

Composition 1: The Writer's Craft

Coursebook



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Introduction

Welcome to *Composition 1: The Writer's Craft*. This single-semester course is designed to help you develop essential writing skills that will form the basis for your long-term development as a writer. As with most important things in life, learning to write is a journey rather than a destination. That is to say, becoming a writer is a lifelong endeavor that will improve and change as you grow and learn to perceive the world with an increasingly complex appreciation of meaning and purpose.

The essence of writing is a desire to communicate with others our own sense of self and ideas about the world. The journey toward becoming a writer is one of self-discovery and the recognition of the commonalities of the human experience. With this in mind, this course is designed to give you multiple ways of exploring who you are and finding your unique voice in the form of the written word. Once you develop the tools for understanding yourself and others, you have the basic ingredients needed to describe the things you understand or to argue a specific viewpoint—both key components of academic writing.

What to Expect in This Course

This course uses the following texts:

In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction (Norton)

Write It Right (Oak Meadow)

This course is divided into 18 lessons, and each lesson is designed to take about one week to complete. In the lessons, you will find the following sections:

An **Assignment Checklist** is included at the beginning of each lesson; you can see at a glance what is required and check off assignments as you complete each one. Assignments are fully explained in the lesson.

Learning Objectives outline the main goals of the lesson and give you an idea of what to expect.

Reading selections focus on writing instruction and creative nonfiction essays.

Writing sections detail the writing and projects you will be doing in each lesson. The assignments are designed to help you analyze the literature selections and practice your writing technique.

The Writer's Craft spotlights different techniques and styles from a variety of writers. By studying how writers effectively convey their ideas, you can develop your own writing skills.

Further Study provides additional reading selections to extend your learning. All Further Study readings are optional.

The **Share Your Work** section provides reminders and information for students who are enrolled in Oak Meadow School and submitting work to their Oak Meadow teacher. Those who are working with a tutor independently might also use this submission schedule.

This course is designed for independent learning, so hopefully you will find it easy to navigate. However, it is assumed you will have an adult supervising your work and providing support and feedback. If you have a question about your work, please ask for help!

When you begin each lesson, scan the entire lesson first. Take a quick look at the number of assignments and amount of reading. Having a sense of the whole lesson before you begin will help you manage your time effectively.

Academic Expectations

This is a writing course and you are expected to proofread everything before you share it with your teacher. Your teacher will provide feedback on your writing assignments and you will have the opportunity to revise your writing to make it more expressive. You will repeat this process of writing, revising, and proofreading throughout this course, learning and improving with each piece of writing you produce.

The **appendix** contains important material that you will be expected to read and incorporate into your work throughout the year. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the resources in the appendix. You will find information about academic expectations, how to avoid accidental plagiarism, and details on citing sources and images.

It is assumed that you will be working with an adult who assesses and supports your learning whether you are enrolled in Oak Meadow or are using this course independently. This teacher—who may be a parent, tutor, or Oak Meadow teacher—is the one to whom you should turn if you have questions about your assignments or how to get the most out of this course.

A Note About the Workload

Students vary greatly in terms of reading speed, reading comprehension, and writing ability. Some may find the reading in this course takes longer than expected; others may find the writing assignments take a great deal of time. In general, you can expect to spend about five hours on each lesson. If you need more time to complete the work, you might modify some lessons to focus on fewer assignments, or you might opt to forgo the reading assignments in order to focus on your composition skills.

Modifications like these can allow you to produce work that is of a higher quality. Each lesson in this course can be customized to suit your needs.

Keep an eye on the workload as you progress through the course, and make adjustments so you have time for meaningful learning experiences rather than rushing to try to get everything done. Please consult with your teacher when making adjustments to the workload.

Lesson

1

Letter to Self

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify specific words that express your sense of self.
- Explain your word choices.
- Write a self-reflective essay.

At the heart of writing is the need to communicate and, specifically, to express yourself. Consider what this means, to express your “self.” In order to authentically express your self, you need to understand who you are. This, then, is your starting point and guiding question for this course: “Who am I?” By examining your response to this question, you can begin to place yourself into the context of the world you inhabit and identify what you want to share with others in order to influence the world in some way. Searching for your own identity can help you better relate to the challenges, uncertainties, purposes, quests for knowledge, and ideas shared by other human beings.

Reading

1. In *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, read the following essay:

- “In Praise of the Humble Comma” by Pico Iyer

Notice how the author uses subtle humor, historical references, and analogy to impart valid writing instruction.

2. Read the following section of Part II: Expository Writing in *Write It Right*.

- General Formatting

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read “In Praise of the Humble Comma” by Pico Iyer.
- Read a section of *Write It Right*.
- Choose three words to express who you are.
- Write a letter to yourself exploring the question, “Who am I?”

The Writer's Craft

A run-on sentence, its phrases piling up without division, is as unsightly as a sink piled high with dirty dishes.

“In Praise of the Humble Comma” by Pico Iyer

Using proper grammar, punctuation, spelling, and writing technique is not just an academic exercise; it actually helps you express yourself more effectively. At the core of all writing is a desire to share your ideas. For readers, stumbling over errors in a piece of writing can be distracting and frustrating. Improving your writing technique will help your readers focus on your message and walk away with something to think about.

Writing

1. Writing is an expression of self, so your first assignment is to spend some time thinking about who you are. You might find a quiet place to sit, outside or in your favorite spot. You might take a walk, just pondering the question of your identity and how you came to be the person you are. You might try walking into your bedroom as though you are seeing it for the first time. What does this space say about the person who lives in it? Look at your favorite possessions, the activities you like to do, the ways you like to spend your time alone. Use this information to help crystalize your sense of self. Choose three words to express who you are.
2. After spending some time thinking, write a one- or two-page letter to yourself, reflecting on the essential question, “Who am I?” Feel free to write your letter by hand, if that feels more natural to you or helps you get your ideas on paper more clearly. (If you are writing by hand, doodles are encouraged!) Use your three words in your letter and explain why you chose them.

You might want to jump right into your letter, or you might want to gather your thoughts first with a prewriting exercise. (See the section, “Prewriting Exercises,” in *Write It Right* if you aren't sure where or how to start.) Here are some additional questions that might help you explore this topic:

- What am I really good at?
- What do I need to work on about myself?
- What do I really know well?
- What do I want to learn or do?
- What do I worry about?
- What makes me feel happy or content?

Since you are writing to yourself, you can write either in journal form (“I like how I always notice . . .”) or in letter form (“Dear Me, I like how you always notice . . .”). When your letter is complete, proofread it to correct any errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar.



(Image credit: CCO Public Domain/Max Pixel)

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your letter to yourself with your teacher, and then continue to lesson 2.

If you are a student enrolled in Oak Meadow's distance learning school, be sure to look closely at the Google course doc your Oak Meadow teacher shares with you because the assignments or course requirements may have been modified.

Lesson

2

Essay #1

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Analyze two pieces of writing.
- Support your statements with textual evidence.
- Reflect on yourself as a reader.

Words, sentences, paragraphs—these are the writer’s basic tools. Most people take these tools for granted, and don’t give them much thought. But writers need to pay careful attention to every detail of a piece of writing to make sure the ideas expressed serve the intended purpose: to delight, intrigue, inform, persuade, entertain, provoke thought, or simply draw attention to the common bonds of humanity.

In this course, you will become a better writer. Part of that process is carefully examining what you like and don’t like about other writers’ styles. Everything you read can help you learn how to express yourself in your own personally meaningful way.

This week, you will read two essays that describe emotional experiences. In “Suspended” by Joy Harjo, the third sentence tells the reader what the essay is about, so the message or purpose is clear. How, then, does the author convey this “revelatory,” life-changing moment? Notice the use of sensory details to ground the reader in the experience of this “rite of passage into the world of humanity.” It is not the child’s first time hearing the music, but it is her first time *really* hearing it. Similarly, “Museum Piece” by David Huddle describes seeing something familiar in a new light.

In each of the essays you’ll read in this course, notice what makes the writer’s voice unique. What makes their writing powerful? What writing techniques do they use to express themselves so powerfully? Analyzing what works well can help you become a stronger writer.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read sections of *Write It Right*.
- Read “Suspended” by Joy Harjo and “Museum Piece” by David Huddle.
- Write an analytical essay in response to the reading (Essay #1).
- Reflect on and describe your reading process.

Reading

1. Read the following sections of Part I: Writing Basics in *Write It Right*. Keep this information in mind while reading the essays in the next assignment and writing your own essay this week.
 - Elements of Good Writing
 - Writing Style
 - Sentences and Paragraphs
 - Varied Sentences
 - Dependent and Independent Clauses
 - Run-On Sentences
 - Concise Writing
 - Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers
 - Strong Paragraphs
2. In *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, read the following essays:
 - “Suspended” by Joy Harjo
 - “Museum Piece” by David Huddle

Take active notes as you read. Use your notes to help you understand what you read. Write down any ideas the reading sparks in your mind. Underline, ponder, disagree. Look up words you don't know and write down the definitions in your own words. Taking notes about a text is your chance to interrogate it as much as enjoy and learn from it. Active note-taking helps you translate for yourself what the text means to you.



A Lady Writing by Johannes Vermeer, 1665
(Image credit: National Gallery of Art)

The Writer's Craft

Here is the opening paragraph of Brian Doyle's essay, "Joyas Voladoras":

Consider the hummingbird for a long moment. A hummingbird's heart beats ten times a second. A hummingbird's heart is the size of a pencil eraser. A hummingbird's heart is a lot of the hummingbird. Joyas voladoras, flying jewels, the first white explorers in the Americas called them, and the white men had never seen such creatures, for hummingbirds came into the world only in the Americas, nowhere else in the universe, more than three hundred species of them whirring and zooming and nectaring in hummer time zones nine times removed from ours, their hearts hammering faster than we could clearly hear if we pressed our elephantine ears to their infinitesimal chests.

Notice the evocative language Doyle uses. Consider this phrase: "their hearts hammering faster than we could clearly hear if we pressed our elephantine ears to their infinitesimal chests." The hummingbird's chest is not really infinitesimal, and our ears are not really elephantine, but feel how much more expressive that phrase is than simply saying "if we pressed our big ears to their tiny chests."

Writing

1. Using your notes about the two essays you read, write a one- or two-page response (this will be called Essay #1). What did you like or dislike about the essays? What were the authors trying to convey? Did the essays share a common thread? Which writing techniques did the authors use? Were they effective?

Here is a list of some of the features that define a writing style:

- Are there a lot of adjectives? Are the verbs strong?
- Are the sentences long or short? Does their structure vary? What structure does each author prefer?
- Are the paragraphs long or short? Does their structure vary?
- What sort of rhythm is achieved within the sentences and paragraphs?
- What is the tone of the writing? Is it intellectual, poetic, authoritative, or humorous?
- What kind of language do the authors use? Formal? Informal? Do they employ dialect or slang?

- Are the descriptions elaborate or subdued?
- Is the emphasis on plot? Character? Setting?
- Do the authors use metaphor or simile?
- What narrative point of view is used? Is it effective?

In your writing, reference at least one specific line, phrase, or word choice from each essay you read; make sure to cite the author's name and the title of the essay and enclose any direct quotes in quotation marks. When you have completed your essay, proofread your work. Share your essay with at least one other person (this can be a teacher, another adult, or a peer) and ask for feedback.

2. Think about your experience reading the essays assigned in this lesson. Reflect on your individual reading process: your strengths, challenges, and approaches to reading. Do you read things once and only once? Do you go back and reread lines and passages that you like or that confuse you? Do you take notes as you read? If so, how and why? What do you do when you come upon a word that is unfamiliar to you? What do you do when you come upon a passage that delights you or resonates with you? What happens when you read an idea you object to or that baffles you? Reflect on how you read in general, how you read the two essays assigned in this lesson, and how your reading process differs depending on what you are reading. What are your reading strategies? What is your approach to reading?

Here are some of the things you may notice and focus on in your essay:

- your note-taking style
- your stylistic preferences for writing and reading different kinds of essays
- the kinds of writing you find confusing, frustrating, or annoying
- the kinds of writing you find appealing, exciting, or intriguing
- how you connect what you are reading to your own life

Write one or two paragraphs about yourself as a reader. Alternately, you might choose to complete this assignment as a discussion, as an audio or video log, or in a creative, visual, or artistic form.

Further Study

Note: All Further Study readings are optional.

Social relationships have an ebb and flow. Even with casual relationships, the push-pull of emotions can sometimes be inexplicable, or at least hard to fathom. For one take on the impact of social relationships, read "On the Street" by Vivian Gornick (*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*). Try to figure out how the author expresses her conflicting emotions.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share the following work with your teacher:

- Essay #1
- Reflection of your reading process

Lesson

6

Essay #3

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify the central theme of a literary work.
- Explain how the author develops the central theme.
- Identify instances of figurative language.

In “Nostalgia” by Richard Shelton, the first line reads:

“Whatever happened to the crepuscular?”

Crepuscular describes something resembling or relating to twilight. The author continues by drawing the reader’s attention to other little-used words. Is the author lamenting the loss of a rich, varied, and nuanced language? Or is he missing the rich, varied, and nuanced experiences described by the words? Is he missing both? Is he saying the loss of one resulted in the loss of the other? These are some questions to ponder as you read the essay.

Reading

1. Read the following section of Part II: Expository Writing in *Write It Right*.

- Literary Analysis

Read the following section of Part III: Writing Fiction in *Write It Right*.

- First Sentences

2. Read “Nostalgia” by Richard Shelton (*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*). Take notes as you read, and let yourself absorb Shelton’s writing style and literary techniques. What do you like? What works for you and what doesn’t? How would you describe this essay’s theme or message? What is your take on it? You will be using these notes to write your essay so be sure to carefully identify direct quotations (using quotation marks) that you might want to use.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read sections of *Write It Right*.
- Read “Nostalgia” by Richard Shelton.
- Write an analytical essay in response to the reading (Essay #3).



Twilight (Image credit: Cyrille Dutrulle)

The Writer's Craft

Author Annie Dillard offers some bits of advice for writers:

- Learn punctuation; it is your little drum set, one of the few tools you have to signal the reader where the beats and emphases go.
- Always locate the reader in time and space—again and again. Beginning writers rush in to feelings, to interior lives. Instead, stick to surface appearances; hit the five senses; give the history of the person and the place, and the look of the person and the place. Use first and last names. As you write, stick everything in a place and a time.
- The way to a reader's emotions is, oddly enough, through the senses.
- Don't use any extra words. A sentence is a machine; it has a job to do. An extra word in a sentence is like a sock in a machine.
- Write for readers. Ask yourself how every sentence and every line will strike the reader. That way you can see if you're misleading, or boring, the readers. Of course it's hard to read your work when you've just written it; it all seems clear and powerful. Put it away and rewrite it later. Don't keep reading it over, or you'll have to wait longer to see it afresh.
- The work's unity is more important than anything else about it. Those digressions that were so much fun to write must go.

(Excerpted from "Introduction: Notes for Young Writers," *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*)

Writing

1. Write a one- or two-page response to the reading (Essay #3). First, examine the writing: content, style, tone, technique, etc. What is the central theme? How does the author develop this theme through the piece? How is language used in both a literal and figurative way? How do the author's word choices create a tone that supports or highlights the theme? Include specific details in the writing to support your thoughts and opinions. When you have completed your essay, proofread your work before sharing it with your teacher and/or others.

Further Study

“My Children Explain the Big Issues” by Will Baker (*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*) is structured around vignettes featuring insights gleaned when the author's children were young. Read this essay to see how the mundane events of daily life take on added meaning with a wide-lens perspective.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share the following with your teacher:

- Revision of Essay #2
- Description of your plans for your Book of Self
- Essay #3

Lesson

14

Final Essay: Topic and Outline

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Reflect on the process of developing a long-term project.
- Create an outline or other graphic organizer for an essay.

You have spent a great deal of time reading essays from a variety of talented writers. You've carefully examined writing styles and techniques, and you've worked to develop your own writing skills. Now it is your turn to write an original nonfiction essay on a topic of your choice.

Writing

1. Write an artist's statement of one paragraph, roughly 500 words, that describes your Book of Self. Address the following questions:
 - How does your Book of Self express who you are as an individual?
 - How was crafting this book different than writing an essay about yourself?
 - How does your Book of Self address the question, "Who am I?"
 - What challenges and positive discoveries did you encounter while working on your Book of Self?

Finalize your Book of Self and prepare it for sharing with your teacher by taking photos of all the pages you are comfortable revealing.

2. In this course, you have done a lot of writing about yourself. However, writers often aren't writing about themselves, but about other people, ideas, concepts, events, and information about the wider world. Now that you have a clearer sense of who you are—as a person, as a reader, as a writer, and as a learner—think about what kind of writing you are drawn to. What kind of essay would you like to write?

You might like to write a persuasive essay, where you try to influence the opinion of your reader, or an opinion piece, where you state an opinion and support it with reason and specific examples.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

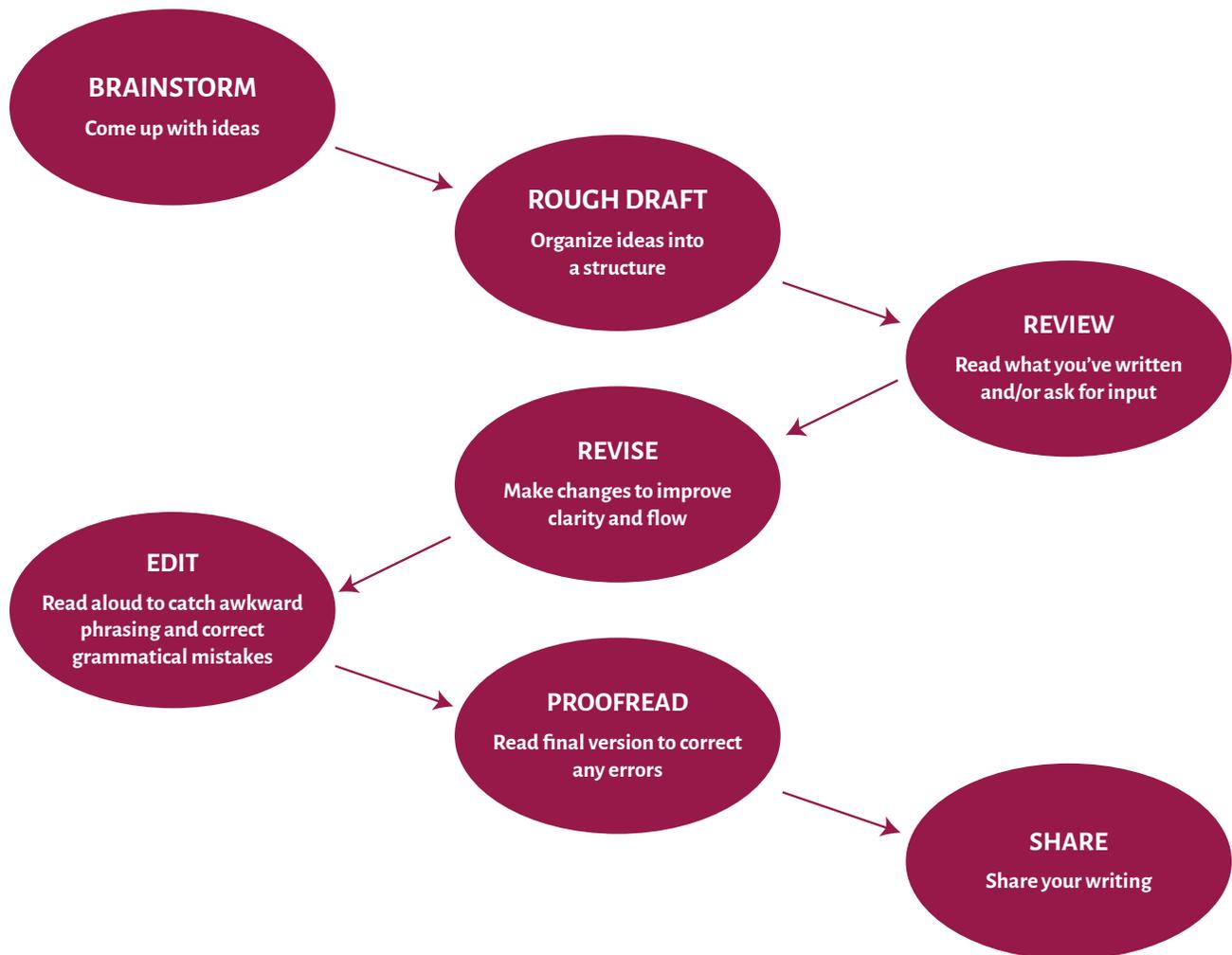
- Write an artist's statement for your Book of Self.
- Choose a topic and type of essay to write, and complete an outline.

You might like to do an analytical or comparative essay, where you explore a topic in depth or compare two or more things. You might like to do a newspaper editorial or a piece of investigative writing, where you research a topic and try to bring to light unknown or little understood information. Or you might like to do a satirical or humorous piece—the list is endless!

After considering what kind of essay you'd like to write, you'll need to choose a topic. What would you like to write about? For instance, perhaps your chosen topic is food. You might write an essay persuading readers to try a new food or to eat more nutritious food; you might write about your cultural or personal experiences with food; you might analyze different traditional diets and compare them in terms of nutrition; you might investigate state health regulations and compliance in food trucks and report your findings; or you might write an essay poking fun at fad diets or people's unusual eating habits. Any topic can become the subject of any type of essay. Do you have a favorite sport or hobby? Maybe you want to write about that. Are you interested in current events or political maneuverings? You might write about that. Are you intrigued by personal and social relationships? Do you love art or music or animals or being outside in nature? You can write about anything that interests you.

In the next lesson, you will be writing your final essay. This week, you will choose the topic and the type of essay you will write. Compile your thoughts, ideas, and/or research, and organize them using an outline or other graphic organizer (mind map, idea web, etc.) that details your topic and how you will approach it. Make sure to clarify both your topic and the type of essay you plan to write.

Writing Process



SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share the following with your teacher:

- Revision of Learning Profile
- Copy of your Book of Self and your artist statement
- Outline or graphic organizer for your final essay



Appendix

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