As one historian of creative writing has noted, the term creative writing implies something in progress, imperfect, not yet complete (D.J. Myers, *The Elephants Teach*). And to a certain extent, that is one of the assumptions behind the way I teach this class. At the same time, the history of creative writing reveals a constant tension between such a process emphasis and one that insists that the creative writing class must also lead toward the making of aesthetic products that reflect critical standards. In this class my purpose is to provide some kind of reasonable balance among these three crucial factors: process, product, and standards.

The history of creative writing classes is also rooted in the master/apprentice relationship. That is, students (apprentices) explore their talents under the supervision and assistance of an artist who, by his or her accomplishments and commitment to creative work, has earned the status of master. I don’t much like the connotations of that term and don’t see myself as your master, but the concept itself has persisted since at least Classical times (and probably has even more ancient origins) and has been responsible for a good deal of the very best art the world offers. So this is another assumption underlying the class. Most of my work has been in poetry, but I began as a writer of short fiction. I have been writing and publishing my work for the last five decades—a fact that makes me a bit nervous even as I type it—and you can rest assured that I know rejection up close and personal. Almost all writers do, and perhaps the hardest part of serious writing is learning how to cope with and get beyond such “failure.” For any of you interested in the details of my creative history, I will keep a resume in my office, and you are welcome to stop by and look it over any time. You can also order at least two of my books from various online bookstores. I keep a few copies in my office for anyone interested in sampling my work. I might also say that I have been teaching creative writing for over 30 years. It is the most challenging class I have ever taught, and, like the perfect curveball, I am still trying to get it right.

**What Are The Goals For This Class?**

1. To give you the space and encouragement (time is something you have most of the control over) to engage in and extend your own creative writing talents. I assume, by the way, that you all have such talents, possibly to varying degrees. But you all are creative, and you all have the potential to grow. I will ask you to extend yourself as far as you can and in the process to aspire to the condition of art. That is a tall order, to be sure, but that is my goal. I hope you will make it yours as well.

2. To help you see how good poems and stories are put together, how they are crafted.

3. To help you direct your work at a critical audience. To do that, I will ask you to define your audience this semester as readers and editors of the many mainline quality literary magazines being published in America today. Part of my job is to teach you what the values of such a readership...
would be.

4. To assist you in acquiring a working vocabulary of techniques and craft issues accomplished writers possess.

5. To help you become discerning and lifelong readers of serious literature.

6. To help you understand the difference between a creative process and a final aesthetic product and, ideally, to give you the experience of both.

7. To assist you in learning more about yourself and your worldview as well as to encourage you to regard such self-exploration as the raw material for art.

What Traits & Attitudes Might Help You Succeed in This Class?

Students who do well in this class typically possess all or most of the following:

1. An interest in expressing feelings and ideas through words and a willingness to share these with others, which may be risky.

2. Actual interest in (or at least tolerance for) the details of American English—syllables, syntax, grammar, punctuation, spelling, rhythmic strategies, the effect of verbal sonic devices on the ear and their feel in the mouth ("mouthfeel").

3. Interest in the structure of lyric and narrative forms.

4. Introspectiveness about what William Faulkner called "the old verities"—compassion, pity, truth, beauty, joy, despair, etc.

5. Some knowledge of and respect for the humanistic tradition (literature, history, philosophy, painting, music, dance, sculpture, theater). Science may not be technically humanistic, but it has a great deal to offer any serious writer.

6. Willingness to take yourself seriously as a creative writer for fifteen weeks.

7. Willingness to learn literary principles and to risk breaking them for intended artistic effects.

8. Openness to criticism and willingness to offer other writers suggestions for improving their writing.

9. Respect for and commitment to the importance of revision.

10. Deriving pleasure from both the play of imagination and serious play with words and sentences.

What Will You Have to Produce in this Class?

I will ask you to complete one short story (about 10-15 pages typed) and three poems (one of these in an assigned form). I will also regularly assign what I call "finger exercises," brief writing assignments intended to teach specific matters of craft that are important in the making of stories and poems that reflect the aforementioned critical taste.

Please Note: With respect to fiction: This is NOT a class in entertainment fiction, the kind you might read in popular magazines like Field and Stream or Reader's Digest or Seventeen (Playboy and Esquire are notable exceptions). Nor is this a class in the writing of science fiction (sorry) or fantasy literature (sorry again). And finally, this is not a class in writing stories according to the formulas, clichés, and tastes of commercial television or Hollywood films. With respect to poetry: This is not a class in writing what the popular press and greeting card companies typically offer to the public as poetry. In the case of both genres, our standard is literary fiction and poetry of high quality, the kind of stories and poems you would find in any major contemporary literary magazine. Broadly speaking, our subject matter this term is more or less the present condition of real human beings, and we want to treat this "condition" as serious writers in one way or another always do, with intelligence and artistic discipline. Admittedly, there is considerable latitude for creative approaches within such a topic and its various formal options.
How Will We Spend Our Time This Semester?

We will divide the class roughly into two halves, the first devoted to poetry, the second to short fiction. We will, however, spend a very brief amount of time this week talking about your story assignment so that you will have more time to think and plan and to begin working on it.

Within each of these two basic halves of the course, we will work on our own writing and study the work of accomplished writers to learn as much as we can about the ingredients of artful poems and stories. During the first few weeks of each unit, we will discuss readings in our texts, complete finger exercises, and work with one another in small groups. The primary aim of these various activities is to give you both theory and practice in the composing of poems or stories. In the last week or so of each unit, we will workshop your manuscripts. For the most part, I will choose the mss. for the full class workshop sessions. By the time the class is over, each of you should have had a poem or a story discussed by the entire class. In addition, you will all have work reviewed critically in your small groups.

What Deadlines Will I Have To Meet?

Here are the main deadlines, as I see them now at least (they are all subject to revision):

End of Week 3—Poem 1 due
End of Week 4—Poem 2 due
End of Week 5—Poem 3 due
End of Week 10—Story due

In addition, you will have various finger exercises due, mostly at intervals during the early parts of each of the two units. I will also ask you to read assignments from each of your two texts. These readings must be completed prior to the class for which they are due.

For each of the major deadlines above, you are to bring typed and carefully edited copies on 8 1/2 by 11 paper for the entire class, including me, and we will distribute them. Please have a class folder for these manuscripts, for finger exercises, and for all handouts so that you do not lose any of this material.

***These are important deadlines, and you must meet them.

How Will I Be Graded?

I will not grade individual assignments, and most of my feedback will be oral rather than written. I would not grade you at all for the class if I didn’t have to. But obviously I do, so here is how I will assess your work:

I will consider five broad categories; the % of the final grade for each is in parentheses:

Participation (20 %)
Finger Exercises (20 %)
Products (30 %)
*Process (30 %)
Attendance (no % assigned because I expect nearly perfect attendance; see note below under Final Notes)

*The Process category refers explicitly to the amount of revision prior to and following discussion of your work. We will talk about this frequently in class, but you should know that almost all serious writers value the process of drafting and re-drafting. I have sometimes had as many as 40 or 50 drafts of a poem before I was satisfied. I know you are busy, and I don’t expect to see that many drafts, but I DO expect to see ample evidence that you worked and re-worked your poems and story. NB: I will not accept the excuse that you did all of your revising on your computer and saved only the last draft or two. Make
hard copy of all drafts and save them for your portfolio. I look at the differences among drafts, so don’t simply run off multiple copies of essentially the same draft in order to pad your Process section of the portfolio.

**You might note that in one way or another roughly 70% of the course final grade is based on process criteria. How you do with respect to those criteria is pretty much in your hands. It will be my job to judge the products—the final poems and story you submit. In making my judgment, I will assess the overall literary quality of your writing, but I will also look for evidence that you were trying to apply the knowledge of craft issues stressed in your texts and in our discussions.

You must complete all assignments. Failure to do so will have a major impact on your final grade. I also expect you to turn all assignments in on time. Clearly, it’s better to turn an assignment in late rather than not at all, but a pattern of late submissions will also have a significant impact on your final grade.

How Will I Submit My Work For A Final Grade?

You will put all of your written work—finger exercises, drafts/revisions, and final drafts—in a portfolio, one that has a binding mechanism. You should use dividers to mark off each section of the portfolio so I can make my way easily through your work. The first page of your portfolio must be a retrospective assessment of your work and your experience with the class. *This retrospective should be typed, single-spaced, and at least one full page.* We will talk more about this assignment toward the end of the term.

This portfolio is due no later than the last day of class prior to exams.

Some Final Notes

*You are always welcome to stop by my office or to schedule a conference with me in order to talk about work in progress. Conferences can be valuable, and in my role as “master” I am a resource I hope you will be willing to take advantage of.*

**A final word about attendance: I will give you two misses free, no penalty. You should be careful about when you take these cuts. For example, missing class on a day when an assignment is due is obviously not a good idea. Each miss thereafter will cost you dearly; for example, if you had an A and three misses, it would become an AB; four misses lowers it to a B; five to a BC; six to a C; seven to a D. Anything beyond that would revert to an F. If you start with less than an A, you can see the problem.

FINAL NOTE: MTU’s Affirmative Action Officer has asked that all faculty include the following statement on each course syllabus:

MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA). If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students, (2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head, or the Affirmative Action Office (3310).