

## Teaching Philosophy

Like many of my colleagues, I teach students at both ends of the spectrum. On one end are students who are so serious about my specialty that they go on to graduate programs in creative writing; on the other end are students who would rather get a root canal than take a required rhetoric and composition course. In between are students who have an interest in writing but, once the semester ends, may never compose another poem, story, or creative nonfiction essay. How I tailor my courses to these students' disparate needs reflects not only my teaching philosophy but also the role I believe reading and writing play in our culture at large.

Approximately one-third of my teaching load is comprised of first-year composition, a course I enjoy teaching because of the challenges it presents. The majority of first-year composition students enroll in the course for the sole purpose of fulfilling a graduation requirement. What I enjoy most about teaching these courses is the opportunity to defy these students' expectations. By introducing stimulating model texts; providing in-depth critiques of student essays; designing grammar lessons that address the underlying causes of errors; providing "real-world" examples of effective and ineffective prose; and requiring a minimum of three drafts for each assignment (for a total of approximately one hundred pages per semester), I engage students in the kind of critical thinking that produces successful expository writing. It is my hope that these tools will help them throughout college and beyond, whether they end up writing dissertations, business memos, or letters to their children's teachers.

Teaching creative writing courses provides a very different kind of challenge. Unlike most composition students, creative writing students typically have an interest in and/or gift for writing. Also unlike composition students, creative writing students tend to identify personally with their writings. The result can be a highly-charged atmosphere, rife with opportunities for bruised egos. The challenge is in finding ways to encourage students without offering empty praise and to critique works without making students feel defensive. I do this by taking students step-by-step through the revision process, both with their writings and with examples from my own work; by examining model texts in the context of the authors' choices; by introducing literary terminology to serve as our common vocabulary; and by assigning writing exercises that focus less on personal feelings than on poetic techniques. Each of my students creates a final portfolio with an introductory essay. For some students, my creative writing courses mark the beginning of their literary careers; for others, these courses provide the foundation for a lifetime of reading, appreciating, and reflecting on literature.

Erin Murphy  
Associate Professor of English, Penn State Altoona