

Interoffice Memo

To: Archives

From: Brian L Olson, English Instructor

Subject: Sabbatical Report / Winter '23 Semester

Date: 11 September 2023

Attached is my Sabbatical Report for Winter '23 semester.

I especially appreciate the many people that made this happen, the many people who helped me during that semester of study. Thanks go out to the administration of the college, especially to people who had to make arrangements for covering the classes I would have been teaching. I appreciate my department colleagues for all their continually supportive comments. Thanks also go out to the Sabbatical Committee, who took the time to read proposals and discuss their merits.

I welcome any questions, suggestions, comments that might arise. Please feel free to email me.

Sabbatical report for Brian L Olson, Winter '23

My original statement of purpose was “A project of both writing and researching a form known as ‘flash fiction.’”

Below I discuss the activities I performed, as part of meeting my original objectives. Following that, I explore what conclusions I have drawn, my observations about putting what I have discovered through this sabbatical to use, as a teacher. Those observations are followed by a quick summary of how I met the goals of my original proposal.

I have included a list of books I’ve read, outside of the proposal, in search of works of fiction to teach literature classes such as American Voices, The Novel, or World Literature. (I am currently scheduled to teach American Voices, Winter '24.) This is followed by a list of the works I read during the sabbatical.

The report concludes with a pair of examples of the sort of writing I developed.

Activities Performed, Objectives Accomplished

Objective A: to write a minimum of 12-15 polished pieces, adaptable for use as a class exercise, as well.

Objective A started with a goal of writing every day. This ideal started with Ross Gay’s virtual visit to Valley in the Winter 2022, along with his writing *The Book of Delights*, which was his collection of writings from a year when he decided to write something every day, himself. Depending on how you define writing, this goal was not difficult to meet. I’m someone who thinks about reading and writing all the time, anyway. Ideas appear while going about your everyday life, at the grocery store, going for a hike with grandchildren. I even found myself waking from a vivid dream and writing what I recalled from those fleeting moments. Unfortunately, nothing that seemed so good amidst the dream was worth really developing in the light of a waking day.

I was successful in a goal of writing every day, even if the work was mulling over a fleeting idea.

This leads to the major goal-- to write a minimum of 12-15 polished pieces, adaptable for use as a class exercise, as well.

I was more than successful with writing over 15 polished pieces. (It’s worth remembering this is in a framework of flash fiction, prose poems, which range in length of a paragraph to a page, two pages maximum.) The challenge in many ways was the modifying clause (“adaptable for

use as a class exercise”). Writing has many uses, and one important use is how writing helps someone move from vague, nebulous ideas to a far clearer statement of just what the writer really thinks about those early often even incoherent ideas. Writing is a way of thinking. But I often found myself writing about topics deeply important personally, but not things I felt good about turning into a grammar worksheet.¹

B. My second major goal was Research and reading “flash” fiction and prose poems.

This goal turned into an interesting challenge. My wheelhouse, if you will, is the novel. I had a stack of 600- to 700- page books for summer reading, so reading in a collection of works a paragraph to, at most, a couple of pages was an interesting change in mindset. (A distance runner does not necessarily become a sprinter overnight, if ever.) That said, it’s often good to step out of one’s comfort zone, which also came with reading multiple collections of prose poems, as well.

Needless to say, when the entire work is a paragraph in length, a lot of reading was done. In many ways, this project started with *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, which offers hundreds of examples of the prose poem. Below is a bibliography of the books I read, both collections of prose poems and collections of flash fiction, anthologies and works by specific authors. I also read multiple critical works on the subjects, starting with *Prose Poetry: An Introduction*, by Hetherington and Atherton. For someone interested in this topic, I would recommend the books by another of Valley’s visiting authors, Dinty Moore, who’s responsible for *The Best of Brevity: 20 Years of Flash Non-Fiction* as well as *The Field Guide to Writing Flash Non-Fiction*.

Regularly, books on the topic of Prose Poems or Flash Fiction start by noting it is impossible to definitively distinguish between the two so similar forms. The discussions and examples I’ve read have left me more sensitive to the subtle differences in writing choices, in writing style, that can serve to distinguish either form.

Conclusions / Plans for the Future / How I Hope to Use What I Have Learned

1. The project was a healthy reminder of how a writing project looks from the student perspective. From a teacher’s perspective, my goals and deadlines have to do with getting “X” number of papers evaluated, doing the reading and other prep work required to be prepared for class. This project gave reminders of the student perspective: there I am with a somewhat inchoate idea or an observation drawn from life, and now I am staring at the blank page, trying

¹ I’m still sorting through my father’s somewhat recent death, and a visit to my mother in assisted living often elicits a topic. Why is a nephew in prison again, for serious trouble? The creative piece of my mind struggles with these issues, yet the writings don’t seem right for helping a student with apostrophe usage, though I would support a student working on such a topic, in a personal essay.

to recreate that event, trying to recreate that idea in stubborn words which will successfully transfer to another reader and evoke the experience as clearly as possible.

As writing teacher, I was reminded of the importance of thinking of writing as a process, not just final polished product. A student with a messy set of notes and ideas is in the middle of doing something really useful, something really valuable. It's OK, it's required, to struggle with something as simple as a sentence, simple word choice, as the student writer, as any writer, moves toward a final product. The teacher's task may be to serve as a sounding board for a student wrestling with an idea. The teacher's task may be to help the student with time management, the organizing and setting of priorities that enable a busy student to more efficiently get through what might seem a overwhelmingly busy day.

2. I have always been more confident discussing a work of narrative than a poem. The background reading I've done as part of this project has developed my ability to discuss more poetic works. My "to read" pile currently contains books like *Don't Read Poetry: A Book about How To Read Poetry*, a book by Harvard professor Stephanie Burt, and I am slowly but surely working my way through *The Penguin Book of English Verse*. 200 pages into the just over 1,100 page anthology, organized chronology, leaves me in the early 16 hundreds. And I will still look to find time to continue reading in the initial topic of research interest, with a collection entitled *Little Poems*, where all of the nearly 300 poems consist of a line or fewer than the 14 lines of the sonnet.

3. The 2020s decade has been a challenge to teachers. I've never been happier with my personal decision to learn to teach online over 20 years ago than that moment in March, a couple years ago, when Covid disrupted everything, setting off repercussions still echoing through education in general. As education only hopes it has exited the Covid era, a new challenge arises—AI, Artificial Intelligence. How do writing teachers go about their business in a time when a student might be able to simply set of few parameters and let the computer go about the work? For one, there's never been a time when the advice that a teacher gets to know students a little, as a human being, rather than just a number on a seating chart has been useful. As an occasional literature teacher, I need to get ahead of the information available out there on the internet, especially. A paper ghosted by AI is only as good sources out there, that AI cobbles together into an essay. Combined with the hope that current writings are more relevant, the more recent the reading, the less likely enough information is yet out there, that AI needs to do its work.

During my sabbatical, I did try to carve out time to read some old-fashioned novels. (I remain a reader more happily lost in the 850-page world of Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* than the quick, brief paragraphs of flash fiction and prose poems.) I occasionally get a chance to teach an upper-level literature class, so I found time to read some longer books, appropriate for a class like *American Voices* or *World Literature*, which I've listed here:

Abbas, Fatin, *Ghost Season*.

Arudpragasam, Anuk. *A Passage North*.

Chakrabarti, Jai. *At Play at the End of the World*.

Degollado, Ruben. *The Family Izaquierdo*.

Fajardo-Anstine, Kali. *Woman of Light*.

Fofana, Sidik. *Stories from the Tenants Downstairs*.

Gawad, Aisha Abdel, *Between Two Moons*.

Hokeh, Oscar. *Calling for a Blanket Dance*.

Jain, Vibhuti. *Our Best Intentions*.

Jeffers, Honoree Faronne. *The Love Songs of WEB Du Bois*.

Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*.

Murakami, Haruki. *The Elephant Vanishes*.

Nagamatsu, Sequoia. *How High We Go in the Dark*.

Serpell, C. Namuali. *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*.

Shafak, Elif. *The Island of Missing Trees*.

Valdez Quade, Kristen. *The Five Wounds*.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Nickels Boys*.

Happily, I've found some new reads for classes like ENG 111, Writing about Literature, and ENG, American Voices, that students should find engaging.

Summary of How Proposals Were Fulfilled

1. I was able to successfully write on a regular, day-to-day basis, at the stages of the writing process: invention and discovery; drafting and revising; editing. I have begun to create worksheets and examples for use in class. A writing teacher can't help but gain perspective from spending some time in the students' shoes, struggling with some writing of their own.
2. As my reading list indicates, I had the chance to read extensively in genre of "Flash Fiction" as well as "Prose Poetry," both anthologies and collections, and critical works. As a regular teacher of ENG 111, I have improved my teaching knowledge through this experience.

List of Books on Flash Fiction and Prose Poems, Read During Sabbatical

Caws, Mary Ann and Michel Delville (eds.). *Beginnings of the Prose Poem—All over the Place*. Black Widow Press, 2021.

Christopher, Nicholas. "Poet's Sampler: Mark Strand." *Boston Review*, 1 Mar. 2011. [Poet's Sampler: Mark Strand - Boston Review](#).

Delville, Michel. *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*. UP of Florida, 1998.

Friebert, Stuart and David Young. *Models of the Universe: An Anthology of the Prose Poem*. Oberlin College Press, 1995.

Gay, Ross. *The Book of Delights*. Algonquin Books, 2022.

Hetherington, Paul and Cassandra Atherton. *Prose Poetry: An Introduction*. Princeton UP, 2020.

Johnson, Peter (ed.). *A Cast-Iron Aeroplane That Can Actually Fly: Commentaries from 80 American Poets on their Prose Poetry*. MadHat Press, 2019.

Moore, Dinty. *The Best of Brevity: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction*. Rose Metal Press, 2020.

---. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction: Advice and Essential Exercises from Respected Writers, Editors, and Teachers*. Rose Metal Press, 2012.

Noel-Tod, Jeremy (Ed.). *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem: From Baudelaire to Annie Carson*. Penguin, 2019.

The Prose Poem: An International Journal. (Ran 8 years, from 1992-2000) [About This Journal | The Prose Poem: An International Journal | Providence College](#)

Rankin, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf, 2014.

Simic, Charles. "Essay on the Prose Poem." *Plume Poetry*, Issue #137, Jan. 2023. [Essay on the Prose Poem by Charles Simic - Plume \(plumepoetry.com\)](#)

---. "Seven Prose Poems." *The Café Irreal: International Imagination*, Issue 13, [The Cafe Irreal #13: Seven Prose Poems by Charles Simic \(alicewhittenburg.com\)](#)

---. *The World Doesn't End*. Harcourt Brace, 1989.

Strand, Mark and Eavan Boland. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. Norton, 2000.

- Stern, Jerome (Ed.). *Micro Fiction: An Anthology of Really Short Stories*. Norton, 1996.
- Swartwood, Robert (Ed.). *Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Less*. Norton, 2011.
- Tempest Williams, Terry. *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice*. Picador, 2013.
- Thomas, James and Robert Scotellaro (Eds.). *New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction*. Norton, 2018.
- Thomas, James, Sherrie Flick, and John Dufresne (Eds.). *Flash Fiction America: 73 Very Short Stories*. Norton, 2023.
- Ziegler, Alan (ed.). *Short: An International Anthology of Five Centuries of Short-Short Stories, Prose Poems, Brief Essays, and Other Short Prose Forms*. Persea, 2014.

Here is an example of the sort of writing I've been creating. The first version is the original. It's followed by something revised into a potential worksheet for an ENG 099 or ENG 110 class.

A SMALL FIRE

You might think spring, full of melting snow and April showers, would not be a time for fire worries, but spring is also full of dead leaves and brittle dried grass, fuel just waiting for ignition and a brisk breeze to burst into flame. The phone pulled me from a peaceful nap, and the wind coming in through a cracked sliding door smelled of fire. I stepped out on the back porch and could see a plume of gray smoke rising behind a neighbor's house. Though tempted to let it burn a little longer in that direction, I dialed 911, explained that a grassy area next to a busy 4-lane road had to be on fire. I found some shoes and started to see what was on fire. The area was empty, after the town had bought up the houses on the 4-lane and hauled them off on a train of trucks to be rebuilt by Jimmy Carter and Habitat for Humanity. My house was on a corner, from where I would see so many of my neighbors. A favorite was an elderly woman who rode an old one-speed, fat-tired cruiser bike around and around, the friendliest smile on her face. But today, she was riding as fast as she could, toward home, away from the fire, with a grim look on her face. I made her very happy when I waved her down, telling her I had already summoned the fire department.

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We have been covering the 4 major rules for the comma...

1. Comma with a coordinating conjunction, when joining two potential sentences
2. Comma marking an opening phrase (not a sentence) has reached its end and the main clause (a sentence) has now begun
3. Commas surround an interruption

4. Commas separate the items in a list

Identify and circle an example of each rule. Use the number of each rule to distinguish one rule from another.

Finally, perhaps of interest to people who have only heard about Redwood Hall, here are two short writings about the now long-gone part of KVCC.

The Mysteries of Redwood Hall

With its demolition over 20 years ago now, Redwood Hall, the location of many of the first classes at Kalamazoo Valley, may forever hold its mysteries. Redwood Hall received its name from the redwood siding of this modular building trucked in from California. Not designed or meant to last forever, the floors would creak, leaving students with the sensation that this might be the time the floor broken open and you would fall into the crawl space beneath. The result might put you in the record books, as perhaps the first person to fall victim to the only poisonous rattlesnake in this area—the Eastern massasauga rattler. According to the internet, its venom, drop for drop, is more deadly than other more dangerous rattle snakes, but a bite from a massasauga delivers far less poison than snakes that are known to kill people. In fact, it's not clear if a massasauga has even caused the death of a small dog. But still, the maintenance man's description of this writhing bed of serpents beneath the floors was enough to cause worry. (Especially after seen one—hearing its rattle—in the marsh behind Valley, during a lunch time bird watching walk.)

The other frustrating mystery was the refrigerator in the back break room. A practical joker liked to rig a small firecracker (a popper, really) to the door. They would tape one string to the door and the other to the body of the refrigerator, so that you never knew when you'd get a startling SNAP whenever opening the door for your lunch. Was this prankster the troubling lunch thief who would also strike refrigerator? I was there when a colleague discovered someone had opening his sack lunch, taken a bite from his sandwich, and then put the sandwich and the lunch back into the fridge. Yes, with an obvious bite taken from the sandwich! His issues appeared to escalate, with wallets stolen from purses, which should have been safe in internal offices. Though this troubled soul may have met just results. The bathrooms at Redwood had a shelf for books and things just inside the door. The toilets were around a corner, so all someone could see from the hallway were the bookbags and things like a purse. This thief came to his end when he spotted a woman's purse, thought the coast was clear when he saw an empty hallway, and then slipped into the men's room next door. Shortly after, when the true owner of the purse was in the hallway yelling her purse was gone, inside the men's room the thief was trying to explain why he had the purse, to a group of law enforcement students.