

Certificate in Life Writing

Awarded by West Dean. 1 year, part-time course

Tutors

Joanna Moorhead, Hannah Vincent and Katy Massey



Programme Specification

This Certificate in Life Writing course is delivered in three weekend course units spread across the year, self-directed study and a final submission of 5,000 words. It is delivered by experienced educators and authors, Joanna Moorhead, Hannah Vincent and Katy Massey.

The course aims to draw together a clearer understanding of the skills, knowledge and qualities that lend themselves to good life writing and is underpinned by a clear understanding of some of the forms and craft that enable the writer to produce high standard work.

Each weekend unit will be based in the inspirational environment of West Dean College's historic rooms. It is aimed at writers who wish to commit to an extended programme of study without having to make a significant time commitment and who will benefit from a cohesive course that offers focus on the key elements of successful life writing over the course of an academic year.

It also offers a potential pathway to those interested in applying for the College's Higher Education programmes in Writing and Publishing.

Aims

An Introduction

To introduce you to the key areas of Life Writing, including memoir, biography and autobiography, and to explore the similarities and differences. The course will also offer a brief overview of the history of life writing: from Plutarch and Vasari to Johnson, Woolf, Holroyd and Hermione Lee to present day.

It will encourage you to consider various aspects of being a life writer, including:

- What right do I have to be a life writer? Whose life am I telling? Who 'owns' the story? Issues around invading others' lives. Sensitivities and how to deal with them.
- Introduce the skills of research and shaping your story.
- Introduce you to the idea of transformational writing; how we change and are changed by what we write and how we write it.

Skills Development

The course will offer a stimulating and varied learning environment to enable writers to develop their skills around voice, style, tone, pacing and prose. Writing exercises will be used, along with discussion, textual analysis and a subject overview.



It will facilitate constructive critical thinking/reflection, editing and rewriting skills, contextual and critical studies.

Essay/Final writing

On the completion of the course, you will submit the first 5,000 words of a piece you have developed on the programme.

Submission date for 5,000 words: 5 September 2026 (two months following the final unit).

Feedback from the programme tutors: the following month by 5 October 2026.

Course tutors

Joanna Moorhead is an award-winning journalist and author. She's been writing for the Guardian and the Observer for the last three decades, including many pieces about her own experiences of parenting, travel, illness and family life. Her work has also appeared in a wide range of other UK newspapers and magazines, including The Times, The Independent, The Art Newspaper and the Financial Times.

Her memoir, *The Surreal Life of Leonora Carrington* was published by Virago in 2017; it tells the story of the artist who was a member of her family, whom she got to know in Mexico at the end of her life. Her second book *Surreal Spaces. The Life and Art of Leonora Carrington* was published by Thames & Hudson in 2023. Joanna has been a tutor on writing courses at West Dean College for the last ten years and has also been a visiting lecturer in journalism at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Hannah Vincent is a novelist, short story writer and an award-winning playwright. While her first novel, *Alarm Girl* (2014) features a setting and family circumstance that bear no relation to her own, she considers the book highly autobiographical. Her second novel, *The Weaning* (2018) draws on her experiences of working as a childminder and several of the stories in her 2020 story collection, *She Clown and Other Stories* (shortlisted for the 2021 Edge Hill Prize) are inspired by lived experience, though readers of the collection will appreciate they are also flights of imagination...

Hannah has taught several Life Writing weekend courses at West Dean and she co-designed the Creative Non Fiction Programme for The Creative Writing Programme in Brighton. She has a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of Sussex - the subject of her thesis was female autobiographical practice.

Katy Massey has been an acclaimed memoirist, novelist and tutor for over 15 years. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing and her 2020 memoir, *Are we home yet?*, was shortlisted for the Jhalak and Portico prizes. Her Dagger-shortlisted crime novel, *All Us Sinners*, will be followed by a sequel in 2026.



Katy's approach to teaching both fiction and life writing focuses on helping every writer find their voice. She does this through teaching the craft of writing and by fostering their innate creativity. Her work is inspired by the alchemy of literature, which enables her to bring beauty, significance and meaning to everyday experiences, and lend voice to the ordinary lives ignored by history.

Programme overview

This course is designed for writers who want a thorough and cohesive course on Life Writing. It offers a deeper and broader raft of teaching, designed to enable you to take on a piece of longer writing. The focus is primarily on the development of the craft of writing in the context of Life Writing. At the end of the third unit, you will be expected to submit the first 5,000 words of a work in progress for feedback from the tutors.

Unit 1: What Is Life Writing?

Tutor: Joanna Moorhead | 30 January-1 February 2026

The first unit will include:

- An introduction to Life Writing (history and possibility)
- Form, style and voice
- Whose life am I writing? Who 'owns' the story? Issues around invading others' lives. Sensitivities and how to deal with them.
- Research
- Writing exercises

Unit 2: Writing and Transformation

Tutor: Hannah Vincent and Katy Massey | 24-26 April 2026

This second unit will include:

- Working with memory, ideas of 'truth' in writing
- Using writing to 'find out' our story: sketching, journaling, morning pages
- How are we changed by what we write?
- Exploring what stories we want to tell
- Writing exercises



Unit 3: Your Story

Tutor: Joanna Moorhead | 3-5 July 2026

- Where does your project sit in the market? Who is this for, and who is it trying to reach?
- Shaping your story: the fundamentals of good storytelling
- How to find an agent and a publisher
- Editing: how to make your prose sing
- Writing exercises

Completion

On successful completion, you will receive a Certificate of Completion and be offered an interview for the MA in Writing and Publishing should you wish to continue your studies and project. The MA is set up to facilitate the production of a completed novel but is exploring expanding its remit to facilitate Life Writing.

Entry requirements

- A commitment to attending all three units.
- Some experience of writing or attending a short writing programme
- An ability to work respectfully and thoughtfully in a small group of fellow writers
- An interest in and awareness of the life writing genre

For standard Terms and Conditions, please refer to our online Short Course brochure. Specific Terms and Conditions include a commitment to attend all three weekend course dates listed as no alternative course date can be offered for any that you are unable to attend. Therefore, no refund can be made for the course fee for any weekend you are unable to attend.

Please bring

Your usual writing equipment, notebook and pen and/or laptop

Course fees

The course fees are payable in advance of study.

Course fee: £1,057 (non-residential, payable in one instalment covering all three units - payable by 19 December 2025 (or on booking if after this date).

Accommodation is available at an extra cost at our Sussex campus. Find out more about our accommodation options and costs on our website.