

Writing Your Journey

Lecturer: Lucia Najšlová, Ph.D.

Fall 2026

Monday 15:30 – 18:30

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, city or a country activates senses. Questions rush in: 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 bot cannot know your unique story, only you do. A semester abroad is an opportunity to practice the arts of self-reflection. It also is one of the most obvious ways to see the difference between doing your own thinking and having someone do it for you. It is also a great entry point into conversations on what writing does for humans and how this skill matters in our current technological revolution.

This course invites you to study past and present debates on how humans recorded their experience and the role of technology – such as typewriter, computer, AI – played in ways we think about the world and our place in it. You will also have an opportunity to develop some of the skills essential for professional writers. We will discuss how writers across times and spaces thought about boundaries they crossed, sense of strangeness they experienced 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, engage with new experience and unpack its different parts. Being away from home comes along with a plethora of feelings; sense of cosmopolitan belonging mixes with moments of solitude and estrangement. Through journaling, observation exercises, and group and individual brainstorming, we will practice techniques used by non-fiction writers. The course is not primarily designed as preparation of future writers. Our goal is to explore ways in which writing helps humans navigate their sense of belonging, interpret new experience, and having feet on the ground in a world that seems to be constantly in flux.

Style of Instruction:

The course strengthens your skills. This means that while you will gain new knowledge, you will also be practicing what you have learned. The goal is not to become a professional writer in twelve weeks, someone well-versed in all the tricks of the craft. Instead, the emphasis is on developing a better understanding of what the writing process does for you as a human. Under writing process, imagine, for example: noticing interesting things; trying to make sense of emotions and cognition that come to work as we observe the world; doing research, interviews, moving from the first draft to the one you actually want others to read; reflecting on the process and how it matters 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 outside of classroom assignments. If you occasionally write but do not really enjoy reading, this class might not be a good match. 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. To have that, you should be interested in the world, or parts of it. Curiosity and questions are something you already have at the moment of registration. Of course, occasional writing block – caused for example by lack of ideas or inability to express them – happens from time to time even to experienced authors. Such blocks are temporary and there are strategies to overcome them.

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 even more compelling if paired with effort to understand events and ideas that live ‘outside your head.’

Grammar, punctuation, style, vocabulary are all important and if you want to be a professional writer, treat them seriously. There is no such thing as a strict separation of form and content. Style is a vehicle and we take different vehicles to cover different distances. Style and content are mutually reinforcing. Important messages can get lost due to spelling and grammar errors. An interesting discovery might never reach a wider audience if you present it in a boring or off-putting style.

As we will explore how ideas, facts and observations come together to build interesting stories, we will prioritize drivers of imagination over techniques that help us create a polished output. This course helps you become a more perceptive observer, 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. On some weeks, we will take a field trip or welcome a guest lecturer, an experienced writer. Most weeks we will have in-class exercises that develop specific writing skills, such as note-taking, observation, background research, evaluation of veracity.

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this course, you (students) should demonstrate:

- Enhanced ability to describe your experience and express your ideas
- Being a more perceptive observer, a one who can recognize nuances between binary choices
- Deeper understanding of the variety of methods and techniques used in non-fiction writing
- Stronger orientation skills in new environment, enabling you to navigate novelty while cultivating a stronger sense of your own place in the complex flows of events and information
- Soft skills including intercultural competence and communication, which involves practicing peer review / providing feedback on writing of your fellow students
- Comprehension of the relationship between technological developments that have shaped the fields of communication and writing – such as the pen, typewriter, computer and AI
- Greater sensitivity to distinguishing between human and artificial/automated processes

Assignments and Grading:

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

40 % Class participation and short writing assignments

This part of your coursework includes in-class activities, short in-class writing assignments and homework (including journal entries). In-class participation entails making relevant contributions during class discussions, taking initiative, showing familiarity with the required readings and providing constructive feedback on your colleagues' work. The short writing assignments throughout the semester are an opportunity to practice and deepen your understanding of the material studied. Some prompts are based on readings for specific weeks; the goal is to help you connect your individual experience and perspective with knowledge and insight gained from other writers. Homework assignments consist of a series of journal entries. You are required to complete at least six journal entries, each 300-500 words long, written in full sentences rather than bullet points. These entries will primarily reflect your own experience, they are not meant to be a review of academic literature. However, if your reflection sends you to conversation with other authors, please include references.

30% Midterm presentation and exploratory research report (intellectual itinerary)

This assignment will elaborate on one of the themes in your weekly journal. You will give a talk lasting 5–10 minutes and submit a draft essay of 1,200–1,500 words including references. The report/essay will trace the process you followed to prepare your presentation. You are not expected to submit a polished essay; instead, think of it as an itinerary of your intellectual journey.

30% Final presentation and article research design

Your final project is a research design for an article you would like to write in the future. You will identify a question or issue that is important to your audience and propose ways of gathering sources. These could include reading memoirs, interviewing people, analyzing documents, etc. You will also reflect on the practical viability of your work, such as accessibility of sources, and also ethical implications of collecting, analyzing, and publishing information. You will give a talk lasting 5-10 minutes and submit a report that will explain your thinking on the project, including the steps you took along the way, any detours, and moments of hesitation. The main goal here is not to submit a polished piece of text or a final essay. Instead, you are expected to carefully document your research and thinking journey. The word count is 1,500 words.

Detailed instructions will be provided in class.

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:

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

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.

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

September 21, 2026

How do you know that you have come to a new place? What is it that you notice? How does writing down first thoughts help you make sense of this experience? Is there a difference between writing at home and writing on the move? What 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://imagejournal.org/article/notes-for-young-writers/>
- 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

September 28, 2026

Have you ever noticed that thoughts flow differently depending on how you record them? A pencil and paper notebook provide an invitation to express yourself, and so does a typewriter, a 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. We'll take a bird's eye view on how writing practices have evolved with new technologies, a theme that will remain of interest for the rest of the semester.

Reading:

- Roland Allen, *The Notebook: A History of Thinking on Paper*. Biblioasis, 2024, Chapter 12, pp. 157-164.
- 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-kil-critical-thinking>
- Jill Lepore, "Automated Authorship that Predates Chat GPT," *The New Yorker*, May 25, 2026, 7p.

Week 4

The arts of observation / On being a citizen of the world.

October 5, 2026

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); pp. 268 -282 (Moscow, Pushkin).
- 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

October 12, 2026

Writing is one of the foundations of a thing we sometimes call culture. Through writing, we learn how our ancestors lived. Writing helps us record dreams; what do we want to do? How do 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 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, Chapter 3 (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>
- Nordquist, Richard. "Of Travel by Francis Bacon." *ThoughtCo*, April 15, 2025, [thoughtco.com/of-travel-by-francis-bacon-1690071](https://www.thoughtco.com/of-travel-by-francis-bacon-1690071)

Week 6

Walking, writing, thinking

October 19, 2026

What does walking do to the way we think? What can happen if your motivation to walk transcends the goal of those 10 000 steps? This week is not our first encounter with walking and writing, as we have already conducted a number of observations outdoors. Our task now is to organize what we already know about connections between these two processes and get ready for discoveries that await us in the second part of the semester.

Reading:

- Roland Allen, *The Notebook*, Chapter 14, pp.173-191.
- Ben Jacks, Reimagining Walking: Four Practices, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2004, 57(3): 5-9.

- Virginia Woolf, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure", *The Yale Review*, Autumn 1927.
- Short excerpts from Craig Mod's book *Things Become Other Things: A Walking Memoir* :
<https://www.themarginalian.org/2025/08/09/things-become-other-things-craig-mod/>
- 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 your work-in-progress.

October 26, 2026

This week we will focus on your own work-in-progress. You will present your intellectual itineraries and receive feedback from lecturer and from each other. Detailed instructions on this week will be available in the Moodle.

Note: AEP Semester break is scheduled for November 2-6, 2026. Classes do not meet during the semester break.

Week 8

Writing on beauty. Reporting aesthetic experience, creating beautiful words.

November 9, 2026

We can write to capture beauty, to preserve it, to report about something we have seen or heard. 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?

November 16, 2026

Spaces serve all kinds of practical purposes. A park is for recreation, a street is for rushing to work. This week's task is to reflect on experience – emotional and cognitive – that comes to us when we sit, walk or write in a particular setting. We will also practice techniques that help us grasp spaces and places for audiences.

Reading:

- Allen, *The Notebook*, Chapter 22, pp. 284-294.
- 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

November 23, 2026

It takes courage to write about things that matter. For centuries, scientists, journalists and other authors were persecuted by powers, who felt threatened by their knowledge and discoveries. But politics is not the only obstacle to bringing stories to life. Our comfort zones can be just as limiting.

Reading:

- Haruki Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (Vintage: London, 2009) pp.3-23.
- Zadie Smith, Art for Our Sakes, *The New York Review of Books*, June 11, 2026.
- Vanda Vradi, "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-relationships-that-journalists-have-with-audience/>
- Corina Stan, "George Orwell's Critique of Sincerity and the Obligation of Tactlessness", in Stan, *The Art of Distances* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), pp. 33-67.

Week 11

Fiction and fantasy: (How) is it different from writing the stuff that 'really' happened?

November 30, 2026

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 Smith, *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: A History of Walking* (Penguin, New York, 2000), Chapter 1, pp. 1-5
- George Orwell, "Why I Write", *Gangrel*, No. 4, Summer 1946.
<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write/>

Week 12

Frames, structures, performance, impressions, genres

December 7, 2026

By now we have learned about and practiced different styles of writing. We are already aware of the existence of genres, audiences, and vocabularies that go with them. The task for this week is to better understand notions of performance, simulations, pretense. This will help us make better sense of structure of good writing. We will explore differences between scripts (formalities) and spontaneous reactions and talk about essential and redundant parts of compositions.

Reading:

- John McPhee, Structure, In: McPhee, *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017), pp. 17-62.
- William Zinsser, "Writing Family History: How to tell a story for generations to come", *The Writer*, July 2006, pp. 14-18.
- John McPhee, "Frame of Reference", In: McPhee, *Draft No. 4*, pp. 115-127.
- Guy Debord and the Situationists
<https://situaonist.org/collection/demanding-the-impossible/guy-debord-and-thesituationists>
- Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar", *New German Critique* Spring 1979 No. 17 pp. 65-69.
- Erwing Goffman, "Performances" in Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (University of Edinburgh, 1956), pp. 10-46.

Week 13

Final workshop and presentations

December 14, 2026

Our final session will have similar structure as the midterm workshop. Will discuss your writing, wrap-up key points from the second half of the semester, and hopefully emerge with a wealth of inspiration for further work. Detailed instructions on final assignment (article research design) and preparation for the workshop will be provided in class and available in the Moodle.