MFA FACULTY GUIDELINES for the teaching of
ENGL 396, ENGL 397, ENGL 398, & 399

The MFA faculty offer these guidelines for the teaching of ENGL 396, "Introduction to Creative Writing," ENGL 397, "Introduction to Poetry Writing," ENGL 398, "Introduction to Fiction Writing," and ENGL 399, "Introduction to Nonfiction Writing" not to inhibit anyone’s teaching style or dictate the specific content of the readings in these courses but to give some early advice to those teaching these courses. Recognizing that we all teach best out of our strengths and enthusiasms, and that part of being a good teacher is finding ways to bring together the subject of a course with those strengths and enthusiasms, we do, however, want to ensure that students have comparable experiences in the various sections of these three courses; that they all learn—or at least have the opportunity to learn—some basic terms and concepts related to the reading and writing of imaginative literature; and that, if these students go on to more advanced work, they will come together as readers and writers in future workshops with some of the same knowledge and skills.

It is only realistic to admit that most of the students who enroll in 396, 397, 398, and 399 will not go on to write and publish significant fiction, poetry or essays. That in no way invalidates these courses or such students taking them. For one thing, the Mason English Department offers no "Introduction to Poetry" literature course. The introduction to reading poetry in 396 and 397 may be the only college-level "introduction to poetry" these students receive. Moreover, approaching fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and drama from the writer’s point of view focuses attention on the materials of literature, on such things as "close reading," "imagery," "metaphor," the "music" of language, "point of view," "voice," and "tone" in ways that ought to enhance students’ experiences of language (and therefore of emotion, sensation, ideation and imagination) in all areas of their lives, both as makers and as consumers of imaginative work.

And some students will go on to produce valuable fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and essays. We urge those teaching 396, 397 and 398 to work with each student as if he or she had a literary vocation. As Theodore Roethke said to his students, "Faith. That's it. This course is an act of faith. In what? In the imagination of us all, in a creative capacity—that most sacred thing—that lies dormant, never dead, in everyone."

Now, some basics:

1. University regulations require a written syllabus in each course, paper or electronic, distributed during or before the first class meeting. This includes creative writing
workshops. If the requirements of the course change substantially during the semester, it is best to give students written revisions of relevant portions of the syllabus.

2. The syllabus must spell out grading procedures: How much each assignment will count, how the final grade will be determined, how (or whether) participation will be evaluated, etc.

3. The English Department voted some years ago that all syllabi should include a statement on plagiarism. There is a standard statement for 10 1/200-level/3 02 courses, and that can be adapted to 396, 397, 398 or 399. (Yes, we do get occasional cases of plagiarism, even--once--in a graduate workshop.)

Second, here are some things the MFA faculty agreed upon long ago with regard to the teaching of these courses:

1. ENGL 396 is an introduction to the writing of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry with encouragement for instructors to include drama as they see fit.

2. We believe fiction, nonfiction, and poetry should receive equal attention in 396, since students may well go on to more advanced workshops in these genres, either at Mason or elsewhere.

One possible approach in 396 is to emphasize "elements" of literature as they are manifest in the respective genres. For example, one might consider dialogue: It is the main ingredient in drama, it is almost always employed in fiction, it can form the basis of poems (until the 18th Century, drama was a particular kind of poetry), and it is often important in making nonfiction immediate and lively. Closely related to "dialogue" are such elements as "character," "persona," "speaker," "voice," "diction" and "tone."

Instructors are sometimes puzzled about what to do in nonfiction and drama, imagining that a complete, elaborate essay or even a play (even a complete one-act) must be completed. With regards to drama, a 2- or 3-page scene is probably sufficient, or a very short radio play—anything that requires the student to convey a complete experience through dialogue, without elaborate stage directions. Such work could be tied to fiction or poetry writing. Similarly, discussions of nonfiction could be tied to the elements of fiction used in nonfiction. Etc.

3. Reading selections for these courses should be broad-based and inclusive of various styles. All sections of 396/397/398/399 should assign readings—possibly in "introduction to creative writing," "introduction to poetry writing," or "introduction to
fiction writing" texts or comparable books, and all should use anthologies or other readings that include traditional, modern/contemporary and experimental work. Faculty members will be glad to recommend texts. Also, see the attached list of possibilities at the end of this document. Readings should be used both to acquaint students with the traditions in which they are working and, more importantly, to illustrate how a writer must "make it new." In selecting anthologies and other texts, instructors should also keep in mind the total cost of these books: It is not reasonable, for example, to ask students in 396 to buy separate fiction, poetry and drama writing texts and separate fiction, poetry and drama anthologies. Xeroxing pertinent material and asking students to buy copies at the Johnson Center is one possible solution. So is using a multi-genre text. And so is posting samples to the class section or on Blackboard.

4. All sections of 396/397/398/399 should include writing assignments that enable students to "learn by doing." These should cover basic traditional elements such as point of view, direct and indirect description, spoken language, metaphor and—in poetry—measuring the poetic line and nontraditional or "experimental" devices, particularly those which help students break free of tired conventions, inhibitions and habitual ways of thinking/feeling/writing. Sharing these works, or workshopping them, can include web-based systems or the traditional method of handing out copies at the class meeting before the work is discussed, or some combination. Instructors should work out a clear system, though, and ensure that the course calendar allows for the chosen system to work.

5. While instructors will take different approaches to these courses, it is advisable to have some objectively gradable work built into the course. To accomplish that, sections of 396/397/398/399 should include quizzes and exams that cover reading assignments, terms and concepts, or the application of elements of writing covered in the course. (There may also be in-class writing that draws upon reading assignments and allows for quickly assessed work.)

6. All sections of 396/397/398/399 should take into account the students’ progress over the semester and so weigh major writing assignments over the semester or use a system relying on portfolios to weigh work at the end more heavily than work at the beginning.

7. All sections of 396/397/398/399 should require at least a minimum number of revisions, with discussion in class about what constitutes a revision and how writers usually work in revision versus draft mode.
8. All students in 396, 397, 398, and 399 should be strongly encouraged to attend fiction and poetry readings and plays produced on campus, and that means that the instructors of these courses should also attend such events. It is appropriate to cancel one once-a-week class or two twice-a-week classes in order to enable students to attend readings (or to compensate them for doing so). One cannot require attendance at readings which do not take place during the scheduled class time, but one can require that students attend a minimum number of readings, either on campus or in the metropolitan area, during the semester. To evaluate this kind of participation, the instructor might collect signed 3x5 cards at on-campus readings, or include questions about the readings on quizzes, or require short essays on the experience of attending.

9. Instructors are encouraged to use the work of writers visiting Mason in their classes to strengthen the ties between the readings and in-class experiences.

10. The MFA faculty do not have a single list of terms and concepts for these courses. This reflects the variety of valid approaches and the importance of each instructor’s having the freedom to teach out of her or his strengths and enthusiasms.

We do agree on a core of basic terms and concepts we want all students to encounter in these courses, both general literary terms (such as "character") and terms specific to poetry (such as "stanza") and fiction (such as "focal point character.") We largely agree on those elements of poetry all students should have practice in using and those elements which should be introduced and illustrated but need not be covered in assignments. We are not much interested in having students memorize lists of terms, although knowing the meaning of the terms is a starting point. We hope that students will know, be able to discuss, and be able to apply in their own writing such clusters of concepts as:

-the differences between a first-person or "I" voice narrator in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry

-diction and tone

-imagery and the possibilities of the image abstract and concrete

-direct and indirect exposition

-analogy, figurative language, metaphor, simile and metaphoric implication

-the line as a unit of meaning and an interval of sound

-noting the differences between poetry and prose
-the differences between a sentence and a line
-the differences between rhythm and meter
-point of view and its effects
-the concepts "persona," "speaker" and "narrator"
-the advantages of dialogue over summaries of conversations

and so forth. In addition, in ENGL 397 particularly, the poetry faculty want students to

-learn to scan verse
-have practice in writing iambic meter, one other meter, and syllabic verse
-learn to perform a close reading
-understand the concepts of "closed" and "open" (or "fluid") form better grasp the relations between form and content.

In all four courses we want students to practice writing and discussing writing. This may be accomplished within the constraints of exercises (whether those are traditional forms or other restrictions of such things as measure, language and content), or through more open-ended assignments or writing prompts. In all four courses, we want students to learn to revise—and to learn by revising—and to become better, more adept and more adventuresome readers. We also want students to become comfortable participating in "workshop discussions" and to learn that one must read, interpret, and then evaluate. That is, that evaluating also is a process, just like reading and interpreting, and writing are processes.

What follows is an incomplete list of possible texts, drawn up to include genre-specific as well as multi-genre books. Of course the sample syllabi have their own suggested texts. These merely augment those. And these may be more helpful as resource titles to recommend for students than they would be for everyone in your class.

**Multi-genre:**
Fiction:

Thomas Arp’s *Story and Structure* Marvin Diogenes and Clyde Moneyhun’s *Crafting Fiction*

R.V. Cassill’s *Writing Fiction* (one of the best of its type, now out of print but available in on-line and real used book stores).

A wide-ranging volume of stories both old and new to give students a varied reading experience, *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction* edited by Richard Bausch.

Poetry:

Nonfiction:
William Blundell, *The Art and Craft of Feature Writing*