



49 Writers

INSTRUCTOR GUIDELINES

Instructional Philosophy: Some say good writing can't be taught. We disagree. Instruction alone won't make you a great writer, but it will take you a good long way in that direction. At the heart of our mission is a firm commitment to instruction that encourages students from a variety of backgrounds and experiences to become more thoughtful, proficient, and prolific as they explore their passion for the written word. We offer affordable workshops and courses—free of the academic constraints of credit hours and grading—for both emerging and established writers. We offer no easy answers; our aim is to delve deep into the mysteries of language, discovery and expression with teaching that is both student-centered and well-structured around meaningful outcomes. We also believe that good teaching, like good writing, develops through a life-long process of learning that includes evaluating our work, sharing ideas, and stretching ourselves—sometimes beyond our comfort zone.

Course offerings and scheduling: We offer a variety of instructional options in our fall and spring terms. Registration for the fall term begins in August; the term starts in September and ends in November. Registration for the spring term begins in January; the term starts in February and ends in April.

Our course offerings typically fit into one of three categories: **Elements** courses that are generally 6 to 8 hours long; genre-based **workshops** that typically run 12 hours; and **special topics** that are normally covered in a single session of 2 or 3 hours. Evening and weekend scheduling is a top priority, and our students tend to prefer classes that last less than four weeks. Limited scope workshops with one or two sessions have been filling up fastest and are the easiest to schedule.

Elements courses include cross-genre topics like character, voice, narrative structure, point of view, description, beginnings, revision, and narrative time. Workshops are by genre, alternating between fundamentals workshops for emerging writers (Fundamentals of Fiction, for example) and workshops exploring advanced techniques (such as Advanced Poetry Techniques). In workshops, students draft and revise within their genres. While critiques by instructors and classmates may be part of the workshop content, we encourage instructors to consider the limitations of MFA-style “workshopping” as the sole instructional technique.

While we hope all of our courses are feisty and fun, our special topics courses are intended to be especially so, with an exploratory bent. Though the time frame is short, we applaud instructors who incorporate some real writing into their special topics instruction.

We strive to balance our course offerings each term with regard to length, type, and genre. As genre, we consider fiction, non-fiction, poetry, screenwriting, and playwriting—plus we like to offer courses in publishing and marketing.

We have expanded our course offerings outside of Anchorage and like to offer satellite courses within our same terms and using our same course proposal and registration procedures in various communities. If you are able to travel to another community to repeat your course, please let us know and we will address classroom/advertising/registration logistics.

Fees: As of 2016, member fees for our courses are approximately \$15 per hour. Fees for non-members are slightly higher. The basic 49 Writers membership fee is \$49 a year.

Proposing a course: Prospective instructors should submit their proposals using our Course Proposal Form online. The deadline for fall course proposals is July 1st and the deadline for spring proposals is November 15th.

What we do for instructors: Schedule. Provide classroom space, including screen and LCD projector and wireless Internet connection, in most cases. Publicize (typically, to our membership, to our statewide mailing list, through term flyers, through our blog, word of mouth, and in local media calendars). Offer help and feedback with course planning as needed. Handle all aspects of student registration and payment. Provide a roster with email addresses for you to contact students prior to the start of class. Provide forms for evaluation and feedback. Pay our instructors within two weeks of course completion.

What instructors do for us: Provide a course description, resume or CV, one-paragraph bio, photo, and syllabus. Sign required paperwork: a memorandum of understanding and a W-9 for IRS 1099 reporting. Spread the word on courses however and wherever they can. Submit a guest post to the 49 Writers blog to promote the class (30 days in advance if requesting a specific date, so we can work into the blog schedule). Prep (including handouts if needed), show up (early to set up tables, chairs, etc.) and engage with students. Help us keep building our reputation as one of the best statewide resources for writing instruction.

Instructor pay: While we're a non-profit operating on a slim budget, we believe in paying instructors as well as we can, given the market and our overhead costs. At this time, that's \$8 per student per hour. For instance, an instructor teaching a 6-hour workshop with 10 students would earn \$480. Our instructors are independent contractors, with tax payments between them and the IRS—we'll provide 1099s at the end of the year. If an instructor travels from out of town to teach with us, we can discuss how to cover additional costs, such as increasing the hourly rate or timing the class with travel already planned.

Minimum and maximum enrollment: Typically we look for six students minimum and twelve students maximum in a given course. If the course doesn't require the students to sit at tables, we can fit twenty or so in our classroom.

Age level: If you're open to high school students in your course, please let us know.

Scheduling: Courses do well on Saturdays and weeknights (excluding Fridays)—we try to schedule a mix so students have plenty of options to fit with their schedules.

Facility: We are currently developing a roster of facilities in each community. Our primary classroom in Anchorage at this time is the conference room at the Alaska Humanities Forum, generously made available to us in the form of in-kind support. It's equipped with wi-fi, a

monthly rotation of visual art by Alaskan artists, free off-street parking, a projector and screen, and more. We often utilize the JAHC in Juneau, and various other facilities throughout the state.

Cancellations: If a course is cancelled due to insufficient enrollment, instructors do not receive pay. Instructors who are forced to cancel a course session or sessions due to circumstances beyond their control should notify us (49writers@gmail.com) immediately. Students may opt to attend rescheduled sessions or request prorated refunds; to accommodate refunds, instructor pay will be likewise prorated.

A student who is unable to attend a course may send a substitute student after notifying 49 Writers, who will notify you. Though not required, we encourage instructors to contact students who've missed sessions and to offer any handouts or assignments to help them catch up.

Teaching tips for student-centered instruction: In the old days, teachers stood at the front of the classroom and spouted knowledge to students in hopes it would take. With teachers in control and positioned to “show off” what they knew, this model felt safe, but research shows it's actually the least effective way for real learning to happen. We retain very little of what we hear, but when we're skillfully guided to discover ideas, we're empowered and changed by instruction.

If you're teaching a short clinic, you'll probably find yourself teaching the old-fashioned way: delivering information as clearly and concisely as you can, with stage presence and visuals to make up for the lack of student involvement. Do try, though, to include a writing exercise or two, and allow time for sharing and questions. If you're teaching a longer workshop or class, we encourage student-centered instruction.

Regardless of the length of the course, we recommend you begin by learning about your students as writers—their interests, levels, needs, etc. Like good writers, good teachers must take risks, and that includes ceding control—in a structured way—to students by designing learning experiences that encourage discovery. To foster powerful, student-centered learning we recommend that you arrange your thinking not so much around content as outcomes. What will your students be able to DO at the end of your course? As in writing, use active verbs to articulate your thinking about these objectives.

As you plan learning activities, consider the need for the following:

- Engagement: Guiding students into the topic (primarily through their own experience, rather than us telling them why they should be interested)
- Explanation (with diagrams, notes, and visuals where you can incorporate them)
- Examples (students need to see, not just hear)
- Instructor modeling (“here's how I do this”)
- Student practice (“now you try”)
- Metacognition (students reflecting on what they did, how they did it and how their thinking has changed)

How do you accomplish all this? Take a look at this sample, expanded from the Power Writing course from which we've taken our sample syllabus:

Objective: Students will create engaging sensory images.

Activities:

- Exercise: What images obsess you? Directed freewriting. (Engagement)
- Sensory detail: For intimacy: touch, taste. To focus attention: sound. To affect the limbic, primitive part of the brain: smells (especially for unpleasant/scary). To anchor the reader and imply meaning: sight. (Explanation)
- Read/display excerpt from "Perfume." (Example)
- "I saw a bird." Instructor illustrates how instead of writing only this sentence, she'd push for sensory images. (Instructor modeling)
- Exercise: Return to directed freewriting. Pick one of the images. Explore it from multiple senses, emphasizing those that achieve the strongest effect for your purpose. (Student practice)
- Exercise: Write a sentence or two about what you discovered when you did the last exercise. What parts were hardest to write? What parts were most exciting? What have you learned that you could use in a writing project you're working on? (Metacognition)

Of course, you won't be able to include all of these components in every activity. But when planning instruction, do apply the old adage about the spice in variety. Remember that people learn differently: some are more auditory, some are kinesthetic; some are visual; some are empathetic. Some learn best alone; some with partners or in small groups. Beyond instruction, students like to feel part of a learning community, and they want to know that they matter. Also: adult learners need ten-minute breaks every 50 minutes. We recommend you take them religiously.

Here are some tips for achieving a balance between instruction and student participation:

- Learn students' names during the first 10 minutes of the first class. This isn't as hard as it sounds. Have each say his or her name, along with telling something about themselves, such as what they're writing now. Be clear and directive: one or two sentences, maximum. Model by introducing yourself the way you want them to introduce themselves.
- Be clear when giving instructions. Break activities down, step by step. What should students produce? How much time do they have? If they're writing, will they be required to share, or will sharing be voluntary, or is their writing for their eyes only?
- Avoid open-ended questions that only draw out the bold, talkative students. Instead of asking, "What do you think of this poem?" ask students to circle the words and phrases that they like best as you read the poem aloud. Then direct students, one after the other, to "say back" something they circled. Depending on your objective, you can open from there into a discussion about why they picked the words they did and what works in the poem, or you can expand into a writing exercise involving the words that they chose.
- Anticipate that as the class "warms up," discussions will veer off track. While it may be tempting to tell yourself that this is all "student-centered," keep your outcomes in mind.

One of the biggest sources of student frustration is not feeling they've learned because the instructor didn't maintain control. Grab hold of a strand of the discussion and use it to steer the class to the next activity.

- If you use small-breakout groups—a nice change of pace from full-class discussion—make sure the purpose, process, task, and time limit are clear. Monitor small group or partner work by listening and interjecting.
- End each class session with five minutes of freewriting by students on what they enjoyed, what they're still wondering, and what changes they'd suggest. Collect these pages and read them, after class, for feedback. This process reminds students you value their input, guides your thinking for the next class sessions, and gives voice to quieter students.

These tips are all offered to challenge your thinking as a classroom leader. None are required. Like great writers, great teachers might make it look easy, but the part we see is the net result of a huge effort that includes lots of planning, false starts, rethinking, and revision. It's all worth it when students leave our courses excited about the new focus, determination, and knowledge they've gained.

Fine instruction for writers is at the core of our 49 Writers mission. We appreciate all your efforts toward that end. Wherever we can be of help, ask. If you have any questions, contact Jeremy Pataky at 49writers@gmail.com or 907-244-7717.

