



## “Writing as Witness” course

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

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**Course Description:** This course examines what the writer’s role is during historical, social, and personal extremity. We explore what it means for the writer to “bear witness” in times of both joy and darkness in poetry and creative nonfiction. The course is designed to build students’ skill, interest, and confidence in writing.

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

- Understand the writer’s role, and responsibility, as “witness”
  - Use published texts to examine how writers engage with the world around them, especially in response to events of emotional intensity that threaten to silence them
  - Learn about the process of invention, writing, and revision in a dynamic environment
  - 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 Writer’s Role?

- Students will be introduced to the argument that writers function as witnesses to the world.
- Students will read and analyze an introductory excerpt from a published anthology, as well as a text that confronts trauma in artistic ways.
- Students will begin to write a creative piece of their own that defeats the silence of trauma.

**Week 2:** How Writers Deal with Suffering

- Students will read and engage with a quote to stimulate creative and analytical thinking.
- Students will consider challenging questions about the potential limits of a writer’s role as witness.
- Students will read a poem about suffering to reinforce that, in times of darkness, the writer does not turn away, but instead speaks the truth.
- Students will begin to write a creative piece of their own that likewise articulates a truth.

**Week 3:** Writing as a Camera

- Students will read aloud and discuss a series of texts that depict writing as a way to record moments in the world that would otherwise go unnoticed.
- Students will examine writing as a mode of self-portraiture.



- Students will begin their writing assignment that prompts them to compose their own self-portrait as a series of snapshot memories.

#### **Week 4: Writing as Gratitude**

- Students will read and engage with poems that bear witness to extreme joy.
- Students will discuss the studied benefits of gratitude.
- Students will compose a “list” poem whose items accumulate to form a celebratory text.

#### **Week 5: Writing as Witness of the State**

- Students will discuss the writer’s responsibility to bear witness to the dangers of the passive voice, euphemism, and political language when used by those in positions of power.
- Students will begin to compose a text in the voice of the powerful in order to demonstrate their understanding of the concept.

#### **Week 6: Witness of Nature**

- Students will read and engage with a quote to stimulate creative and analytical thinking.
- Students will read aloud and discuss a personal essay that bears witness to a natural event in order to examine how the writer uses language to approximate the emotional experience.
- Students will begin to compose a personal essay of their own that likewise seeks to use language to approximate the emotional intensity of a natural event they’ve witnessed.

#### **Week 7: Witness of Culture**

- Students will read and engage with texts that examine the emotional and mental effects of bearing witness.
- Students will begin an in-class writing exercise in which they bear witness to a part of the culture, or a personal custom, that they find important enough to study more deeply.

#### **Week 8: Witness of Animal**

- Students will read and engage with texts that study animals with an attentive, detailed gaze.
- Students will begin an in-class writing exercise, prompting them to bear witness to an animal that can teach us about ourselves or our human realm.
- Students will reflect on the class, the writer’s role in society, and the creative work they’ve produced.