



English 351-01: Fiction Writing

Fall 2013

MWF 1300-1350, Grubbs 302

Instructor Information

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Course Description and Prerequisites

English 351: Fiction Writing focuses on practicing the craft of fiction and the production of advanced works through peer workshops and extensive reading. The prerequisite for this class is English 251: Introduction to Creative Writing.

Learning Outcomes and Course Objectives

This class will be taught face-to-face and will approach literature in two ways: by reading and by writing. By reading classic and contemporary short fiction, students will come to understand the methods and techniques established writers use. By writing, students will come to understand the structure and form of stories from the inside, will understand literature as a living entity, and will develop skills as literary individuals. By the completion of this class students will:

- Produce approximately 10,000 words of original, competent writing
- Elevate the quality of their writing in both critical and creative genres
- Develop a critical understanding of short fiction
- Enhance their enjoyment of serious literature and film
- Engage in writing as an open-ended process
- Understand methods of revision and the importance of revision to the writing process
- Recognize the relationship of writer and audience
- Experience writing both as an individual and community activity

Writing. Writing is a process that relies on memory and imagination, on deliberation and discovery. In this class you will use the same learned and intuitive methods used by major writers, and you will produce at least three short stories. You will practice writing in class with informal assignments, and you will also write a series of short response papers that analyze the readings and help to develop your understanding of literary forms.

Reading. Reading well is crucial to writing well. Reading well—reading carefully, reading wisely—is also crucial to your success in this class. If at some point you encounter works containing language or situations that make you uncomfortable, please continue reading the material in a mature and scholarly manner. Always feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Workshop. A large part of this course will be devoted to the traditional writing workshop. Students will read each other's work and write a short critical response to the work, and will also make marginal comments on the work itself. This will provide helpful feedback to the student writer and important experience in critical reading to the student reader.

In-Class Work. On many class days we will write in class and we will read our writing out loud. You are expected to participate in these activities and in other class discussions and collaborative activities.

ALWAYS BRING PENS (OR PENCILS) AND PAPER TO CLASS.

Feedback. Occasionally I will request written questions from the students, questions dealing with the class, writing, or literature in general. Once or twice during the semester I will request anonymous feedback from the students, seeking to better understand what works and doesn't work in the class readings, activities, or instruction. What *you think* is important.

Teaching Philosophy

I do not believe that reading and writing are based on "talent," on mysterious accidents of nature, or on gifts of generous muses. Rather I see reading and writing as skills that can be taught and learned. All my teaching is based on this perspective, a perspective that places the responsibility for success or failure on the individual student. But it is also an extraordinarily liberating perspective, I think, for in a talent-free classroom students can shake off their inhibitions and face what I see as an important truth: that with desire and hard work, anyone can write a competent essay or short story or poem. The skills of reading and writing are there for anybody to use and to learn. Once they are learned—owned, as it were—they become the personal possessions of the learner. I have many times in my life experienced the transformative power of literature. Though this power is not directly transferable from me to the students, I think it is my responsibility as a teacher to help my students achieve transformation, if they want it, to give them the opportunity to learn these skills, to use these tools, to open their lives to literature and to change. Words have power. Words change lives. And I am in the word business

Required Texts and Materials

The required text for this class is:

- Singleton, George. *Pep Talks, Warnings, and Screeds*. Cincinnati: Writers Digest Books, 2008.

A number of other texts will be posted to Canvas.

You will also need the following supplies:

- a few standard-sized file folders with pockets
- one or two notebooks
- Internet access and an email account
- a stapler
- lots of paper

Recommended Texts

While it is generally agreed that students cannot learn to write from a book, there are a great many fine books that give detailed and interesting analyses of the various aspects of writing literature. These include:

- Butler, Robert Olen. *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*. New York: Grove Press, 2005.
- Hills, L. Rust. *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- King, Stephen. *On Writing*. New York: Pocket, 2002.

Grading Policies

Grading

This course will use the standard letter grading scale:

A = 100...90, B = 89...80, C = 79...70, D = 69...60, F = 59...0

Grade Determination

Homework & Extra Credit	14
Attendance & Participation	13
Story One	5
Story Two	6
Story Three	7
Final Portfolio	55

Due Dates

Story One: Boy Meets Girl	Monday, September 23
Story Two: Hero Sets Off	Wednesday, October 16
Story Three: Stranger Rides In...	Wednesday, November 6
Final Portfolio	Friday, December 13

Course Topics, Calendar of Activities, Major Assignment Dates

Stories

The Stories You Will Not Write. You will not write stories that take place in the future, or on other planets, or on alternative, fantastic Earths. You will not write stories about orcs or elves or princesses, about unicorns or talking toothbrushes. You will not, in other words, write fantasy or science fiction.

I would further advise you to avoid writing stories dealing with perverse and violent crime—stories, for example, that deal with serial killers, serial rapists, school shooters, creepo stalkers, etc. I have read *dozens and dozens* of student stories dealing with these allegedly transgressive topics, and I've never read a good one. They require little imagination, and yet are quite difficult to write. Don't bore me. Don't waste your time. Be creative.

The Stories You Will Write. You will write stories that take place on and in this everyday (but often very magical) world. In other words, you will be writing standard, literary fiction, stories that deal with the mysteries and desires of the human soul and with life as it is lived in 21st century America.

The Three Basic Stories. The late critic and novelist John Gardner once claimed that there are but three basic stories:

- Boy meets girl / girl meets boy
- Stranger rides into town
- Hero sets off to seek her/his fortune

Gardner may well have meant this as a polemic, as something to argue over in class (and, by all means, if in your reading you find a story that falls outside this description, please bring it to the attention of the class and let us argue over it). However, for the purposes of our class, we will take Gardner's paradigm at face value, and you will write one 2500 to 3500-word story of each type.

The Final Portfolio

On Friday, December 13, you will submit a portfolio of your best writing. The portfolio will consist of:

1. Two short stories, revised and polished.
2. A cover memo of 250-500 words describing your writing process and your experience in this class

I really do expect the work in your portfolio to be *revised*. Please note that revision does not mean merely correcting a few grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors (though that of course is important). Revision means re-envisioning your work—re-imagining it, re-creating it, transforming it into something better than what you started with. Your revised stories should be *substantially* better than your original submissions.

Attendance & Participation

Your level of participation is important in this class—your knowledge will grow not just from your writing but from your questions, your comments, and your ideas. You are expected to attend all classes and participate in discussion, workshops, and other activities.

Homework & Extra Credit

For each reading assignment, you will write a short (150 to 250-word) response and post your response to Canvas. These will be awarded a completion grade, and are designed to help you sort out your thinking about the texts. Due dates will generally be class time on the specified day. Late submissions will be awarded ½ credit. Submissions falling short of the required word count will be awarded ½ credit or less. Extra credit will at times be offered, which can help boost your grade.

Distinguished Visiting Writers

Several writers will be visiting campus this fall to present their work. You are encouraged to attend these events, which will count as valuable extra-credit assignments.

- September 5th: Dr. Stephen Meats, Poet
- October 25th: Simon Ortiz, Poet

- November 21st: Whitney Terrell, Fiction Writer

Conferences

At some point in the second half of the semester I will ask you to make an appointment to come to my office for an in-depth discussion of your writing. But you are, of course, always welcome to come in at any time to talk about your work. In fact, I would strongly recommend that you do!

Tentative Course Schedule

week	m	w	F
1	A19 Syllabus Workshop	A21 Singleton, 1-50	A23 Singleton, 51-100
2	A26 Singleton, 101-150	A28 Singleton, 151-206	A30 A Student Story
3	S2 Labor Day! No Class!	S4 Salinger, "For Esme..."	S6 Egan, "Found Objects"
4	S9 Gray, "La Negra Blanca"	S11 Johnson, "Emergencies"	S13 White, "Five Things"
5	S16 McClanahan, "Phone Numbers"	S18 Everett, "Afraid of the Dark"	S20 Jones, "The Pugilist at Rest"
6	S23 Story 1 Due / Writing Focus	S25 Writing Focus	S27 Revision Workshop 1
7	S30 Revision Workshop 1	O2 Revision Workshop 1	O4 Revision Workshop 1
8	O7 Revision Workshop 1	O9 Revision Workshop 1	O11 Fall Break! No Class!
9	O14 Revision Workshop 1	O16 Story 2 Due / Writing Focus	O18 Writing Focus
10	O21 Revision Workshop 2	O23 Revision Workshop 2	O25 FSU! No Class!
11	O28 Revision Workshop 2	O30 Revision Workshop 2	N1 Revision Workshop 2
12	N4 Revision Workshop 2	N6 Revision Workshop 2	N8 Story 3 Due / Writing Focus
13	N11 Writing Focus	N13 Revision Workshop 3	N15 Revision Workshop 3
14	N18\ Revision Workshop 3	N20 Revision Workshop 3	N22 Revision Workshop 3
15	N25 Revision Workshop 3	N27 Turkey!!!!	N29 Turkey!!!!
16	D2 Revision Workshop 3	D4 Revision Workshop 3	D6 Revision Exercises
post	D9	d11	d13 Final Portfolio Due!!!!

Additional reading assignments may be posted to Canvas....

Other Pertinent Course Information

Classroom Policies

Syllabus Supplement. Important university policies can be found on the Syllabus Supplement:

<http://www.pittstate.edu/dotAsset/eef4b5e9-4261-43dc-913b-2be85609cbeb.pdf>

Or go to the Registrar's Office page, click on "Forms," and look for the Syllabus Supplement.

Attendance. You are expected to attend class according to the times published in the fall schedule of classes. Students who arrive more than 20 minutes late will have their attendance mark reduced by one-half.

Authorized Absences. Students are expected to attend class and to complete all assignments. You are responsible for providing evidence to substantiate "authorized absences." If you know in advance that you will miss a class, you are responsible for informing me. Excessive unexcused absences (more than **three**) will result in the final course grade being lowered at least one letter grade. Students who have not attended at all or who have been excessively absent from may be dropped from the course.

Classroom Behavior. I define disruptive classroom behavior as anything that interferes with my ability to conduct the class or as anything that distracts students from the instructional program. This can include sleeping, talking, **TEXTING**, reading the newspaper, or playing with your phone (always remember to turn off your phone when you enter the classroom and **keep it OFF your desk**). Please pay attention. **PLEASE RESPECT YOUR FELLOW STUDENTS.** Disruptive or inappropriate behavior can be cause for dismissal from this course; except in the most egregious cases, you will receive a warning.

Food: Please do not inflict your eating habits on the rest of the class!

Incomplete. An incomplete grade may be assigned in rare instances when a student is unable to complete a course due to circumstances beyond his/her control. You must have completed a majority of the coursework to be eligible for this consideration..

Mid-Semester Grades. Grades reported at mid-semester will be based on homework, presentations, weekly writing assignments, and in-class assignments. This is not 50% of your final grade.

Grades. Grades are not negotiable. Your final course grade will be based on your work in the course. If you are concerned about a grade, please see me during office hours or make an appointment.

E-mail and Fax. Because of security issues, I will not discuss grades via email or fax. I will, however, be happy to answer email questions about the readings or assignments.

Academic Integrity

According to the PSU Code of Students Rights and Responsibilities, "Education at the university level requires intellectual integrity and trust between faculty and students. Professors are obliged to master their subject and present as fair an account of it as possible. For their part, students are obliged to make an honest effort to fulfill both the letter and the spirit of course requirements. Academic dishonesty violates both integrity and trust. It jeopardizes the effectiveness of the educational process and the reliability of publicly reported records of achievement."

The Code defines academic dishonesty as “unethical activity associated with course work or grades.” This can include:

- Giving or receiving unauthorized aid on examinations.
- Giving or receiving unauthorized aid in the preparation of notebooks, themes, reports, papers or any other assignments.
- *Submitting the same work for more than one course without the instructor's permission.*
- Plagiarism.

For more information on Academic Integrity, please see the Code of Students Rights and Responsibilities:

<http://www.pittstate.edu/audiences/current-students/policies/rights-and-responsibilities/academic-misconduct.dot>

Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact the Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Office at

<http://www.pittstate.edu/office/eoaa/>

Final Note

When the person who is grading your papers writes a syllabus, or hands you anything that says, “These are my values—this what I’m looking for,” you should always believe them.