



“Playing with Form”

Duration: Eight hour-long sessions, schedule to be determined
Location: Tutor’s Zoom link & Google docs

Course Description: “Playing with Form” is a creative writing class that will allow students to adopt existing forms to contain their poems, stories, and essays. Students will learn about, and experiment with, the exciting genre of the "hermit crab essay," and study how writers transform common material into extraordinary works of art. The course is designed to build students’ skill, joy, and sense of play in writing.

Course Objectives: By the end of the course, students will:

- Understand what constitutes a “hermit crab essay”
 - Gain a deeper respect for form: that is, understanding that *how* something is written is just as important as *what* is being written
 - Work with various creative texts and writing assignments that advance and complicate their analytical thinking, self-knowledge, and sense of adventure using language
 - Learn to work meaningfully in a small group setting
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Calendar: This calendar, like life, is subject to change, and may be modified by individual tutors to fit the needs of the particular class

Week 1: What is the “Hermit Crab Essay”?

- Students will define the hermit crab essay.
- Students will read and analyze a series of hermit crab essays in the form of a rejection note.
- Students will brainstorm a list of potential forms to inhabit for their own stories.
- Students will begin to compose a hermit crab essay of their own about a dramatic incident or moment, either fictional or autobiographical.

Week 2: Writing Difficult Stories

- Students will brainstorm a list of topics that have been difficult for them to write about.
- Students will begin composing a hermit crab essay, inhabiting the most appropriate “shell,” or form of writing (e.g. an instructional manual, a to-do list, etc.), for this particular content.
- Students will read and analyze a published hermit crab essay in the form of a quiz, reinforcing that difficult personal material can be contained in creative formal structures.

Week 3: Elevating the Mundane

- Students will begin composing an essay in the form of “driving directions,” learning that such common modes of writing can be manipulated to tell compelling stories.
- Students will read a published hermit crab essay in the form of a syllabus, in which the author shares a personal narrative in unconventional but meaningful ways.
- Students will use the in-class reading exercise as inspiration for their own projects.

Week 4: A Writer’s Constraints

- Students will begin writing a personal narrative in the form of a common structure of writing (e.g. a Harvard outline, a recipe, etc.).
- Students will read and discuss an author’s approach to her own hermit crab essay in which she imposed limits on her writing to achieve creative effects.
- Students will begin to compose an in-class exercise using similar limits or constraints, which are designed to yield unexpected freedoms of expression.

Week 5: Visual Art

- Students will study and engage with stimulating visual art examples, both photographs and museum installations, that use common or “trivial” materials to achieve artistic outcomes.
- Students will select a household object to describe in granular ways, as the visual artists performed on their own subjects.

Week 6: The Field Guide

- Students will review how hermit crab essays adopt already existing forms as the container for the writing at hand.
- Students will read aloud and discuss an excerpt of a field guide, studying how precise language can bring a subject to life.
- Students will begin composing a field guide about an object or person of meaning to them.

Week 7: Poetic forms

- Students will discuss how emotional states can affect the form that a writer’s sentences take.
- Students will describe a formative personal incident, letting form reflect emotion.
- Students will read a published poem that uses form in virtuosic ways, using that as inspiration for their own creative work.

Week 8: Poetic forms, cont.

- Students will examine the history & guidelines of the complex, demanding “sestina” form.
- Students will read published poems that inhabit this form.
- Students will begin composing a collaborative sestina, proving how working together can open up artistic possibilities.
- Students will reflect on the class and the creative work they’ve produced.