

Experimentation Creates Unique Penn English Course

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Penn Professor Charles Bernstein and the 10 students in his English 111 Experimental Writing Course.

During a lifetime of teaching, [University of Pennsylvania English](#) professor [Charles Bernstein](#) has created and tested various writing “[experiments](#)” that now number 95 on a list used by professors and writers worldwide.

Bernstein used many of those writing exercises in his [English 111](#) “Experimental Writing” course last semester. The students published their work in an online book, [Paper Excuse](#), in December.

The course was special not only because of the unique publication, but because it will be the last “Experimental Writing” class Bernstein will teach; he is planning to retire from the classroom at the end of 2018.

“I think of this class as a seminar on the nature of writing, the different kinds of structures and constraints within writing,” said

Bernstein, who is Penn's Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature.



Charles Bernstein's English 111 at the University of Pennsylvania

The students produced an online book of their work.

“It feels like a poetry workshop,” he said. “The aim, though, isn’t to create poets or good poems but rather to be aware of the structures of language and so enrich your ability to write.”

Although he is a poet, Bernstein usually teaches literature courses in the [School of Arts and Sciences](#). “Experimental Writing which he has taught 10 times during his 15 years at Penn, is his only creative writing class.

The course’s format, Bernstein said, is fairly consistent, pulling from his curated list of experiments, creative approaches to writing poems and “fomenting” comments.

Much of the work in the course is collaborative. During the first few classes the students passed around a yellow legal pad and wrote an evolving poem in response to one another’s contribution. Then one of the students used that raw material to create a new work.

“It is very specific to the group and they get to know one another working in this way,” Bernstein said.

The [course syllabus](#) includes an array of novel assignments. Cut a poem into sections and recombine it, translate a poem into another dialect, cross out words and make a poem from what remains. Jot down dreams every morning for 30 days and weave the thoughts into a poem. Write a poem in the form of an instruction manual or travel guide or a baseball lineup. Make a poem of 26 words, each beginning with the next letter of the alphabet. Write a poem inspired by a work at the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) or the [Barnes Foundation](#). Listen to a bird song and transcribe it into words.





The course employed several writing exercises, including graphic design, as in this one by senior Jack Kohler.

Several students said an assignment to write for one hour, using a stream-of-consciousness approach, was particularly impactful.

“This simple task gave me more insight into 'stream of consciousness' writing than all my exposure to that style had ever before,” said Jack Kohler, a senior from Rocheport, Mo., who said the class was one of the most enriching experiences he had at Penn.

Senior Regina Salmons said she used that approach to write with the prompt “I remember,” resulting in one of her favorite written pieces.

“It created some really cool stuff,” said Salmons, an English major from Methuen, Mass.

Using an online program to “scramble” one of her poems to re-order the words was another favorite assignment for Salmons because “it gave me a totally radical product,” she said, adding that Bernstein was one of her most influential professors at Penn.

Students were required to attend readings at Penn’s **Kelly Writers House**, and some of the authors visited the class, including poets James Sherry, author of the book *Entangled Bank*, and Peter Gizzi, author of *In Defense of Nothing: Selected Poems, 1987-2011*.

Of the 10 students in the class last semester, about half were English majors and the others from STEM programs, including engineering and nursing.

“The class is radically different each time, focused on the thinking and interests and approaches of the enrolled students,” Bernstein said. “The small group works in a way that fully engages the students. They are always reading and commenting on each other’s work. They have a shared life at Penn, and their writing for the class intensively reflects their experience as undergraduates.”





Freshman Kelly Liu made a paper sculpture in the shape of a cauliflower referencing the first line of one of her poems.

The *Paper Excuse* publication reflects the range of the 14-week semester. Each student chose and created a section, and Bernstein put the book together.

Over the years, the form of the class publication has changed, from stapled paper copies to a chapbook to a website.

“Publishing writing and exchanging writing is crucial,” Bernstein said.

The final assignment, in addition to the online publication, was to make an object to share with the class related to the course.

“In this pervasive digital environment, it’s valuable to create, and share, something physical,” said Bernstein.

Freshman Kelly Liu of Palo Alto, Calif., made a paper sculpture out of words that looks like a cauliflower, referencing the first line in one of her poems “extol every moment hold it in your palm like cauliflower.”

Sophomore engineering student Justin Swirbul of Tuxedo Park, N.Y., used 3-D printing to create a wood puzzle, cutting the pieces with a saw, with poems visually arrayed on the top. He presented a puzzle piece to each student.



Sophomore Justin Swirbul made a 3D puzzle featuring poems by all the students.

Bernstein’s influence is “transformative,” said **Julia Bloch**, an English professor and director of the **Creative Writing Program** at Penn. Bernstein worked with her on her thesis when she earned her Ph.D. at Penn.

“As a creative writing professor, he’s the best I’ve had,” said Kohler, who has decided to pursue a master of fine arts in creative writing in part because of the course.

Salmons also said the class has inspired her to continue writing and publishing poetry.

“I feel completely prepared to start writing my senior honors thesis, writing a poetry book of radical/experimental poems,” she said. “The class gave me such a fresh perspective on writing and instilled in me such a sense of confidence and sense of direction.”

Bernstein, who had been awarded multiple fellowships and prizes, has published books of poetry, collections of essays and librettos for operas. He has collaborated with painters on books and art installations. He is also co-director of **PennSound**, an open archive of poetry sound files.

“I like the way he gives us lots of room to experiment week-by-week,” Kohler said, “but in class asks a lot from us in terms of speaking out for ourselves, of defending ourselves as writers who have a right to be good poets someday. He has been a big help to me in my writing life.”