



MICHELLE HERMAN, Ph.D.  
*Associate Professor of English*  
College of Humanities

---

### **Why "Creative" Writing?**

I am a novelist; I never called myself a "creative" writer until I entered the Academy, where the difference between "writers" (everyone) and "*creative* writers" (those of us who practice imaginative writing of one form or another, rather than scholarship of any form at all) had to be delineated. I teach "creative writing classes," though that phrase tells one nothing much at all about what I teach, and how I do it.

I tend to think of the courses I teach as of roughly three kinds: the "workshops" at the graduate level—for at Ohio State we have an MFA in Creative Writing Program, a highly competitive graduate program to

which we admit just twelve or thirteen new students each year. By the time they leave us, three years later, they have their first book in hand—a novel, a collection of short stories or poems or essays (short works of literary or "creative" nonfiction) or a full-length nonfiction book; the advanced undergraduate workshops, for college students who are quite serious about writing (and who must apply to get into these classes; admission is competitive, and limited), but are not as accomplished as our graduate students (and most of whom will not in fact go on to "become" writers—and indeed this course is often what changes their minds about that dreamy plan); and finally

the introductory classes in writing we offer, which are very popular electives.

Why do college students choose to take a creative writing class? What do they learn in such a class and how is it useful to them? These are the questions that inform my teaching of this class, and my work in directing my graduate students, who teach this course as well.

What are we to teach our students in English 265, Introduction to the Writing of Fiction? I ask my new TAs this question each year. The simple answer is that it's possible to write a *story*! We must teach these (mostly) sophomores and juniors what a story is, how it is made, what the various techniques are that will be brought to bear on the making. An adventure! And furthermore: how writers think, how writers work, how to read stories as writers, how to make judgments about writing—their own and others'—and

how to make something (indeed, how to make *art*) of their own experiences, their knowledge, their feelings, their *selves*. That the students in English 265 will have the rare opportunity to make sense of the experience that comes dinnning into their lives too rapidly and confusing to do much of anything with—except perhaps file it away in memory—is a gift I can give them by which most of them will be shocked and delighted. But not right away.

Right away what they want is to write stories based on TV shows or movies or terrible books they've read. I do not let them. I explain that it is difficult enough to find a precise way to say something,

a way to say it that captures exactly what something was like in "real life," if one is working with some event or feeling or person they *know*. If they instead try to recreate something they've seen at a distance—no matter how frequently—they will be guaranteed failure

*That this skill—the ability to find the words that perfectly express a thought—will help them in every area of their lives, seems to me self-evident.*

at this. One cannot put words on paper to make something seem real if it has never *been* real to the writer.

I talk a great deal about making *choices* about words instead of settling for them. About making the link between thought and word—and finding ways, through trial and error (also known as revision!), to express a thought precisely. I talk about recreating an experience on paper so that a reader will understand exactly what that experience feels like to the character—recreating every image so that the reader can see it in precisely the way the writer intends. I talk about using poetic devices such as metaphors when "ordinary" language fails at the task of getting *at* something as precisely as one would wish.

That this skill—the ability to find the words that perfectly express a thought—will help them in every area of their lives, seems to me self-evident. I am sly about this: I don't say (as my daughter's fourth grade teacher did, when she taught the children fractions), "Oh, you will use this skill all your life!" I simply do my best to teach it, knowing that it doesn't matter if they never again attempt to write a "scene," or a bit of

narrative summary, or a passage of description. I am teaching them the power of words, and it is my conviction that this is one of the most important things they will ever be taught.

Some of these students are actually interested in learning to write. Some imagine they might want to be writers; most are voracious readers and want to try their hand at something that has meant a great deal to them. One or two will have been "the best writer" in her small town high school class. And one or two may well be able to write very well indeed, though not necessarily the ones identified in the previous sentence. Many of the students I see in these classes are not English majors; many are upperclassmen from very distant disciplines. Many have no idea what they're doing in my classroom: an instinct, a vague feeling, led them there.

I want to do right by all of them.

To this end, I take everything they do seriously, with the hope that *they* will, too. More often than not this "trick" works. My classes usually start out thinking that I'm crazy: my relentless questions about

what they've written (*Why* would this character do this? But why did he *think* he did it? What's the story he tells himself about it? How is that different from what the reader will think from what *you* think? And how did he feel *when* he did it? How will he feel later? What do you think will become of him ten years after this story is over?) startle and sometimes infuriate them. But in the end—long before the end—they are thinking this way too, asking each other (and themselves) these very same questions; treating each other like "real" writers. This will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience for almost

all of them and I mean to make the most of it.

That by the end of the ten-week quarter they have learned something about making lucid to others their own ideas about the world, as well as something about what their ideas about the world *are*—not to mention something about how to write an elegant sentence, and something about the way literary art is made (that it doesn't fall from the sky! That real humans are engaged every day in making the books they love) — means that I have changed their lives. That's what I believe about this course, and about teaching "creative" writing overall.

It's why I love to do it.