

## **A Sample Creative Writing Workshop Curriculum for High School and University Classes**

**Description:** This curriculum is based on evaluation of successful methods piloted during a workshop in June 2010 with twenty Azerbaijani women writers. During this workshop, methods which involved a social element and/or concrete objects/visuals were the most successful with the group. The activities and suggestions below are meant to offer just a short course in creative (literary) writing: Poetry, Fiction, Memoir. Teachers and individuals using this curriculum should feel free to modify it as needed and consider it simply as inspiration to develop new exercises and activities for their students. Ideally, more exercises would be included and a course in creative writing would take place over a full academic term.

### **Goals:**

- Gain deeper awareness and understanding of the contemporary genres of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction through hands-on creative practice.
- Begin to explore the processes of creative writing: free-writing, peer-review, revision, publication.
- Stretch each students' existing skill as writers in new directions.

### **Objective:**

After completing this workshop, students will have a working familiarity with the basic craft of creative writing: poetry, fiction and memoir. Students will feel comfortable trying out new writing exercises on their own. Students will have some facility in sharing their writing in a peer review workshop format.

### **Introduction of Contemporary Literature as models for writing**

Models are an important source of learning. Writers learn to write by trying out things they see others trying out. Teachers should choose contemporary poetry, fiction and memoir samples appropriate to the levels and interests of the students to read aloud together and discuss in class and even mimic. Sources for Azerbaijani contemporary poetry might be the journal *Alatoran* or the website <http://www.women-forum.net/>. Sources for world literature in translation include the journal *Xəzər* and <http://www.translit.az/>

### **The Workshop Model**

In this model of teaching creative writing, the classroom operates as a laboratory, with students experimenting with language and then sharing their experiments to receive the feedback of their peers. Based on feedback primarily from other students, the writers then revise their work and present it again. Students learn to critique others' writing, and slowly learn to bring these kinds of critique to their own writing. The Teacher models the kinds of constructive criticism to offer, and

urges students to explain their points/critiques. However, the teacher's goal is to teach the students to be the creators and critics in the classroom.

Basic workshop feedback questions: What did you like about the piece and why? What did you want to know more about and why?

More advanced feedback questions might look at specific aspects of a poem or story—how is the form or figurative language working? How are the characters/plot/setting working?

### **Part One: Poetry**

During this section, students read examples of contemporary poetry, both formal and free-verse (unrhymed); practice a variety of introductory exercises; and learn to share their work and offer feedback to others in a workshop format.

Discuss: What is a poem? How is a poem different from prose? What makes a good poem? What makes a bad poem?

#### Sample Poetry Exercises

Because traditional Azerbaijani poetry rhymes, students will often want to rhyme. While rhyme can add music to a poem, the first concern should be for content and attending to the line break as a strategy to create a contemporary form for the poem. Ask beginning students to write non-rhyming poetry.

**1) Acrostic Poem:** Students develop a poem describing themselves, in which each line begins with the letters of their first and/or last (family) names. Lines may be one word, a phrase or a sentence and should NOT rhyme. Encourage students to be playful—nonsense is fine.

Example:

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Answering to no one  
Loving her books and her chocolate  
Inside the heart beats and beats  
Yes! The world is wide and wider  
Enter the elephants

**2) Metaphor Riddles:** In this exercise, students practice creating their own figurative language. Their efforts may or may not be developed into longer poems. Students then create a poem in which they use at least one extended metaphor.

— Teacher asks students to brainstorm, and writes on board for all to see, two lists, side by side. One list is of at least ten concrete objects in the world around them (chair, mountain, fireplace, tree, pencil, television),

- the other of at least ten abstract feelings in noun form (love, joy, sadness, hate, anger, frustration, disappointment).
- Together, the class practices creating an extended metaphor, pairing one feeling word and one concrete object word. Again, go for creativity, silliness is ok.

Example: *Love* is an easy *chair*, a bit worn in the arms, and faded, a story for every hole and bit of leaky stuffing, but padded and comfortable until too much is resting in it, and the legs break.

- Students individually choose one word from each category (feeling, concrete object) and create their own extended metaphor without sharing which words they are using.
- Finally, after first removing the “feeling” word, students share their metaphors and the class tried to guess what feeling the metaphor stands for.

Example: “... an easy *chair*, a bit worn in the arms, and faded, a story for every hole and bit of leaky stuffing, but padded and comfortable until too much is resting in it, and the legs break.”

**3) Photograph Poems:** For this exercise students each bring an old family photograph from home. This may be a portrait or a snapshot from a vacation or just a photo taken at home.

Part A) Students free-write for twenty minutes (writing quickly, without stopping, without worrying about rhymes or line breaks or anything) about the photograph they brought. Who is in the photo? What is the context? Time period? Who is absent from the photo? What would you like to tell the people in the photo about their future? What else is happening in the world when the photo was taken?

Part B) Students exchange photographs without explaining anything about them and repeat the free-write exercise, this time imagining who the photo “might” depict and what their lives “might” be like and who “might” have been left out of the photograph etc.

Sharing with a partner, students read their free writes to each other and offer feedback.

Students form their free write into at least one non-rhyming poem, choosing the lines they want to include, from one or both free-writes, deciding on line breaks and form.

Workshop finished poem with entire class.

#### 4) Group poems

For this playful exercise, students will write a poem together. Each student writes the first line for a poem on a piece of paper. Then the teacher calls out “switch!” and students pass their papers to the right. Each then write the second line to the poem. Students continue to write one line each until the poem returns to the first writer (in a small class), who then revises the poem into a finished piece and shares with the class.

#### Part Two: Fiction—the short story

Using some contemporary examples, introduce story elements: character, setting, plot (problem and events). A short story is, most basically, about a character who wants something, but can’t have it because something else is in the way. In the process of trying to get what they want, something changes. It is very important to emphasize concrete writing and appealing to the reader’s 5 senses—students tend to write too abstractly when beginning.

#### Sample Fiction Exercises:

- 1) **Character:** Students bring a treasured object from home. In class, they trade objects without explaining why it is treasured. Each student takes the classmate’s object and develops detailed profiles of three different imagined characters who might have something to do with this object.

Share character descriptions and offer feedback on which is most interesting and why—students may choose to develop that character into a story.

This kind of exercise can be used to practice setting as well, using magazine pictures.

- 2) **Chain Stories:** Similar to the group poetry exercise, in this exercise the students write for about minutes, beginning a story, then pass it on to the next student, and the chain continues. It is particularly effective to work in groups of no more than six so that the first writer can also be the last and then revise the story into a cohesive whole. These are great fun and appeal to social group of students.
- 3) **The Stranger:** In this exercise, students take one of the characters and one of the settings they have developed in exercise #1 and add the sudden appearance of a stranger on the scene (for example, a young girl at a wedding party and a woman shows up claiming to be her real mother). What happens?
- 4) **Putting together Setting, Character, Plot:** For this exercise, students explore the basic skeleton of stories.

- Each student writes a specific setting (Ex: the corner of Nizami street by the meat store near the metro station) on a piece of paper, describing it as fully as possible in a 5-10 minute free write. Then the student folds the paper so that the setting is hidden and passes it to the next student.
- Each student then writes the name of a specific character they of their own making and describes this character in concrete detail (Ex: looks, clothes, activities, likes, dislikes) for 5-10 minutes. Again, fold
- Each student writes a specific thing wanted by a character (any character) such as: the love of a neighbor, a new job, to leave the country, to move out of their parents' house, to get a divorce AND what is in the way of getting that thing.

The papers are passed to a student who had nothing to do with writing the initial parts. This student then creates a story from these elements to share in workshop.

### **Part Three: Creative Non-Fiction and Memoir**

While students own lives often offer wonderful material for writing, it can be hard to come up with ideas from “real life.” The same parts that make up a fictional story operate to create a worthwhile piece of non-fiction: character, setting, problem/desire, roadblock. Because the material is often more personal, it is important that the workshop group discuss confidentiality and be especially sensitive in offering critique.

#### Sample Exercises for Non-Fiction and Memoir:

- 1) ***Childhood Memories:*** For this exercise, students brainstorm a whole range of possible topics to write about. The goal is starting to get at particular memories that will make good stories. Students can write as many answers to each question as they wish. Initially, students should write just a sentence or phrase to answer the question. Then after they have a number of memories noted, they choose one to free-write on for 10 minutes, then another, then another. Students then share their writing and offer feedback to each other about which pieces seem most interesting to continue working on.

What is your scariest memory?

What is your earliest memory?

Describe about a time you broke the rules.

Describe a time you were mean to someone else.

Describe a time someone was mean to you.

What is your best memory of your mother (or father)?

What is your worst memory of your mother (or father)?

When were you very angry?

Describe a time you wanted something badly—but didn't get it.

Think of more questions!

- 2) **Table of Contents:** For this exercise it is helpful to have a collection of short stories with particularly evocative titles (In English, *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros is a good choice). Distribute copies of a table of contents from a short story collection and read the titles of the stories aloud together. Discuss what titles, and what seems to make a good title for a story.

Students create their own table of contents from their lives, making up at least ten of their own evocative short memoir titles—but not writing the memoirs. Students share the titles, get feedback on which seem most interesting from the titles. Then, students choose one title to write about for ten minutes, then another, then another. After sharing, students choose one of the three to revise for workshop by whole class.

#### **Part Four Publication:**

Publication is an important part of the writing process. It may be as simple as a final class reading at which all the students read aloud a piece of their work to friends and family or it may be actual production of a printed journal or a website. The creation of a small class journal, or a website, to which each student contributes one piece of their best writing from the workshop can be a wonderful way to support student writing and offer a venue in which they can practice polishing and publishing—sharing their work with friends and family and participating in the larger literary world.