Assessment results:

First-Year Writing Works

Assessment results for AY22-23 have again shown very positive outcomes for First-Year Writing at Suffolk. Steadily building a longitudinal study over several years, the program can track its effectiveness and make data-informed refinements for the future.

Read on for details about the FYW assessment methods, but first, as with any good assessment, we need to define the thing we’re trying to assess.

First-Year Writing classes are not content courses emphasizing memorization. They are not gatekeeping courses designed to block certain students from further education. And they aren’t mastery courses, after which students know everything they’ll ever need to know about writing in every field and discipline. There are concepts and vocabulary to learn, but they are not just information to remember; they are tools to use. These are skills courses. They are gate opening courses. For students, they are not ends. They are beginnings. We’re here to start them, not stop them.

Suffolk is proud home to students from all different backgrounds, and is determined to provide space for everyone, including many who may have been previously underserved in writing instruction, and who may have a negative image of themselves as writers.

Whether they enter Suffolk feeling very confident or very insecure in their writing, our FYW program meets each student wherever they are, and helps them get stronger from there.

Whatever assessments we do have to be built around that.

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From the chair: Keeping track of ourselves across so much changing, so much waiting

For the past year, I’ve been writing a long, braided essay about letting my hair go gray during the pandemic. (Does an essay about hair have to be braided? Of course it does.) I’d never intentionally grown a new head of hair before. It took two years. I documented it obsessively with a hundred oddly-angled quarantine selfies a day. My mother would say it was like watching paint dry (she says the same thing about baseball).

At the end of my first semester as department chair, I’m trying to remind myself that the one of the hardest things we do as human beings is simply wait.

Wait for change that won’t be rushed.

Wait for the unfamiliar to become familiar.

Waiting is especially difficult when so much is urgent. How do we accept a world—or a self—that changes both rapidly and by barely perceptible inches?

But when I look at all the small (and some rather large) changes we’ve implemented in English, they add up to quite a transformed department from the one I joined in 2014.

For starters, we’ve implemented our new major curriculum that includes ENG 200: Introduction to Textual Interpretation and ENG 500, our senior capstone course.

We’re also delighted to see our new concentration in Public and Professional Writing take off—and expand. This fall, we launched a new interdisciplinary minor in PPW. We believe it has broad appeal for any student interested in editing, publishing, technical writing, and rhetoric, serving as a nimble way to marry content from other majors with skills in written and multimodal communication. And as the “public” part of the name suggests, PPW also teaches writing as an agent of social change.

Our First-Year Writing program, which once again received positive assessment data from the VALUE Institute, founded *Inklings*, a new journal of student academic writing. Its first issue features eleven student essays submitted from WRI 101 and WRI 102 courses, with topics that range from representations on TV shows like Derry Girls AND Gilmore Girls, to an analysis of Black masculine stereotypes, to an argument on lowering the voting age. We are proud to add another department publication to our roster, and thank co-editors Erin Trauth and Nick Frangipane for this labor of love.

Change also comes through loss. In November, the renowned poet and translator David Ferry died at age ninety-nine. For over a decade, David taught a one-credit course in the English Department, building many close relationships with students. In 2017, he published a widely-anticipated translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, excerpts from which he shared in this course as he wrote them. Our colleague George Kalogeris, who will soon head into the glory of retirement, organized a tribute to David with a reading by Andrea Cohen, Martha Collins, and emeritus professor Fred Marchant in the Poetry Center, where David’s profound words once again filled the room.

Translation might be another form of waiting. Imagine how long it took David to translate the *Aeneid*. And yet what other way than line by line?

This is how we keep evolving, small shift by small shift, into new iterations of our core values. I want to thank my colleagues and students for their encouragement, patience, and support while I grow into this new role both slowly and all at once. I couldn’t be prouder to serve this department.

—Amy Monticello
Swift and Storytelling

We’re all familiar with the smug mockery of social media and internet hot takes when academia works with popular culture. We don’t need to give them more of our time or attention. The thing about theoretical narrative concepts is that you can see them anywhere you see storytelling.

CAS HC-240, Swift and Storytelling, is one of a set of interesting and accessible one-credit honors courses students can take without the larger commitment of a 3- or 4-credit course. She does a lot of interesting narrative stuff” said Nick Frangipane, who designed and taught the class. “Like any good literature, you can use it to understand how we tell stories and why.”

Students worked through Swift’s songs to understand authorial control. They incorporated Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” to get beyond authorial intent and biography, learning about reader response theory. Understanding theory of mind, students saw Swift working in free indirect style to convey a character’s interiority. Frequently, Swift employs an implied author as well as character/narrator selves within her songs. She creates a version of the self that’s different in each occasion, like the line in “Look What You Made Me Do,” that declares the old Taylor is dead. She uses unreliable narrators, as in the duet “Exile” with Justin Vernon, where two people understand the same situation differently.

Structurally, the class began in a traditional lecture/discussion format, then switched to a flipped, student-led classroom. Students worked in groups to present 1-2 songs as a lesson, and would assign readings. It gave a chance for them to gain control over more advanced concepts of narrative theory. One group tracked Swift’s evolution as a feminist through songs and public statements. Some did a presentation on fan fiction and fan interactions, using academic research to explore Swift fans’ examples how fans often write fan fiction to correct the wrongs they see from the original author. They saw speculations about Swift’s relationships as working like fan fiction.

“It was awesome!” Frangipane said. “They came up with stuff I would never have thought of. We all left the class with a deeper appreciation for how sophisticated her songwriting really is.”

FYW Assessment

If you’ve worked in education for any length of time, you’ve seen bad program assessment strategies. Maybe methods are flawed. Maybe a plan comes from someplace other than teachers on the ground. Maybe it’s shaped more by institutional politics than by attention to students. Maybe someone insists on applying the same metrics to very different programs for the sake of “consistency.” Maybe data is taken out of context. Maybe a discipline’s best practices get ignored. Maybe nonprofessionals outside the field in question game the numbers to confirm their prior assumptions. Maybe the tail wags the dog with a measurement designed to change the thing being measured. Maybe it’s a way to pretend a budgetary decision is a curricular decision. Maybe we too firmly separate quantitative and qualitative, falsely assuming that number people and word people don’t have anything to say to each other. Or that those have to be different people. Maybe we don’t know what we’re doing with assessment, and we count something just to say we did. Or maybe an assessment is done well, but someone refuses to believe the findings.

Effective program assessments are local to the programs themselves. The people doing the work gather targeted data relevant to their work, use it to understand the effects of what they’re doing, and by tracking trends over time, can use those findings to make ongoing, continuous improvements to the program’s field-specific goals and methods.

For the sake of the labor much of this takes, for access to comparative data at peer institutions, and to increase the wider institution’s confidence in the assessment’s validity, it can be wise to get help from a respected independent third party, like the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) VALUE Academy for Professional Development.

Twice a year, we collect writing samples from all first-year students enrolled in WRI 101 (fall) and WRI 102 (spring). Then, in May, we gather all final essays from every section and send a randomly selected sampling of essays from the spring 102 sections to the VALUE Scoring Collaborative.

The stratified sampling method ensures equal demographic representation. Samples are scored through the Value Scoring Collaborative, a group made up of VALUE-certified faculty members and career educators from across the world. Each student essay is read twice by certified VALUE readers and scored against the Collaborative’s Written Communication rubric.

Upon return of the data to the Suffolk FYW program, the FYW program committee (made up of full-time FYW faculty) and the English department, in collaboration with the FYW Director, review this data annually to track patterns over time and to index our outcomes relative to nationwide trends.

In the 2022-23 academic year, 95 percent of Suffolk FYW students met capstone (4 out of 4) or high-milestone (3 out of 4) goals for context of and purpose for writing, 88 percent of students met capstone or high-milestone for content development, 80 percent of students met capstone or high-milestone for genre and discursive conventions, 78 percent of students met capstone or high-milestone for sources and evidence, and 90 percent of students met capstone or high-milestone goals for control of syntax and mechanics.

On VALUE’s scale, assignments in this cycle were intended to meet level 5 (“reinforce outcomes”).

“On behalf of the First-Year Writing program, I’m pleased to share these results that show students exiting our FYW sequence are meeting rigorous national expectations for academic writing,” said Suffolk FYW Director Erin Trauth. “These results, confirmed by VALUE, our nationally recognized and highly regarded external assessment partner, affirm the fantastic work of our FYW students and the dedication of our FYW instructors. I’m quite proud of our FYW students and instructors.”

Several stakeholders across Suffolk, including those in vastly different academic fields, have praised both the FYW assessment process and results, holding it up as a positive model for other programs to follow. Most importantly, it keeps the focus on refining how we serve our students, not on the many other, cynical motivations and functions that infect other approaches to assessment.
Suffolk’s First-Year Writing Program has just launched *Inklings,* a new journal of student writing produced in FYW classes. One issue will be published each fall featuring writing students produced for assignments in Writing 100, 101, 102, and H103. This first issue features 11 essays by 10 student authors. Each one is a response to a class assignment.

"It’s really important that student work get shown," said Professor Nick Frangipane, who made the first moves to establish the journal, modeling it on similar publications at other institutions. "Students come up with insightful projects, and write beautiful things, and that should be celebrated."

First-Year Writing Director Erin Trauth joined as co-editor, working in consultation with other FYW instructors and student workers. After collecting submissions, they put together a panel of English faculty who scored each essay anonymously in order to choose a set for publication.

There are all sorts of reasons why this is good for students. It’s a low-pressure and supportive way for students to get experience reading and sending their work out for publication. It gives them an added rhetorical layer to think about for revision, since writing with a reading audience in mind is different from writing only to the professor in your class. It’s a good line on a CV. It’s a thrill to have your work chosen and to see it typeset for a journal or magazine. And it’s a way of further building a scholarly culture and sense of participating in a community of other writers and learners.

In the spirit of allowing students’ genuine abilities shine through, editing is done minimally, and with a light touch.

"That’s on purpose," Frangipane said. "It’s really important that this remains the students’ actual voices."

"We don’t leave any major errors in the proofreading," Trauth added, "but because this is their work and it’s their language that shapes and expresses their thoughts, it’s absolutely vital to preserve their voices in the published versions."

Students’ voices are still developing at this stage, though we know that all of life is a stage, and writers’ voices develop over their whole lifetimes. There is no end or arrival where you stop growing. And so, it’s important to empower students to speak with the voices they’ve cultivated so far, to use those voices as perspective, as a place from which to think and feel and understand. What’s most important about the writer’s voice here is that each student feels in possession of their own. It’s a move away from the misleading binary of good and bad writing, especially according to disabling, deficiency-oriented criteria, like over-prioritizing superficial grammar choices. At the same time publications like this celebrate the proficiencies each student has achieved to get this far, it’s also a record they can look back on later and see how much farther they’ve come. By holding up these students’ authentic abilities right now, and by validating them as a strong foundation on which to build, we celebrate and nurture all the other, even stronger voices they’ll go on to develop, and all the things they’ll use those voices to accomplish.

And, as with any publication, this one accomplishes many things at the same time. Beyond direct benefits to students, it can also be an archive of the FYW program over time and serve as a bank of sample essays to use in future writing classes.

It can also provide a window into work a lot of others across the university and beyond might not otherwise get to witness. Whether considering arguments about immortality, analyzing the discourse we use to talk about electric cars, or examining the assumptions about race, class, gender, sexuality, and more encoded into television and film—all topics featured in this inaugural issue—these student writers apply the same rhetoric-focused skills and concepts to their own areas of interest.

"I think it’s served to show other campus stakeholders what we do in First-Year Writing, and the types of writing and analytical skills students develop in the program," Trauth said. "It can be hard to explain how rhetoric, analysis, and critical thinking translate into student work, especially when students can apply them in so many different ways to so many different topics. This is a great way for people to see the awesome things our students are doing."

Each FYW course has a different design and purpose, targeted towards different stages in each student writer’s development. So far, students near the end of their work in FYW, such as those finishing WRI 102, have contributed the most submissions, which makes since given their higher self-confidence at that point.

But Frangipane and Trauth want to encourage faculty to encourage their students in WRI 100 and WRI 101 to submit more work as well. This isn’t about refined academic prose so much as it’s about giving students space to participate in scholarly discourse, giving them another way to grow, and letting them recognize their own growth and that of their peers.

Submission is not a class requirement. Students send in work on their own by emailing it to inklings@suffolk.edu. You can read the interactive digital edition [here](https://inklings.suffolk.edu/), or the [pdf](https://inklings.suffolk.edu/Fall2023_Issue01.pdf) in the Moakley Archives.
Brief Interviews with English Alums

Arty Prakasan
B.A. 2019, Creative Writing; Classics Minor
Digital Operations Assistant at Hachette, UK.

**STX:** Tell us about any graduate programs and professional positions you have held since you graduated from Suffolk. What has your career trajectory looked like? What are you doing now? What are you thinking of doing next?

**AP:** A couple months after graduating, I moved to New York City to try and break into publishing. I got into the New York University Summer Publishing Institute, an intensive graduate certificate program, though I deferred it to the summer of 2020 (little did I know how things would turn out).

During my brief time in NYC, I volunteered at 826NYC while job hunting until the start of the pandemic. With my time in the US coming to an end, and after a stressful and uncertain summer, I was lucky to be able to move back in with my family who were based in Southeast Asia. While I was trying to figure out new plans, I worked at a non-profit business association as a content creator and communications / marketing support.

I worked there for a year, and attended the NYU program I had deferred. With the pandemic, the program had turned into a shorter remote course. For me, that meant a 12-hour time difference. After completing that, I was still interested in trying to get into publishing, and I had to think about next steps, as I was not going to be staying at the business association.

I finished my one year with the business association and looked into graduate programs with a publishing degree. In September 2022, I moved to London and started my MA in Publishing at Kingston University. Currently, I’m finishing my MA and am 6 months into my current role as a Digital Operations Assistant at Hachette UK.

**STX:** In what ways has your course work / degree in English helped you professionally? What skills or knowledge do you regularly draw from in your professional life?

**AP:** While I was in a marketing / communications role, my BA was directly helpful, as I was writing or editing copy for various purposes—social media mainly, but also website copy, ad copy, newsletters, promotional material for events, and press releases. People take writing for granted, but it is a skill to be able to communicate effectively in text. While my degree is somewhat less directly relevant to my current role (I live in Excel spreadsheets and metadata records now), the critical thinking and reading skills I developed, and being able to absorb and distill information was a big part of being successful through my graduate program and opportunities that helped me land my job. Communication is always a key aspect, and my role is a service-based role where I am writing a lot of emails.

**STX:** What advice can you offer students who are interested in an English major or minor?

**AP:** A term that’s thrown around a lot is "transferable skills" but it’s true. English degrees are incredibly versatile, and the soft skills that come from them are applicable in nearly any industry. At the very least, any company will need people who know how to understand and transform information into accessible written content.

**STX:** Describe something you learned the hard way that your advice here could help current undergrads learn the easy way.

**AP:** It’s perfectly fine to ask for help. Whether it’s from friends, roommates, professors, coursemates, or coworkers. I’ve always struggled to get over the belief that asking someone for assistance or advice was being a bother. I bottled up issues that I thought I could handle myself. Sometimes I eventually could, but often it didn’t need to be as difficult as I made it for myself.

**STX:** What are you thinking of doing next?

**AP:** I would say a stronger ability to empathise and a conscious desire to continually improve my understanding of different experiences and history, as well as being media literate—traits that I think are crucial, especially as of late, as it seems like a lot more people could have done with some humanities courses in their time. Media literacy seems to be a particular need. We are accosted by so much information regularly, and increasingly, false information and propaganda. Being able to see past catchy headlines and noticing word choice has made me more aware of what I’m engaging with, consciously or not.

**STX:** Do you regularly draw from in your professional life?

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Some canonical writers stay current

"Students can have a hard time connecting with 19th century writers," said Leslie Eckle, who teaches a course on Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, ENG 356. "But it's amazing how alive these two seem to our students now."

Unlike survey courses—which emphasize breadth of a genre, tradition, or time period—a course with a narrow subject focus can encourage more depth. "Every week has a new topic, even though it's the same writers," Eckel said. It's wonderful for the students to build their confidence through deeper engagement, and to get to a more advanced level of autonomy in reading criticism, researching historical contexts, and developing their own scholarship.

Both are seen as founders of contemporary American poetics, but like all cultural icons, they take on different meanings as time and culture proceed.

Dickinson and Whitman had been celebrated while having their queerness erased or minimized by those same critics. In today's more deliberate age of reclaiming subversive queer icons, academia and popular culture are revisiting both poets through queer studies," Eckel said. "They're fascinated by how these writers' experiences or imaginations can intersect with their own identities now, which are typically more flexible in terms of gender and sexuality."

Whitman's series of poems "Live Oak with Moss" wasn't rediscovered and published until 1950s. "It focuses very closely on intimate relationship he had with a man," Eckel said. "How happy and fulfilled he felt, how devastated he was when it fell apart, but how hopeful he was that future men could walk hand in hand. It's been there, but has been hidden for a lot of critical history. Students get excited about that."

It's a great lesson in how the mores and hang-ups of a critic's time will shape their interpretations. "Considering the role that Susan played in editing and responding to Dickinson's writing," Eckel said, "the letters between them weren't published much until the 1990s. That's both a betrayal of Dickinson's real life priorities, and a result of sexism in academia with male scholars mostly focusing on her relationships with men."

Similarly, students are very conscious of racial contexts that brought these two white writers into this privileged place in American literature, and the consequences that limited both for our understanding of American writing and of these two writers themselves.

In addition to literary analysis essays, students get engaged in active ways. One class had students work in groups to created their own class lessons from Dickinson's poems, displaying their lessons around the walls of the classroom in a cumulative analysis of Dickinson's view of solitude.

Eckel invited students to do imitation exercises, taking stylistic models from the class to write poems from their own memories and experiences, followed by a reflective component exploring difference between their imitations and the originals. Some imitated closely, others ended up with something completely different, but the reflection lets them discuss effects of those writing choices and come to a deeper understanding of them.

As an honors project, English Major Catherine Barnum researched Dickinson's fascicles—hand-sewn poetry manuscripts—and made her own.

Students saw manuscripts, documents, and rare book editions from both authors on a visit to Harvard's Houghton Library.

All this, especially in context of history-minded Boston, brings students' lives into continuity with those who came before, showing how the past continues to live in the present.
Letting go of shame, sanctimony, and superstition

Consider "etiquette." For a lot of people, what comes to mind is a set of rules no one ever explained, and that seem to have no purpose other than enforcing a social hierarchy. Violate the arcane rituals, and everyone will know that you don't belong here and you never will. You'll get excommunicated for using the wrong fork. Or for putting a comma in the wrong place. Or so says the fear. Prescriptive etiquette and prescriptive grammar work similarly: all rules and no reasons.

What if etiquette wasn't about rule-following, but about not making other people's lives worse with your behavior? What if grammar wasn't a list of fussy constraints, but an infinitely expandable collection of tools to shape and communicate thoughts? Maybe we should focus more on reasons than rules.

"Prescriptive grammar comes with a lot of superstition," said Rich Miller, who teaches ENG 312, English Grammar and Usage. "A lot of people come in with beliefs about grammar and don't know how to explain them."

The first thing is to show students how much facility with grammar they already have. So, students write a linguistic autobiography, reflecting on their own linguistic development from as far back as they can remember. They also analyze their own college writing, sometimes recognizing that grammatical correctness doesn't necessarily equate to depth, clarity, or precision of meaning.

"Students learn they already speak multiple dialects," Miller said. "In traditional academic writing, we have a pretty prescriptive dialect. But when we take a descriptive approach, students start recognizing their own sentence patterns and can claim their linguistic identities in a way that recognizes their actual, complex influences. We don't become who we are alone. We carry trends and unique habits from family, friends, heritage, culture, education, jobs... It's often the first time students look at themselves as serious language users who have a history that's already made them skilled in multiple dialects."

Miller says the course heavily emphasizes the sentence, since the arrangement of sentence elements are ways of arranging thoughts and drawing relationships between them. By practicing ways of combining and patterning sentences, students leave the class with a much more dynamic and practically useful sense of how sentences can work.

"We emphasize that syntactical level," Miller said. "But also linguistic morphologies and different modes and contexts like speech vs. writing. We talk about grammar and 'correctness' but come to the understanding that every grammar is equally respectable. It takes out the racism, the shame, and the fear of judgment to see your actual language as equally valid as others'. College is a good time for reflection about this."

The class doesn't require prior grammar training. There's a little history of how social factors and military conquests changed English. Germanic Old English dialects evolved for centuries before Norman conquest in 1066 introduced so much French that Middle English emerged. Eventually, orthodoxies, class hierarchies, and standardization tools like dictionaries hammered out "proper" dialects and declared others to be inferior, "ethnic," and full of errors.

Though, stubbornly and gloriously, language continues to evolve.

"Descriptive grammar is a big palate," Miller said. "So we look at concepts and a bit of history, but we try to ground the course at the end in applying it to actual writing. Sometimes you are going to have to work with other people's expectations, like composing in public and workplace contexts."

That involves the rhetorical awareness of audience and context, the cultural literacy to navigate the power dynamics in play, and the critical thinking skills to access the full scope of how meanings get made independently of surface-level grammatical correctness.

Then there are elements of racial and class power and privilege that determine who gets judged for their language and how. That makes standard grammar, for some, seem necessary not just for success but for survival. It's less a question of who uses correct grammar than it is one of whose grammar gets dismissed, and who gets presumed competent regardless of the words they use. See also Vershawn Ashanti Young's argument about this in "Should Writers Use Their Own English?"

The class introduces concepts in vocal pronunciation, which also arise from cultural currents.

"It's good to look at the origins of our own linguistic proclivities," Miller said. "Say a word think about how it feels in your mouth. Where is your tongue? When do we use an enclitic? We had a whole class on the schwa. Some students come in not thinking they have a dialect at all. We talk about British vs. American standard English, but students enjoyed seeing themselves in dialect maps of the U.S., even with pop culture stuff like who says 'bubbblah' or 'water fountain.' It encourages them to speak to one another across dialect differences, which is so important at a diverse college and in the world outside."

One assignment has students analyze advertisements to consider the logic of, say, using a sentence fragment as a marketing slogan. They read Yelp reviews of restaurants to see what their language signals. Another has them analyze their own written grammar habits and ask why they made the choices they did.

"Awareness of grammar can help them negotiate the dialects, communication styles, and insider jargon in a new social or professional situation," Miller said. "Understanding grammar can be about understanding people. I want to get them to where they're not afraid to expand their own lexicon about it. I want them to be more confident and aware of how they negotiate the world through language, which will become more and more important as they move into their independent lives. In language, they can remember who they are but also claim the power to become who they want to be."
First-Year Seminar 1211 takes an overview of literature and films set in Boston from the Colonial Era to the present, "from Phillis Wheatley to Ben Affleck."

"We look at Boston as a psychic space rather than just a geographic location," said Quentin Miller, who designed and taught the course. "We think about what legends or myths about Boston are created, perpetuated, or challenged by literary or cinematic representations."

Field trips were a big part of this class. Students did a lot of walking and examining the relationship between public, private, and hybrid spaces. The first tour was "Phillis Wheatley's Boston," which included the place where she landed after being abducted from her native land in Gambia. That site is now in Chinatown, which made for a lesson about the gradual building out of Boston into the Harbor. Further stops were her place of worship (segregated), the site of her home (unmarked by any plaque), the site of the Boston Massacre—the occasion for one of her poems—and the Granary Burying Ground where she isn’t buried (no one knows where she’s buried) and the grave of John Wheatley, famous for... enslaving Phillis.

"This first tour taught them to look beyond the surface of Boston to see what we currently experience as the product of a long and sometimes checkered history," Miller said.

The trip to the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard was the most intense, and, for some, the most unsettling. It included exposure to four experimental films about the space and a guided tour of the only building in the United States designed by the iconic Swiss architect Le Corbusier.

"This was a unique experience," Miller said. "Probably a little advanced in terms of architectural history, and they found the films challenging, but all of that is positive."

In addition to reading Wheatley's work, students also read William Dean Howells, Robert Lowell, and Denis Lehane.

"I tried to select one work from each century," Miller said. "Wheatley 18th, Howells 19th, Lowell 20th, and Lehane 21st. We linked the development of literature to the development of history. We also encountered the films in chronological order. Part of the subtext of the course is the history of Boston, not just its renditions in literature and film."

As for definitive Boston movies, Good Will Hunting remains a critical favorite, and students responded favorably.

"They also got caught up in The Thomas Crown Affair," Miller said. "And they were surprised by how much they liked Spotlight, and by how little they had understood about the connection between Boston and the Catholic sex abuse scandal."

On the students' reception of history shown in more classic films, Miller said they were aware of changes in the city but also struck by how little Beacon Hill had changed.

"Which is the point of Beacon Hill," he said. "The theme of many of the texts involves the friction between those who want Boston to change and those who don't. The underlying tension here involves social class."

Since the class ended, Miller has seen three more films with Boston or nearby settings: The Holdovers, American Fiction, and Eileen. "They're still making them," he said. "Maybe the greatest Boston movie is in the future."
Routledge Introduction to American Life Writing
A foundational overview of life stories as literature and as public discourse

Two Suffolk English faculty co-authored an introduction to the genre and scholarship defining life writing in America. Amy Monticello and Jason Tucker drew from contemporary scholarship and craft-focused guides to sketch out an overview of a genre that brings together creative writing, literary theory, and rhetoric.

While fiction and poetry have seen a great many efforts at establishing canons of texts, theories, and methodologies (like James Wood’s How Fiction Works, Mieke Bal’s Narratology, and Paul Fussell’s Poetic meter and Poetic Form), creative nonfiction, being more recently defined by formal scholarship, has not had as many attempts at a foundational nomenclature and scholarly framework.

"Existing craft texts are all built on deeper philosophies of how CNF works," Monticello and Tucker wrote in an interview with the journal Assay, "and many of them do include brief analyses, but they are written for other writers to develop their craft. We found that there is a lot of scholarship on CNF texts, but it tends to focus on individual forms (like the essay or memoir) or subgenres (like true crime or addiction memoir), rather than looking for patterns common across all of those categories. Those are about depth. To find the breadth you’d expect from an introductory overview, we collected voices from a range of different literary specializations that otherwise might not have been speaking so directly to each other."

Both authors come from a craft-focused, CNF-writer background, with other influences from literature and rhetoric that gave them ways of considering how CNF writers across all these different categories told true life stories in order to define and create themselves, their communities, their country.

"The biggest unifying thing we found in writing this introduction is that life writing is an act of democracy," they said. "America has produced privileged writers from dominant castes who held themselves up as examples of some singularly true or ideal American. Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography is an example. American life writing is far more filled with those who told their own life stories in order to democratize, in order to resist their own erasure and any narrow view of Americanness, in order to write themselves into the national story as they were already living it.

This scholarly introduction divides "life writing" into several subgenres: Personal essays; memoir and autobiography; literary journalism; lyric essays; diaries, epistles, and speeches, aural narratives; podcasts and story slams; and life writing online.

Notably, and admittedly, there is no section for biography. While the introduction agrees that biographical writings definitely qualify as life-writing, this book’s emphasis on a first-person perspective, even as that of a literary journalist (along with constraints on how long the publisher would allow the book to be) left no physical or metaphorical room for it.

"The project focused on life writing rather than CNF as a whole, so we mostly focused on how and where people were telling life stories in public," they said. "That meant we couldn’t ignore the live performance and online forms, but also that we had to better understand the conventions and rhetorical frameworks of these forms. In podcasts, for example, we had to consider the role of the host who may or may not be the narrator whose experiences are under discussion, but who nonetheless becomes part of the story as they shape its insights for listening audiences.

The chapter on memoir and autobiography is where subgenres became extra important. Certain memoirs get grouped into a conversation about particular subjects such as grief, parenthood, addiction, etc. We could have tripled that chapter’s length if we’d analyzed primary texts of every subgenre we listed, but the parameters of our contract prevented us from doing that. So, we had to make some tough calls about which subgenres seemed most prominent in contemporary memoir and expand our primary analyses there."

They also wanted to ensure that this volume considered not only a range of forms of life writing, but also a range of practitioners, from giants like Douglass, Didion, Baldwin, and Nin, to lesser-known and marginalized authors, to "everyday" people who underscore that nearly every American writes about their life in some form.

"The #MeToo movement, for instance, was a collective act of mostly ordinary citizens sharing about their experiences of sexual harassment and assault," they said. "Taken together, those narratives became a political force whose power (and complicity) is still playing out."

In a book talk at Suffolk in November, they also discussed co-authoring a book with someone who is both a colleague and a marriage partner.

"We met in our MFA program at Ohio State, where we were both students and graduate teaching assistants," they said. "We quickly became personal partners, but we’ve also been professional partners ever since. It’s beautiful how natural it feels, but we’ve never had firm borders between the two spheres. We call out ideas and make each other’s thoughts better. We wrote the book in pieces, collaborating on some chapters or sections and each of us fully drafting others that were then mutually edited and merged into the volume. We each have different orientations about process and deadlines, though, and that’s where cooperation and compromise are important. Amy prefers to write a little every day; Jason is a binge writer."
Publications, awards, talks, teaching news, conferences, travel

JOSÉ ANGEL ARAGUZ
Lyric memoir: Ruin & Want, Sundress Publications, 2024.


ELIF ARMBRUSTER
Scholarly essay: "The Racial Swamps of Reconstruction: Harriet Beecher Stowe's Post-Civil War Life in Florida," in the International Journal of Women's Studies, Nov. 2023. The essay explores Stowe's life in Florida where she lived for half of each year after the war. The book she wrote about her experiences there, Palmetto Leaves (1873), has largely been overlooked by literary scholars. In it, Stowe offers portraits of the newly emancipated African Americans around her whom she employs to work on her orange plantation. Casting them in subtly racist ways, Stowe's book, Armbruster argues, shows her to be somewhat less progressive than she came across earlier in her career, and thus complicates our view of the proto-feminist author.

JAMIE BONDAR

BARRETT BOWLIN

Short Story: "For I Hungered, and Ye Gave Me," TriQuarterly, 164(1); Summer/Fall 2023.

GAIL HANLON
Poetry collection, Mirabilia, was a finalist for the New England Poetry Club Jean Pedrick Chapbook Prize, selected by Daniel Barnum.

KATHERINE HORN AND RUTH PRAKASAM
They will co-chair a session and co-presenting at the 55th annual Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) Convention; it is scheduled March 7-10, 2024 in Boston, MA. Their Roundtable is titled "A Surplus of Plusses: Transferable Teaching Strategies from Writing to Text" and discusses "The Valuable Building Block of Writing: Community".

HANNAH HUDSON

PETER JEFFREYS
Poem, "Carré Anglais," in Mediterranean Poetry, Nov. 6, 2023. It concerns the life of Paul Cavaly, brother of the Greek poet, and his life in Hyères, France. Interview in the Athens magazine LIFO special edition covering the opening of the Onassis Foundation’s Cavaly Archive exhibition space in Athens. He is currently serving as a member of the Cavaly Archive Academic Committee and as a curatorial consultant for the exhibition space.

The newspaper TA NEA asked Jeffreys to recommend a favorite poem for its "Poem on the last page" feature. He selected Yeats’s "Byzantium" and offered a comment on the cultural moment when Erdogan has converted Hagia Sophia and the Chora Monastery (two of the most important Byzantine monuments) from museums (UNESCO) back into mosques.

GREGORY LAWLESS
His third book of poems, Dreamburgh, Pennsylvania, was published in 2022 by Dream Horse Press.

JON LEE

Lee taught at the Wellspring of Imagination conference in Ohio in October.

QUENTIN MILLER


Invited Talk: Designated Respondent to Dr. Frank Thomas’s talk “The Essay as Sermon: James Baldwin as Contemplative Preacher.” The Homiletical Theology Project’s fall research consultation “Spirituality, Preaching, and Bridging Racial Divide: Exploring Black Contemplative Preaching” at Boston University’s School of Theology, October 2023.


AMY MONTICELLO AND JASON TUCKER


Book talk and Q&A at Suffolk University, Nov. 9, 2023.

GERRY WAGGETT

SALAMANDER literary journal hosted readings by the Louisa Solano Memorial Emerging Poet Award inaugural judge Rajiv Mohabir and winner Maria S. Picone on October 25. Generously funded by Suffolk University’s Ellen LaForge Memorial Poetry Fund, this award is given retroactively to a poet who has not published more than one full-length poetry collection at the time of their publication in Salamander. This award is named in honor of Louisa Solano, former owner of Cambridge’s Grolier Poetry Bookshop and a champion of poets and literary magazines.
Through retelling troubling formative relationships, Ruin and Want sketches the outline of a self in lyric fragments

There is no closure here. José Araguz’s lyric memoir Ruin and Want, out recently from Sundress Publications, is a spiral of memories, centered on and always returning to a formative, traumatic romance with L, his high school English teacher when he was 17. She was 47.

Opening in a scene, years afterward, when L visits him and his then-girlfriend (later his first wife) in New York City and offers to treat them to a Broadway show, the book’s beginning suggests and maybe longs for that moment to be a possibility of closure, of denouement, of satisfactory resolution after all this time. Instead, accepting the invitation rings an echo chamber of disgust, turning the scene not into an ending but into an incitement to memory, one shard of broken mirror reflecting another, and another, and another, yielding a fragmented ed structure of experiences all informing and re-forming each other. It took a while to arrive at that structure.

"We tell stories, but I couldn’t ‘story’ this," Araguz said of the five-years of repeated attempts. "First you have to get to a point of at least beginning to understand it. Craft can help you unlock some things, so you have to try everything. Each shape and each technique changes it, gives you access to new things while preventing some others. But somehow barriers kept coming up with formal craft. The first draft was like me trying to be Hemingway. Somebody called it sexy, and I realized I was doing the same thing in the writing that I was trying to work against."

The obvious and tempting danger in writing about our harm-doers is to flatly vilify them while rendering ourselves as sympathetic and undeserving victims.

The parallel challenges of working through all this in therapy while making art out of it definitely inform each other throughout the memoir. Written in present tense, the craft choice minimizes the expectation of reflection—of the writer’s older and wiser voice asking questions and explaining what everything might mean. But in some ways, there’s minimal interiority from the younger selves as well. You might recognize the kind of Hemingway minimalism in emphasizing the emotional resonance of scenic actions and descriptions, each scene a concrete object to hold in your hand and contemplate.

"In therapy, we were talking about scarcity of positive human interactions," Araguz said. "Her pushing me away, trust and abandonment, power dynamics. L got to say when it started and when it ended, but she still stayed a presence. She met a couple of girlfriends and dismissed all of them. Saw a look on my face. Helplessness. That scene, the first in the book, was my first wife. That relationship was marred by this. But the people who hurt us are often not villains. I’m more trying to ask ‘where was the power dynamic? Where was the control? In order for me to understand it, I had to take back some of the power I didn’t have at the time.’"

L does wield a power. She gives him a copy of James Joyce’s The Dubliners, tells him to read “Araby” and locate her favorite line. She gives him Ulysses and says to read the last 50 pages, speaking not at all subtly through Molly Bloom. Then telling him not to speak of this at all.

“She said ‘I can’t believe God gave you to me.’ She said ‘don’t tell anyone,’” he said of the point he felt he aged out of her interest, Lolita in the inverse. “She said ‘17 does this, 18 doesn’t.’ I see a lot of the self-mythologizing she kept trying to get me to do as a way to mythologize herself.”

It’s that sort of naming and showing that Ruin focuses on. Sometimes, Araguz says, naming things is enough.

“I think I see it as clearly as I’m going to,” he said. “It has no closure, so I didn’t want to pretend to write from a place of closure. Breaking off contact isn’t closure. Blocking someone on social media isn’t closure. I had to figure out how to rework the ‘stuck’ place this puts me in. I decided to just leave the moment is accessible, then juxtapose it with something else."

Other discoveries came along the way. From the context of the hard relationships and rigid gender roles he experienced and witnessed growing up, to the ways in which people struggled to challenge them, the story of L is a big fragment among many others.

Araguz had never identified as queer, and owning a queer identity didn’t come through until after the book was accepted. But his trusted in-progress readers saw traces of that part, and encouraged him to let them come more to the surface.

“I kept asking why people wanted to read this queer identity, and it took a dear friend speaking about me in the collective first person—us—that I started to own that part of my identity. I did not go into this book expecting to call out homophobia in Latinx culture, much less in my own family."

He saw another temptation in turning toward cultural critique as a defense mechanism to avoid.

“This is more like a consciousness trip,” he said. “I tend to over-intellectualize with context and research. Fragmenting helped me from doing that. I’m learning in therapy that I use over-intellectualizing as avoidance, so instead, this was more about feeling. There are some light reflective moments, but after the scenic and emotional ones. I could have endlessly gone externally about Latinx identity, poverty, gender, eating disorders, but here all that is more about the messages I was being sent. All I saw was guys fucking up, and I felt like that was the expectation, like that was going to be me eventually. There’s also the danger of speaking for the other people in my life. With family, it’s my story and they are part of my life. I try to remember that this was my experience, this is what it was like, and everyone was suffering. We were all just looking at each other across that chasm.”
Marra visits Socially-Conscious Storyteller class

Anthony Marra, author of the New York Times Bestseller A Constellation of Vital Phenomena, visits the creative writing students of Olivia Cerrone's First-Year Seminar SF 1185 class, Socially-Conscious Storyteller, on Dec. 1, 2023 to discuss his latest novel, Mercury Pictures Presents. This author visit is the culmination of a semester-long study on the practice of historical fiction to examine themes of social justice, identity, war, and intergenerational trauma. Marra spoke about his research and creative writing process involved in navigating historical fiction with a social justice bent. Mercury Pictures Presents takes place during WW2-era Hollywood and intersects the lives of many refugees and political refugees who made the motion picture industry their new home/identity. The book deals with themes of war, displacement, immigration and the discrimination against Asian Americans through Hollywood's portrayal of racist stereotypes, along with the destructive impact of the U.S. government's "enemy alien" restrictions against Italian and German Americans, among other socially-conscious themes. Marra also engaged with the students' creative writing. Over the course of the semester, students completed various creative writing assignments, one of which required them to write a short piece of historical fiction that involved their own research. Cerrone also hosted a reading and conversation with Marra about the content, craft, and process of writing his new novel on Nov. 30 at I AM Books in Boston's North End.

Remembering David Ferry
Poet, Professor, Translator

David Ferry passed away on Nov. 5, 2023 at the age of 99. For more than a decade he taught a one-credit course for Classics Minors each semester at Suffolk, and offered two annual poetry readings. During his time at Suffolk, he received the National Book Award in Poetry for his book, Bewilderment.

His 2017 translation of Virgil’s Aeneid, was reviewed by the critic and poet April Bernard: “He has some sort of uncanny connection to the great poet” (Virgil), and suggested that his translation was superior to those of John Dryden, Robert Fitzgerald, and Robert Fagles. Classicist Richard Jenkyns called Ferry’s Aeneid “the best modern version... both for its loyalty to the original and for its naturalness in itself.”

Students often remarked on David’s kindness and modesty, and his congenial sense of humor—a warm point of contact across the great divide in age. I’ll never forget his serious trust in them, willing as he was to bring in his Aeneid translations as the lines were taking shape, and asking our students if they found the verses “convincing.”

For all who knew David, Horace’s Ode “To Censorinus” ends on a line that translates his own magnificent life:

All promises having been kept.

—George Kalogeris

See also Ferry’s obituary in The New York Times.

Comics artist talks hand-drawn stories

Karl Stevens (left), comics artist and author of seven graphic novels, visits Wyatt Bonikowski’s honors first-year seminar course, SF-H182: Heroes, Anti-heroes, and Outsiders. Students learned about Stevens’s journey as a comics artist and his work as illustrator of the new book, Mother Nature, a superhero ecological revenge thriller written by Jamie Lee Curtis and Russell Goldman. Students were also able to get books signed afterwards and ask questions.

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