

8/30/23

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

Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it. Then write. If it's good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out of the window. —William Faulkner

*Either way, we got today
and that's all we may be allowed. --Dispatch*

Dear Scholars,

Welcome to your English class. I hope you'll feel a deep sense of belonging here, 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.

Yesterday was my son's first day of school. I said to him in the kitchen before I left, "Warren, how you feeling about today?"

He said to his bowl of Ramen, "Dad, I don't know what door to go in. I can't remember where my room is. And I can't read."

Warren's in first grade, but, by his standards, just by getting this far you've exceeded expectations.

This is my 17th 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 (Go Birds) 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 11, Olive 9, Warren 6—25 minutes down the road in from here Holliston, Mass. My favorite activities are reading and outdoor sports with them and competitive tennis. One of my newer favorite things to do is ride my bike to work once a week. I recently took up vegan baking.

Best part of my summer was the week I spent at the APSI in St. Johnsbury, VT. I was there to learn how to design an AP English class, which I did, but the whole experience felt more like summer camp—plenty of mountain biking, paddleboarding, swimming, etc. I cried in class on the first day when the instructor asked us to talk about who or what we'd miss while we were there. I hadn't been away from my kids in 10 years, so I didn't even get through the word "kids." I just said "ki—" when tears started dropping on my notebook.

This accidental moment of vulnerability on my end broke down all kinds of barriers for the 17 of us in the room. I'm not saying everyone else cried too, but we got to be real and honest, which

made it more fun. By the end of one week, we felt like we'd spent the whole summer together. On the last day, the instructor gave me, just me, a T-shirt—he didn't say why, just that something inside him told him he should. I think it was because I made myself emotionally available, and in so doing showed everyone else it was ok to be too.

I hope this class can earn your trust like that, so that you'll let yourself be emotionally available.

I have two sources of excitement this time of year. One is that my kids' soccer seasons are starting again—they play on 5 teams between the 3 of them, and I'm helping coach one of them. There's nothing easier in life than watching people you love do what they love.

My other source of excitement right now is 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 several poems in journals I consider respectable, I haven't made a regular writing routine—and thus haven't produced much—since my second child was born. 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 a day—I get back into this groove once in a while, but then slip 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.

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 (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.

Contact: bennetta@wellesleys.org

Writing Lab Hours: Part of my job is to staff the Writing Lab (rm. 237) 3 blocks per cycle. Those are Day 2 Block D, Day 3 Block A, and Day 4 Block D. 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.

Office Hours: I'll be available in 306 on a drop-in basis every Wed 2:30-3. You can always make an appointment to meet with me another time. I'm mostly available Block As as well as Green, Red 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 literary writers about how to tell our own stories?	What can the study of literature 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

While we'll read multiple genres of writing throughout the year, *your* writing will mostly be Creative Nonfiction in the first quarter, Analytical Nonfiction in the second quarter, Fiction and poetry in the third quarter, and an individually selected genre in the fourth quarter.

Texts

Nonfiction prose will be excerpted from *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* by Sherman Alexie and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Short stories will be selected from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *All Aunt Hagar's Children* by Edward P. Jones, and recently published works by Haruki Murakami. We'll read Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. There may be additions, TBD (other past titles in this course include *Fences*, *The Stranger*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Angela's Ashes*, *180 More*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Notes from Underground*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Odyssey*).

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 the student requests *24 hours* in advance of the deadline.
- 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.

Electronic Devices

- Laptops will occasionally be needed for classwork, but otherwise should be put away—these are terribly distracting when they're not needed, and make it difficult for everyone to focus. I'll be clear about which parts of each class are Screen Needed, Screen Optional, or No Screen by labeling the daily agenda on the board.
- You won't need your phone in class, so please keep it away and silent at all times. We may at some point institute a Phone Parking Lot.
- Because unwarranted screen use is so distracting, it will result in a lower class participation grade.

Absence

- Because class participation is measured in both quality and quantity, when you are *absent*, you must ask the instructor how to make up the hour of *participation* you missed, and complete this make-up work in addition to any graded assignments due that day. The same applies to partial absences (tardies, early dismissals, bathroom breaks: any time you are not physically in the classroom during class).
- Keep to a minimum the number of times you leave the room during class. It causes distraction and precludes your ability to participate.

Food/Drink

- Please don't eat in class unless you have enough to share with everybody or you have a documented medical need.
- Drinks are ok, so long as you properly dispose of any disposable containers.

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. Most 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.

Grading of Participation

- Your *participation* grade will be assessed at the end of each quarter as follows:
 - A:
 1. Attendance is excellent (no more than a few full or partial absences, and all make-up work completed)
 2. Preparation is excellent (consistently has all materials, consistently evidences thoughtful completion of non-graded homework)
 3. Citizenship is extraordinary (respectful of classroom and instructor; devices away when not needed; goes out of the way to make others feel welcome)
 4. Contributions are extraordinary (frequently offers thoughtful comments and questions that *stimulate* discussion; shows leadership in this regard)
 - B: Meets all criteria for “A” but is inconsistent in one area
 - C: Meets three out of the four criteria for “A” but is significantly weak in one area;
or, meets all criteria for “A” but is inconsistent in two areas
 - D: Meets two out of the four criteria for “A” but is significantly weak two areas;
or, meets all criteria for “A” but is inconsistent in three areas
 - F: Meets one of the four criteria for “A” but is significantly weak in three areas;
or, is inconsistent with all four criteria for “A”