

9/9/20

Dear Students,

Welcome to your English class. I hope you'll feel a deep sense of belonging in our classrooms—physical and virtual—that they will become spaces you can depend on for peace and inspiration. I'd like to tell you a little about myself generally and recently, my writing life and my goals for this course, and then ask you to do the same.

This is my 14th year at WHS, after spending the previous 4 teaching in public schools in New York State and Boston, and a New Mexico juvenile correctional facility. I grew up outside Philadelphia, and later studied at Vassar and Middlebury Colleges, and at the Rainier Writers Workshop. I live with my wife and 3 kids—Ella 8, Olive 6, Warren 3—in Holliston, and my favorite hobbies are outdoorsy activities with them, cooking and tennis. I am also one of the tennis coaches here.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected everyone's lives significantly. For me I'm thankful it didn't impact the kinds of things I like to do in the summer too much, but the switch to remote learning last spring was a shock to the system, so I really needed that summer to recover. I tend to run away from technology, so the school situation last spring that required its continuous and exclusive use was really stressful, as was the intermingling of work and family life—the physical separation of which is normally my most effective means of emotional balance. A more particular blow came recently, when I found out WHS Child Lab would not open this year. Both my older daughters went through that program, and it was so special having them come to school with me every day that the prospect of sharing the school with my son for the next two years was what I most looked forward to—no luck, but hopefully next year.

But the other source of inspiration I get every September is still there—you. I'm counting on your energy and excitement, as I know you're counting on mine. The cliché now is “we're all in this together”—but in this class it's more than that. We are fueling each other—we are sharing nourishment of the mind and the heart.

In addition to being a teacher and father, I also identify as a writer—more specifically a poet. This is a struggle for me, because while I believe I'm strong writer and have even published 8 poems in journals I would consider respectable, I haven't made a regular writing routine—and thus haven't produced much—in the last 6 years. So I sometimes feel like a failure. Nothing makes me feel more fulfilled, when I do it, than sitting down and at least trying to write for an hour or two a day—I got back into this groove for a couple weeks last year, but then slipped out. I think I'm good at starting pieces, but not at ending them; I'm good at making language engaging and clear, and making my lived situations sound entertaining; but I'm not good at breaking free of the first person, of taking up conflict beyond my personal experience. I'm a good editor. Part of why I enjoy teaching this course is that it forces me—I don't want to be a hypocrite—to complete many of the assignments with you, and this is good for my soul.

I'd like you, too, to identify as a writer, as an artist, even if you never have before. I know you have engaging stories to tell, authentic conflicts to fuel them, vivid language that will make them feel surprising—I will help you discover these matters within you, and the tools to

let them emerge. I believe seeing oneself as a writer also transforms one's *reading* experiences (see appendix).

Why study literature and writing? My teaching philosophy is threefold: 1) If we read carefully enough, there are valuable lessons in literature about ourselves as human beings; 2) Great storytellers, essayists, memoirists, playwrights and poets show us all we need to know about *how to write*; 3) Attention to both of these truths increases the likelihood we'll experience happy and fulfilling lives.

Let me explain that last one some more. In his book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, former Yale professor and admissions officer William Deresiewicz laments how our educational system has overemphasized quantifiable measures of success (i.e. grades and money) to the detriment of learning; he cites the consensus among studies that show no correlation between income increase and increased human happiness—excepting the need for adequate baseline income to keep you from struggling. Those same studies show that what does increase human happiness are 2 things: meaningful work, and meaningful connections to other people.

What does this have to do with English class? 1) The intellectual and emotional demands of reading and discussing literature—and writing our own—train us to think, to doubt, to self-examine, to communicate between the mind and the heart. If through these means we come to better know ourselves, we're much more likely to find our calling in life. 2) Literature is as good a resource as any for understanding the complex ways in which other people think and feel. And that prepares us for the second source of sustainable happiness: meaningful connections to other people.

Race is a particular aspect of our identities literature and writing can help us understand, and the critical thinking skills we practice in their study will help us interrupt and dismantle systemic racism. Social justice has long had a place in the English curriculum, but the recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd and other assaults on black lives have shown us the extent to which we need to focus on it. Much of my nonfiction summer reading focused on how to talk about race and how to practice antiracism, and I am committed to practicing what I've learned, and learning more with you, so that we can change our broken institutions.

In addition to what I've summarized, I hope you'll find your own, unique ways to make your work in this class meaningful.

Please write me a letter addressing all the following, but in any order:

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself, whatever you'd like me to know. If you'd like to include a note about how the pandemic has affected you—like I did—please do, but if you're tired of reflecting on that you don't have to.
- 2) What do you think are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer? These can pertain to any writing genre or purpose—creative, analytical, etc.
- 3) What are your goals for this course? What do you hope to learn? What would you like to practice? How would you like to grow? In what ways would you like to be challenged?

Best,
A. Bennett

Appendix: Traditional Syllabus

Traditionally, a teacher provides a syllabus that outlines key information about course content, policies and procedures—but this is not a traditional year. Some of these topics I’ve covered in the above letter, some I’ll describe below, and some I can’t describe with adequate certainty due to the many unknowns this school year presents. Here’s what I can share with confidence...

Contact: bennetta@wellesleyps.org

Office hours: For the time being, these will be by appointment and probably by Zoom. Just email to schedule a time. If in-person office hours become feasible in the hybrid schedule, I’ll update you on my drop-in availability.

Skills practiced in this course:

You will engage in two modes of reading and writing throughout the year, *Reading as Writers* and *Writing as Readers*.

Mode	Reading as Writers	Writing as Readers
Essential Question	What can we learn from good storytellers about how to tell our own stories?	What can the study of good stories tell us about ourselves as human beings?
Style of Pursuit	Artistic	Scholarly
Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•accessing memory and imagination as resources•using language that is concrete and specific, not abstract and general•writing scenes instead of summary•centering on conflict•making the familiar feel surprising•utilizing existing and innovative structures to create tension and control pacing	evaluating all aspects of an author’s craft (i.e. <i>how</i> the author writes)... <ul style="list-style-type: none">•point-of-view•conflict•structure•events•place•language•characterization•length•time-span•tone•details•pacing ...to understand theme (i.e. “what the author is saying”)
Product	Creative Writing (fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction)	Analytical Essay

While we’ll read multiple genres of writing throughout the year, *your* writing will mostly be Creative Nonfiction in the first quarter, Analytical Nonfiction in the second quarter, Fiction in the third quarter, and either poetry or an individually selected genre in the fourth quarter.

Texts

Nonfiction prose will be excerpted from *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* by Sherman Alexie. Short stories will be selected from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *All Aunt Hagar's Children* by Edward P. Jones, and recently published works by Haruki Murakami. There will be additions, TBD (other past titles in this course include *Hamlet*, *Fences*, *The Stranger*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Angela's Ashes* 180 More, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *The Odyssey*—the list is currently under review).

Quarterly Grades

- The *Writing Portfolio* is a quarter-long—and ultimately year-long—project that doesn't get graded until the end of each quarter. Writing assignments submitted to the instructor during the quarter will earn *completion* credit and *editorial* feedback, but will not receive a number or letter grade. This portfolio—which compiles these assignments along with revision and reflection—will count as the majority of each quarter's grade.
- Participation, quizzes, first-submitted drafts and other assignments count too, but much less than the portfolio.

Deadlines

- The deadline for an assignment is the *start* of the class on which it is due. You won't ever have work due on a day we do not meet for class.
- A penalty-free extension will be granted if it requested *24 hours* in advance of the deadline. This request can come either in person or by email.
- Late work is still accepted without advance extension, but a late penalty applies—half credit in the case of small assignment, 3-percent-per-day in the case of a major assessment like the portfolio.