my WL services are open to any student in the school—first come, first served. Other English teachers staff the Writing Lab throughout the cycle, and in many cases will be at least as helpful to you as I am.

Office Hours: I'll be available in 306 on a drop-in basis every Day 2 Block B. If you have a class then, you can always make an appointment to meet with me another time. I'm mostly available Block As as well as Orange, Yellow and Tans, but email me in advance to check. Feel free to email me any time about smaller issues that don't require conversation, and I should be able to reply during the school day.

Skills practiced in this course:

You will engage in two modes of reading and writing throughout the year, *Reading as Writers* and *Writing as Readers*.

Mode	Reading as Writers	Writing as Readers
Essential Question	What can we learn from good storytellers about how to tell our own stories?	What can the study of good stories tell us about ourselves as human beings?
Style of Pursuit	Artistic	Scholarly
Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•accessing memory and imagination as resources•using language that is concrete and specific, not abstract and general•writing scenes instead of summary•centering on conflict•making the familiar feel surprising•utilizing existing and innovative structures to create tension and control pacing	<p>evaluating all aspects of an author's craft (i.e. <i>how</i> the author writes)...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•point-of-view•conflict•structure•events•place•language•characterization•length•time-span•tone•details•pacing <p>...to understand theme (i.e. "what the author is saying")</p>
Product	Creative Writing (fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction)	Analytical Essay

Your major writing products will more-or-less alternate between creative and analytical modes, and in some cases combine them.

Texts

Assigned books will include *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.

Shorter works will be selected from Raymond Carver, Jhumpa Lahiri, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edward P. Jones, Ernest Hemingway, Alice Walker, Julia Alvarez. and Sherman Alexie.

There will be some additions TBD. (Previously studied authors in this course include Mark Twain, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Claudia Rankine, James Baldwin, John Steinbeck, Ta-Nehisi Coates, William Faulkner, Herman Melville, Flannery O'Connor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickenson, Sylvia Plath and Richard Wright—some additions will come from list.)

If time permits, there will be a poetry-writing unit drawing inspiration from Billy Collins's anthology *Poetry 180*.

All honors sophomores complete a Sophomore Synthesis project that requires the independent selection and reading of 3-5 related texts, and writing of an 8-10-page essay about them.

Quarterly Grades

- The *Writing Portfolio* is a quarter-long—and ultimately year-long—project that doesn't get graded until the end of each quarter. Writing assignments submitted to the instructor during the quarter will earn *completion* credit and *editorial* feedback, but will not receive a number or letter grade. This portfolio—which compiles these assignments along with revision and reflection—will count as the majority of each quarter's grade.
- Participation, quizzes, first-submitted drafts and other assignments count too, but much less than the portfolio.

Deadlines

- The deadline for an assignment is the *start* of the class on which it is due. You won't ever have work due on a day we do not meet for class.
- A penalty-free extension will be granted if it requested *24 hours* in advance of the deadline. This request can come either in person or by email.
- Late work is still accepted without advance extension, but a late penalty applies—half credit in the case of small assignment, 3-percent-per-day in the case of a major assessment like the portfolio.