

WRITING LIVES WRITING LIVES

A generative CNF¹ writing workshop & salon for grownups
6 sessions, Wednesdays, 4 to 6 pm. Begins Sep 15

Let's read the title of this seminar a few different ways, with "lives" as either a noun (n) or verb (v):

Writing lives (n) in writing that lives (v)

Writing your lives (n) for writing lives (n)

Writing lives (v) in your writing lives (n)

Abstract (or something akin)

The most exciting prospect for this Jenks chair occupant is to engage with really, really smart grownups, experts in many fields. It's also the most enervating aspect of job responsibility, since I claim no expertise except as a wordsmith who articulates the personal by attempting to transform it into something akin to art.

This seminar is something akin to a creative writing workshop & literary salon. It will be led by Professor Chaos², my avatar, resurrected. And what this seminar invites you to do is allow a little chaos into your lives by writing CNF memoir.

Why write? Isn't your research and writing more than enough for one lifetime? Do you really need to delve into the personal to say something about who you are and what you know, whether about family culture and the professor, the philosophy of global capitalism, classics for dummies or sustainable liberal arts in the crypt of digital life? Etc., etc. & so forth. Why does the rest of your life matter? Why does the "I" matter? Does your private life need, or even deserve, memoir?

In this seminar, you'll respond to writing prompts during our sessions which you'll share orally. Your in-session writing is the beginnings of your writing assignments (yes, Prof. Chaos assigns homework). These assignments will be "workshopped" to help you discover the effect of your creative work. Some reading will also be provided.



Xu Xi 許素細 *a.k.a.* Prof. Chaos

¹ CNF = creative nonfiction, also sometimes referred to as literary nonfiction or life writing.

² See "South Park" archives: [https://southpark.fandom.com/wiki/Professor_Chaos_\(character\)](https://southpark.fandom.com/wiki/Professor_Chaos_(character))

Seminar schedule

WED	Topic	What we'll do
Sep 15	Defining CNF: Who are you and what is it you want to say about your live(s)? What is or what could your creative writing life be about?	Writing prompts about the who in your CNF. Oral sharing of your work. Writing assignments due by 7 pm Sunday Sep 26.
Sep 29	Workshop & discussion of excerpts of writing assignments.	Guided discussion.
	More definitions: the what & where of your writing.	Writing prompts about the what & where of your CNF. Oral sharing. Writing assignments due by 7 pm Sunday Oct 10. Reading assignment will be provided for the fall break.
Oct 20	Workshop & discussion of excerpts of writing assignments.	Guided discussion.
	Forms of CNF: Discussion of reading assignment.	Writing prompts to experiment with various forms of CNF. Oral sharing. Writing assignments due by 7 pm Sunday Oct 31. Halloween reprieve.
Nov 3	Workshop & discussion of excerpts of writing assignments.	Guided discussion.
	Even more definitions: the how and why of your CNF.	Writing prompts to explore <i>your</i> best form(s) and why. Oral sharing. Writing assignments due by 7 pm Sunday Nov 14.
Nov 17	Workshop & discussion of excerpts of writing assignments.	Guided discussion.
	Figuring out the why of your CNF.	Last writing prompts to think about why you write. Oral sharing. Post-Thanksgiving wind down: no assignment to turn in!
Dec 8	The Salon. How writers celebrate.	Everyone gives a reading! An informal roundtable with wine & hors d'oeuvres.

Writing Assignments and Workshopping

The writing workshop gets a bad rap as critique sessions where we “tear apart the writer” through savage criticism. Although some writers probably deserve to be silenced, this is *not* what we’ll do in this seminar where we want writing to live and remain alive.

Instead, what we aim for in “workshopping” another writer’s work is to try to understand what the writer is trying to say. As *artificially* close readers, we feedback to the writer what we understand to be their meaning, as well as what we perceive they’re attempting to do through their writing. Is the writer trying to recount a personally traumatic event in their past? Does the writer wish to illustrate, through humor, the global history of the corkscrew? Has the writer researched their family genealogy in order to tell the story of a lesbian great grandaunt who lived a century ago in Mongolia? Is the writer trying to explain a problem in advanced mathematics for the lay reader?

We also try to feedback how *effectively* this come across by telling the writer what works and what doesn’t quite work. So we might say, for instance, that this paragraph gives us a very strong feeling for place because the specific details about the streets and houses are evocative and visual, and point to examples. Alternatively, another passage may not quite evoke the physicality of a person portrayed, because descriptions such as “beautiful” or “tall” are vague, whereas “she was our family’s beauty queen every female relative tried to emulate” or “at six foot six, he towered over all his cousins” offer a more vivid picture.

Most of all, we read with *empathy* for another writer’s personal experience, story, passion or research, etc., by trying to understand what it is the writer wishes to articulate, and why. In the abovementioned paragraph about meaning, it would be helpful for readers to know, for example, that they’ve never written about the trauma till now, or that the corkscrew history originated with an alcoholic friend or relative who was funny when drunk, or that the great grandaunt was removed from the family’s genealogical chart by her embarrassed husband, or that the math problem was the writer’s PhD dissertation that another scholar tried to plagiarize. Etc.

Each session, you’ll write in response to prompts that help to exercise your creative muscles, and share a little of that orally. The assignments will be more fleshed out or revised versions of the in-session writing and turned in 10 days later on a Sunday. Excerpts from these assignments will be compiled by Monday into a single document and emailed to everyone to read before Wednesday when we’ll discuss them.

Some readings from modern and contemporary CNF literature will be provided as possible models for your own writing, as well as articles about writing craft.

We’ll have fun.