

TEACHING JOBS

Creative writers have always been teachers, whether they've realized it or not. Perhaps they taught, unaware, through their work, which apprentice writers scrutinized as though studying a textbook on craft. Moreover, for millennia authors have been writing about the art of writing. From Horace to Maxine Hong Kingston, practicing writers have critiqued the style and subjects of others (and sometimes themselves). In the United States in the past fifty years, teaching creative writing has become something of a boom industry. It is probably not hyperbole to say that there are now more active creative writing teachers than there have been in the history of the world. In academic circles, teaching has become synonymous with teaching in the university. This entry will begin there, but—because so many of our keyword entries already address life in this particular institutional setting—we will quickly move on to discuss the many teaching opportunities outside these relatively narrow, and difficult to enter, confines.

What this second category of teaching jobs has in common is the assumption that creative writing is beneficial to people in all walks of life, not just college students. Once a teacher accepts the idea that self-expression can be at least as important as artistic excellence, she comes to realize that every person is a potential writer, every student is a potential teacher. At that point, the undersized province of creative writing as it is generally defined by the Associated Writing Programs (q.v.) opens into an entire world.

UNIVERSITY CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMS

When students enroll in graduate creative writing programs, they are routinely told not to expect that their degrees will lead to teaching jobs (see “MFA” and “Creative Dissertation”). The market is glutted with qualified teachers, many of them with substantial publications, and more candidates enter each year. It is not uncommon for five hundred or more applicants to seek a single tenure-track job. Yet a great deal about graduate programs leads students to yearn for this sort of work. If nothing else, the excitement of always being around others who love reading and writing is intoxicating.

Granted, even these rare dream jobs have responsibilities. Teaching in graduate programs requires faculty to publish, to teach, to direct creative theses or dissertations. Professors whose focus is undergraduate teaching generally have fewer publishing expectations, but they are likely to have more courses per term, more committee work, and more emphasis placed on the quality of their teaching. Whatever the level of student, though, the duties of a tenure-track faculty member are more than offset by the perks—plenty of time to write, the respect accorded full-time college professors, opportunities to network with publishers and other writers, the sense that one has a position coveted by his peers.

There are three main sources for information about current college and university jobs: the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the Modern Language Association (MLA) Job Information List, and the Associated Writing Programs Job List. The *Chronicle* list (currently available at chronicle.com/jobs/100/500/2000/) has a significant advantage over the other lists. While all can be accessed online, only the *Chronicle* provides free entry into its database. Online updates occur more frequently in the *Chronicle* and MLA lists than they do in AWP; moreover, the *Chronicle* and MLA databases show positions throughout English studies, while the majority of listings in AWP are creative writing jobs. Of course, the preponderance of creative writing notices makes AWP a good source for those focusing solely on this teaching area, and sometimes potential employers will post jobs on this list and not the others.

Unfortunately, the number of full-time positions is shrinking, and the truth is that very few creative writers with either MFAs or PhDs in creative writing will ever land tenure-track jobs teaching their specialty. The odds are just too heavily stacked against them. Young writers who enter

four-year colleges and universities in the new millennium will almost certainly need to have won a prestigious book contest (q.v.); they will need connections and considerable personal charm. Otherwise, chances are that young writing teachers will begin as adjuncts (see this keyword for a full description of the challenges of temporary academic work). So what lies in store for those who have a relentless calling to teach but don't get the breaks? What avenues are there for educators outside the four-year university?

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE EXTENSION PROGRAMS

Extension programs draw their students from throughout the community. Because enrollment fees tend to be relatively inexpensive and admissions are open, the range of student skills varies enormously. Some students will already have publications and advanced degrees; others will be writing seriously for the first time in their lives. Payment to instructors varies depending on class enrollment and the prestige and funding of the program. Typically, there is no tenure for instructors, so job security is poor.

However, applicants for jobs in extension programs do not face as much competition for open positions, as teachers are normally hired from the local pool of writers. Moreover, extension programs generally offer far more creative writing courses than do English departments. The Writers' Program at UCLA, for instance, sponsors 550 creative writing courses annually, while the university proper lists only a handful of such classes for its undergraduate and graduate students. At UCLA Extension, "[a]dult learners study with professional screenwriters, fiction writers, playwrights, poets, nonfiction writers, and writers for new media who bring practical experience, theoretical knowledge, and a wide variety of teaching styles and philosophies to their traditional and virtual classrooms" (UCLA Extension n.d.).

UCLA's faculty is well trained, with prestigious publications, but faculty in smaller extension programs need not have spectacular credentials in order to find satisfying employment. Indeed, in less populous areas, extension administrators may be actively seeking qualified creative writing instructors, and someone who holds the MFA degree might find himself unexpectedly in demand.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges typically feature at least one creative writing course among their English department offerings. Normally, this course is

multigenre, with units devoted to poetry and fiction and a third section focused on either playwriting or creative nonfiction. Seniority dictates that tenured faculty members will have the first opportunity to teach these classes, but capable and diligent adjuncts are often able to pick up a section of creative writing.

The standard method of community college job hunting is to send out copies of one's curriculum vitae to as many institutions as are within reasonable driving distance. The job applicant indicates that she is able to teach a variety of writing courses, including creative writing. Many creative writers find their way into community colleges by first teaching composition courses, and some composition courses are flexible enough to allow the teaching of creative writing as part of the curriculum. Like extension classes, community college creative writing courses are open to all, so students bring a range of talents with them. Unlike extension programs, community colleges generally pay a fixed rate for each class, regardless of enrollment size.

POETS IN THE SCHOOLS

Poets in the Schools programs began in the 1960s, when the country was flush with cash and high ideals. Improbably, they have survived in many states, with New York and California maintaining the two largest programs. California Poets in the Schools (CPITS), for example, is dedicated to "1) helping students throughout California recognize and celebrate their own creativity, intuition and intellectual curiosity through the creative writing process, and 2) providing students with a multicultural community of trained, published poets who bring their experience and love for their craft into the classroom" (California Poets in the Schools n.d.). The organization claims to have taught more than half a million schoolchildren since 1964, with over one hundred thousand poems written in CPITS workshops every year. The best of those poems are collected annually in local, regional, and statewide anthologies.

Poets in the schools must be enthusiastic and able to connect well with children and teens. They often face students whose knowledge of the subject is limited to a handful of ancient anthology poems, greeting card verse, and song lyrics. Instructors, therefore, must bring considerable knowledge of their subject with them, though generally some further training is required. Normally, a teaching credential is not necessary; instead, new teachers spend time in the classroom with veteran poet-teachers before they are given classes of their own.

CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

While correspondence schools have been the subject of humorous poems by, among others, Elizabeth Bishop and Galway Kinnell, they offer a genuine service to apprentice writers who, for whatever reason, are unable to leave their homes to attend classes. *Writer's Digest* sponsors one of the oldest and most respected correspondence schools, with courses such as Fundamentals of Fiction and Novel Writing Workshop. Students submit assignments via mail, with instructors responding within two weeks to a month. Teachers typically have a solid publications record and some teaching experience, although they do not necessarily hold advanced degrees.

Online creative writing instruction is a variation on traditional correspondence courses (in fact, *Writer's Digest* now offers a selection of these courses). Reputable companies in the field include writingclasses.com, the online division of New York's Gotham Writers' Workshop, and writing-world.com, which features a variety of specialized classes that run from four to eight weeks. Among Writing-World's offerings are How to Write a Nonfiction Book Proposal, Writing the TV Spec Script, and Writing and Selling Erotica. Each week students receive lessons from instructors and respond to new assignments. Fees are more modest here than at *Writer's Digest* and writingclasses.com (\$100 per course or less as opposed to \$300 and up), but there is less competition for teaching jobs, and consequently opportunities for new teachers are greater. According to instructor Sue Lick, the fact that writing-world.com handles "all the recruiting of students and handling of fees" is a distinct advantage for teachers who are busy pursuing other employment opportunities. "The teachers are paid a large percentage of the fees, so the more students we have the more money we make" (Lick 2003).

WRITING GROUPS

For those who don't mind rounding up their own students and who prefer to work outside an institutional setting, there is always the option of placing an advertisement in the local paper. Such an ad announces that an experienced, published writer will be conducting workshops. If response to the idea of a paid workshop is poor, the group leader can always hold an abbreviated version of the workshop for free, then, assuming participants are satisfied, begin charging a fee.

Once a group is assembled, space becomes a vital issue. Meetings can be held in the group leader's home, although most teachers prefer to safeguard their privacy and meet in comfortable public spaces like

coffeehouses. Some guerilla workshop leaders even scout out free times and empty classrooms in the local university and hold their workshops there.

Unfortunately for the teacher hoping to be remunerated for his guidance, a successful writing group may well decide that it can function perfectly well without a paid leader. (Like a flourishing writing class, a thriving writing group is student- rather than teacher-centered.) Yet workshop leaders with charisma, authority, and intellect will find there are always new students seeking instruction, and the advantages of heading one's own writing group are many. Group leaders teach what they want the way they want to. They respond to their students' individual needs directly, without any institutional mediation. The group environment can be as serious or as lighthearted as the leader desires.

POETRY THERAPY

Because the teaching described in the following sections concentrates on students' self-expression and personal enrichment rather than their aesthetic development, it will not appeal to all potential teachers. According to registered poetry therapist Perie Longo, "the focus of poetry for healing is self-expression and growth of the individual whereas the focus of poetry as art is the poem itself" (2005). The National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), which confers professional credentials in the field, divides poetry therapy into two main categories. "Developmental Interactive Bibliotherapy" can be provided by trained teachers without medical or psychiatric credentials. This therapy is given to "children in schools and hospitals, adults in growth and support groups, and older persons in senior centers and nursing homes." The primary goal is to promote individual self-awareness, but the therapy may also be "used as a preventive tool in mental health." Providers of "Clinical Interactive Bibliotherapy" must have medical credentials; they use literature "to promote healing and growth in psychiatric units, community mental health centers, and chemical dependency units" (Poetry Therapy n.d.).

The work is emotionally challenging for both writer and therapist. Writers must confront painful memories if they hope to overcome them. Therapists are deeply involved in this sometimes excruciating process. And yet, as Longo notes, "the therapeutic benefit of poetry [is that] words remain forever for they are sound waves. Wherever we go, they follow us, from room to room, unconsciousness to consciousness, denial to acceptance, sorrow to joy. And hopefully to health" (2005). (For an extended discussion, see "Therapy.")

HOSPITALS

If poetry as therapy is truly beneficial as medicine, then the most obvious location for its healing to occur is in hospitals. The hospital poet-in-residence is a relatively recent phenomenon, so ideas about what the job should and shouldn't entail are ongoing. While a certified or registered poetry therapist would probably be welcome here, often no medical or counseling background is required to obtain such a position. Duties might include sharing and discussing published poems, composing and discussing original work with patients (and occasionally doctors, nurses, and staff), and giving poetry readings. Obviously, teaching methods and readings differ radically depending on the age and medical condition of the patients: children with cancer, for instance, have significantly different needs and skills than AIDS patients.

In nearly every case, however, compiling a printed record of the work created is essential. To this end, most poets-in-residence arrange for the publication of a chapbook (q.v.). As Perie Longo notes, it is important for patients "to fasten their poems down, so that when they move from place to place, they can take their poems with them to provide some continuity." (2005) Clearly, friends and relatives of patients with terminal illnesses will also cherish the work created during this time. Another popular method of "publishing" creative writing is to display it in a "poetry corridor" of the hospital. Such a space allows not just patients but doctors, nurses, and visitors to pause and reflect on the emotional effects of illness (Chatterjee n.d.).

Again, the work is intense. Teachers enter a world where pain and death are common. Fear is a constant presence. Some instructors find the scene overwhelming; the needs of medical patients are far greater—and possibly more intrusive—than those of the casual student. Yet there are few more rewarding experiences than providing someone in a life crisis with the skills to express her fears, to attempt to overcome them.

HOMELESS SHELTERS

Like hospital patients, homeless people live in a world of uncertainty. Unsure of where they will find their next meal, where they will sleep, whom they can trust, the homeless live from day to day, from moment to moment. Creative writing provides them not merely with a means of self-expression but also with a sense of stability. The words they write on the page today will still be there tomorrow.

If the words remain fixed, the writer may not. The transitory nature of their existence makes sustained creative writing instruction with the homeless problematic, to say the least. Homeless children are particularly vulnerable to the setbacks associated with frequent moving. Fortunately, there are institutions such as the T. J. Pappas School for homeless children in Phoenix, where creative writing classes, like all the school's courses, are designed to promote "inquiry, positive decision-making, effective communication, cultural appreciation, and life long learning experiences . . . to curtail homelessness" (Pappas School for the Homeless n.d.). Teachers who work with homeless writers will probably want to look for similar institutional settings, places that can provide not just classroom space but services such as food and shelter. Creative writing may sometimes feel like a life-or-death pursuit to its practitioners, but people who are truly in such a struggle must first meet their basic needs before they can begin to think seriously about writing poems and stories.

PRISONS AND JUVENILE DETENTION CENTERS

The downsides of teaching in prisons are obvious. Safety is a legitimate concern for instructors. Pay is generally at the rate for community college adjuncts—low. Some prisoners may enroll in such a class simply as a way of avoiding more onerous duties; they have no intention of taking the assignments, or the teacher, seriously. Moreover, "the primary objective of such institutions is to keep control over the inmates—their bodies, their behaviors and all information about them. The goal of many prison researchers [and teachers] is to illuminate the experience of human beings in the context of the penal institution. How can these tensions co-exist?" (Peltak n.d.). The answer is: Uneasily.

Despite these impediments, teachers who have worked with prisoners extol their desire to write. Incarcerated men and women can initially present challenging behavior problems, but they are also full of gripping stories. In *True Notebooks* (2003), Mark Salzman movingly details the year he spent teaching personal writing in the Los Angeles County Juvenile Detention Facility. Those on "the outside" can barely imagine some of the things prisoners have seen and done. Prisoners' lives are inherently dramatic, full of the raw material of unforgettable creative writing. It is the instructor's task to provide guidance, encouragement, and literary models, to tap the well-spring. To do so, though, they must confront the fact that many prisoners lack basic literacy. The translation of oral into written skills is a major obstacle in the prison creative writing class. (See Judith Tannenbaum's *Disguised*

as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin (2000) for another full account of the joys and challenges of this endeavor.)

SENIOR CENTERS

People entering the final phase of their lives have seen and heard much; they have many stories to tell. However, creative writers who work with seniors are occasionally frustrated by their unwillingness to write outside traditional boundaries: poems usually rhyme; stories often have sentimental endings. Convention (and cliché) may be hard for poets and fiction writers starting so late in life to conquer. Autobiography, on the other hand, depends on anecdotes that evoke specific people, places, smells, tastes, and sounds—the very qualities a good oral storyteller will already have at his disposal. Teachers will find seniors delighted to share their most memorable events, with other students clamoring for more details. In addition to the advantages it offers student and teacher, “life writing” is also likely to produce valuable family documents.

Senior centers are often cash strapped, so they are reluctant to hire someone who doesn't have significant experience working with their population. The best way to begin interfacing with seniors is to volunteer one's time and expertise. One or two successful gratis workshops that inspire a dedicated following may well result in steady paid work later on.