

Writing Your Journey

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Course Description:

Few things remind us so convincingly of the importance of writing as when we suddenly find ourselves in a new environment. Mere exposure to a new place (be it city or a country) activates senses. Ideas and observations rush in. Questions come up: why is this so? How is this different? Why do I find this unsettling? Maybe you can put these questions into a chatbot and see what happens. But a chatbot itself is not going to generate your individual human experience. THIS is the difference between doing your own thinking and asking someone to do it for you. A semester abroad is an excellent opportunity to practice the arts of self-reflection. It is also a great entry point into conversations on what writing does for us (humans) and how to think of this skill in the time of technological revolution we are currently experiencing.

This course invites you to explore history and current debates on how humans captured their experience; what role technology (such as typewriter, computer, AI) played in ways we think about the world and our place in it. It is also an opportunity to practice some of the skills professional writers have developed. This includes studying how writers across times and spaces reflected on their own crossing of boundaries, being strangers in new cultures, and how they navigated belonging to multiple communities.

It is not a conventional class, but rather a workshop that helps you, on a regular basis, learn to work with the new experience and unpack its different parts. Being away from home brings with it a plethora of feelings. Sense of cosmopolitan belonging (world citizenship) mixes with moments of solitude and estrangement.

Through regular journaling, practical observation exercises, and group and individual brainstorming and woodshedding, we will practice techniques used by non-fiction writers. The course is not primarily aimed at preparation of future writers – although, maybe you want to be one. Here, our primary goal is to use writing to help you navigate your own sense of belonging, interpretation of new experience, and having feet on the ground in a world that seems to be constantly in flux.

Style of Instructions:

The course is focused on strengthening skills. This means that while you will be gaining new knowledge (as is expected in classrooms), you will also be practicing what you have learned every single week. The goal is not to become a professional writer in twelve weeks. Instead, we are aiming for improved understanding of the different parts of the writing process (including background research, observation, interviews, drafting and reviewing) and how they matter for us as individuals and societies we live in.

You are most likely to benefit from this course if you enjoy reading and have already experimented with writing different genres. If you have so far worked on your writing only or mainly because it was a course requirement, this class is probably not a good match. If you occasionally write but do not really enjoy reading, please also think twice about taking this class. Most people whose writing I respect told me that reading a lot – voluntarily and often – is the best prerequisite for becoming friends with writing.

If you already are a skilled reader and writer, you probably know that writing works only if you have something to write about. Of course, occasional writing block (lack of ideas, inability to express them) happens from time to time even to very experienced authors. But as a golden (or silver, if you prefer) rule – you are likely to find this class useful if you are interested in the world, or parts of it. We will work on skills such as how to become a better observer, how to do thorough background research, how to move from the first draft to the one you actually want to publish. But curiosity and questions are something you already have at the moment of registration.

Novelty, being and feeling new in a particular place, is always a good starting point for rediscovering your own relationship with the world. Reflecting on your own experience is, however, much more convincing if it goes hand in hand with describing and commenting on events and ideas that live ‘outside your head.’

Grammar, punctuation, style, vocabulary – all of these are very important and if you want to be a professional writer, work on them. Be serious about them. In fact, there is no such thing as a strict separation of form and content (ideas you are conveying). Style is a vehicle – and we take different vehicles to cover different distances. Style and content are mutually reinforcing – your very important message can get completely lost if it is communicated in a way that abounds with spelling and syntax errors. A potentially interesting discovery might never reach a wider audience if it is presented in an off-putting style that bores or antagonizes your reader.

So, do work on your style and do learn the rules of grammar in a language in which you want to write. That said, the emphasis in this course (i.e., primary focus) is on creativity. We will explore how ideas, facts and observations come together to create interesting stories.

In short: this course helps you become a more perceptive observer (one who can see nuances between either/or), a more thorough researcher (one who knows where to look for background information), and a more connected writer (one able to build the plot/flow) in a way that speaks to the reader in a language they can understand.

The class meets once a week. Every session includes an interactive lecture presenting an angle from which one can think about the writing craft. We will talk about courage, surprise, identity. Every session includes exercises specifically aimed at training parts of the writing process – such as note-taking, observation, background research, evaluation of veracity. Every session expects you to show up ready to take some (or many – it is up to you) steps toward learning objectives specified below.

Learning Outcomes:

- Improved ability to describe your experience and express your ideas
- Becoming a more perceptive observer – one that can see nuances between either/or
- Better understanding of the variety of methods and techniques used in non-fiction writing
- Stronger orientation skills in new environment – navigating novelty while cultivating a stronger sense of one's own place in the complex flows of events and information
- Training of soft skills including intercultural competence and communication (this includes practice of peer review – providing feedback on your colleagues' writing)
- Comprehension of the relationship between technological developments that have shaped communication and writing profession (pen, typewriter, computer, AI)
- Locating the difference between the human and the artificial/automated

Assignments and Grading:

The assignments in this course strengthen your ability to comprehend how writing has shaped human experience and enhance a variety of practical skills. Your final course grade consists of the following components:

10% Short journal entries

In weeks 2–10 you will receive writing prompts that will help you reflect on the course material. Your journal entries (5 in total) will be 500–600 words, written in full sentences (not bullet points) and, in case the type of text requires it, properly referenced.

30% Midterm presentation and report

This presentation will elaborate on one of the themes in your weekly journal. You will give a talk of 5–10 minutes and submit a draft essay of 1200–1500 words. The essay will trace the process of how you prepared your presentation. Think of it as a preliminary report on your intellectual journey.

30% Final presentation and report

Your final presentation will develop one of the themes discussed in the second part of the semester. As with the midterm, you will also submit a report, something like a research journal, that will explain your thinking on the project, steps you took along the way, detours, and moments of hesitation. The main goal here is not to submit a polished piece of text, a final essay. Instead, you are expected to carefully document your research/thinking journey.

Word count: 3000 words

30% Class participation

Making relevant points in class discussions, taking initiative, showing familiarity with required reading, providing feedback on the work of your colleagues. Throughout the semester, familiarity with required reading will be tested by quizzes. Quizzes will not be announced in advance.

General note on grades:

Every assignment has its individual grading criteria. In terms of final grades, this is what to expect:

- **A grades** – You show initiative and motivation, submit assignments in excellent quality and on time. You do not miss classes and, when in class, you do more than showing your own knowledge – you act as a supportive and respectful teammate. You make it very clear that your interest in course topics and assignments is serious. When you run into problems, you consult your instructor.
- **B, C, D, E, F grades** – Your work in course and attitude shows less or none of the qualities described above. For details see the AEP grading scale.

Grading Policy:

Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1

CEE Introductory Lecture Series

AEP Introductory Lecture Series

Week 2

On Being New

How do you know that you have come to a new place? What is it that you notice and how does writing first thoughts down help you make sense of this experience? Is there a difference between writing 'at home' and writing on the move? What is it that makes us want to report on new things we see (and new selves we discover along the path)?

Reading:

- Georg Simmel, The Stranger. In: Simmel, On Individuality and Social Forms, University of Chicago Press 1971 [1908], pp. 143-149.
- Annie Dillard, Advice for Young Writers, In Fact: The Best of Creative Non-fiction available online at <https://crea.venonfic.on.org/product/in-fact/>
- William Zinsser, Writing for the Wrong Reasons, Zinsser on Friday, June 3, 2011, <https://theamericanscholar.org/wri.ng-for-the-wrong-reasons/>

Week 3

Notebook, typewriter and other companions

Have you ever noticed that thoughts flow differently depending on how you record them? A pencil and paper notebook provide an invitation, and so does a typewriter, computer and the latter's new additions, that usually go under the acronym of AI. This week we'll take a fast track through history of writing and how writing practices have been changing hand in hand with new technology. We'll take a bird's eye view and then keep coming back to nuances (and practical experience) throughout the semester.

Reading:

- Roland Allen, *The Notebook: A History of Thinking on Paper*. Biblioasis, 2024, pp. xx.
- Martyn Lyons, How the Typewriter Influenced Writing Practice, *Quarendo* 44(2014), pp. 219-240.
- Ellen Glover, What is the Eliza Effect?, Built In, July 14, 2023
- <https://builtin.com/artificial-intelligence/eliza-effect>
- Matt Galloway & guests, Will AI Make Us Better Writers?, May 14, 2025
<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-63-the-current/clip/16146279-will-ai-better-writers-or-kill-critical-thinking>

Week 4

The Arts of Observation - On Being a Citizen of the world.

We interpret the world through a unique set of lenses. Your journey to a remote island or a next-door neighborhood in our common city will be different than mine. What happens in us when we observe the world (street, maps, news)? Why is my story going to be different than John's? And how to explain that as humans we connect to and are moved by stories penned by writers coming from very different walks of life?

Reading:

- Johnny Pitts, *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe*. Penguin, 2019, pp. 52-63 (on being a flaneur); pp. 85-100 (Brussels, Matonge - my tribe & nomads); pp. 268 -282 (Moscow, Pushkin and could not wait to leave).
- Howard Becker, "On Learning to Observe in Chicago" In Becker, *Here And There: A Collection of Writings*, San Francisco: Wise Guy Press, pp. 19-39.
- William Zinsser, "Writing About Places", *On Writing Well*, pp. 116-132

Week 5

Surprises and civilizations

Writing is one of the foundations of a thing we sometimes call civilization (or culture). Through writing, we learn how ancestors lived, what they did. Writing helps us record dreams – what do we want to do? How we want our world(s) to look like? Dreamers (world-makers) can sometimes get startled when meeting something they have not quite thought about. What exactly happens when we encounter a culture that ticks in a different rhythm than ours? Psychologists speak of ‘culture shock’, in this class we will work with the term ‘surprise’. What exactly constitutes civilization/culture and what happens in us when we encounter a new one? Is sedentary more ‘cultured’ than nomadic?

Reading:

- Sharika Thiranagama, Tobias Kelly and Carlos Forment, Introduction: Whose civility? *Anthropological Theory* Vol 18, No. 2-3(2018): pp. 153-174.
- Eluned Summers-Bremner, Astray: A History of Wandering, Reaktion Books, 2023, Ch3 (Others) pp. 82-124
- Emily Bender, Eamon Costello, Kyungmee Lee, Robert Farrow, Giselle Ferreira, Unsafe AI for Education: A Conversation on Stochastic Parrots and Other Learning Metaphors, *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2025 (1), <https://jime.open.ac.uk/articles/10.5334/jime.1079>

Week 6

Walking, Writing, Thinking

What does walking do to the way we think? What (can) happen if your motivation to walk goes beyond getting those 10,000 steps in? Is walking subversive, or just healthy? This week will not be our first encounter with walking and writing, as we will have already had conducted a number of observations and improvisations outdoors. This week we will try to organize what we already know about connections between these two processes (walking and writing) and get ready for discoveries that await us in the second part of the semester.

Reading:

- Ben Jacks, Reimagining Walking: Four Practices. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2004, 57(3): 5-9.
- Craig Mod, Things Become Other Things: A Walking Memoir (excerpts).
- Short excerpts of Mod's book in the Marginalian:
<https://www.themarginalian.org/2025/08/09/things-become-other-things-craig-mod/>

- Michel de Certeau, Walking in the City. In: de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 2011), pp. Xx
- Bijan Stephen, In Praise of the Flaneur, *The Paris Review Blog*, October 17, 2013.
<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/10/17/in-praise-of-the-flaneur/>

Week 7

Midterm workshop: presentation of own work-in-progress.

This week we will focus on your own work-in-progress. You will present your texts, drafts and research journeys and receive feedback from lecturer and from each other. Getting feedback is an important part of the writing and research process. You will see how your ideas resonate with your readers and get new impulses on which steps to take next.

More than that – working with feedback is a really helpful skill to have and not just in the professional realm of writing. I believe it is very important to learn to both receive and provide feedback. If we are closed to others' inputs and perspectives, it can limit growth of our work. If the way we react to others' work lacks basic appreciation of the effort they put in, if we do not invest enough time and energy into understanding before we critique, we risk that even the most well-meant advice will not be heard.

Of course, others' perspectives on our work are not the main determinant of its quality – certainly not all of them. Here, you will be in a group of people with similar goals and interests, hence, it is a great opportunity to train feedback skills.

Detailed instructions on this week will be available in the Moodle.

Week 8

Writing on beauty. Reporting aesthetic experience, creating beautiful words

We can write to capture beauty, to preserve it, to report about something we have seen, heard, experienced. We can also write to create such an experience for others. What is the difference between 'describing beauty' and 'creating beauty'? How and when do these two overlap?

Reading:

- Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1998, pp. 1-38
- Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," In: *On Photography*. Penguin, 1977, pp. 3-24.
- Martha McPhee, *Why I Still Carry a Notebook Everywhere*, *New York Times*, April 3, 2020
<https://www.ny.mes.com/wirecutter/blog/carry-a-notebook-everywhere/>

Week 9

Listening to the architectures – what does the space invite us to do?

Spaces can serve all kinds of practical purposes. A park is for recreation, a street is for rushing to work. Open-space offices and cubicles are for ... I am not sure what. This week we will work with our experience moving around various natural and human-made places. We will study philosophy of spaces and experience/observe our own feelings that arise while we think, sit, walk and write in a particular place.

Reading:

- Constantinos Doxiadis, *Ecumenopolis: Tomorrow's City*. Britannica Book of the Year 1968, pp. 1-34.
- Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 1998, pp. 39-85.
- Kevin Lynch, *What is the Form of a City and How is it Made?* In: Maryluff et al (eds) (2008) *Urban Ecology*, pp. 677-690.

Week 10

Courage

Do we need courage to put words on a page? Is there such a thing as writing that does not unsettle, a writing that does not take risks? This week we will explore the question of courage. The most obvious lens to approach the question would be to talk about independent reporting and the way it is threatened by authoritarian governments and non-state actors. This matters tremendously and we will talk about it. The key angle for this week is however not political – it is rather a one of personal boundaries and readiness to share – or enter into realms which are way beyond the comfort zone. What happens if we write outside of the comfort zone?

Reading:

- Haruki Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (Vintage: London, 2009) pp.
- Vanda Vrástí. "Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Methodology and Love Writing ". *Millenium – Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (2010): 79-88.
- Francesco Vietti, Unexpected Encounters: Migrants and Tourists in the Mediterranean. Berghahn, 2024. Chapter Six: Migrantour Stories. Pp. 217-247, Available open access at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.13568113.11?seq=1>
- Mark Coddington and Seth Lewis, The 11 Types of Relationships That journalists Have With Audiences, *Nieman Lab*, September 8, 2025
<https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/09/the-11-types-of-relaWonships-that-journalists-have-witha udience/>

Week 11

Fiction, Fantasy – (How) Is it different from writing the stuff that 'really' happened?

The boundaries between fiction and non-fiction seem to be clearly set. Libraries and bookstores categorize their collections according to this marker. And yet, there are a few things fiction and non-fiction share. Sometimes, they even switch places: the 'made up' shines more light on facts of our everyday lives. The 'real' can be more soothing than a novel or a poem.

Reading:

- Zadie Smith, Dance Lessons for Writers. In *Feel Free* (Penguin, 2018), pp. 136-148.
- Jenny Edkins, "Novel Writing in International Relations: Opening for a creative practice." *Security Dialogue* 44(4): 281-297.
- Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust*, pp. xx

Week 12

Performance, impressions, genres

By now we have learned about (and practiced) different styles of writing. We are already aware of the existence of genres, audiences, and matches between vocabularies and audiences. The task for this week is to better understand notions of performance, as-if, simulations, pretense – and rhetorical strategies of calling them out. Our lives, for good reasons, are a combination of scripts and spontaneous reactions. This week's sessions will be an opportunity to look at the difference between the two, and how the difference appears in writing.

Reading:

- Guy Debord and the Situationists
<https://situationist.org/collective/demanding-the-impossible/guy-debord-and-the-situationists>
- Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar", *New German Critique* Spring 1979 No. 17 pp. 65-69.
- Erving Goffman, "Performances" in Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (University of Edinburgh, 1956), pp. 10-46.

Week 13

Final workshop / presentations of own work

Our final week will have similar structure as the midterm workshop. We will discuss your writing, wrap-up key points from the second half of the semester and close this final session of the course full of inspiration and energy to jump into our next writing assignments. Detailed instructions on how to prepare for the workshop will be available in the Moodle.