

WRITING 241 SYLLABUS Creative Writing: Fiction

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Office Hours: TR: 2:30-4:00pm & appointment
Class time & Place: NSH 207, Tuesday/Thursday 1:00-2:20
CRN 36431
Web Page <http://cf.linnbenton.edu/artcom/english/milletl/web.cfm?pgID=54>

Text **Required**

1. Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991). ISBN 0-393-32124—X
2. Bullock and Weinberg, *The Little Seagull Handbook*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company). ISBN 978-0-393-91151-0
3. One stout, black, three-ring binder for your material. Keep all your material in this and bring it to every class.

Strongly Suggested:

- Checkoway, ed., *Creating Fiction*
- James Pickering, *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Stories*.
- *Best American Short Stories*, any edition.

Prerequisites

- WR 121 or equivalent: and a habit of reading short fiction wherever you find it. If you don't read it, you can't write it well.
- ENG104 (Introduction to Fiction) is strongly recommended for success in this class.
- If you do not have the prerequisite skills for this course, drop the class immediately. You will need the skill sets taught in both of these courses to succeed in this 200-level course.

Course Description

Hello, and welcome to all of you. The goal of this class is to bring short fiction to life and to help you in the effort to write your own short stories. The format will be based on the workshop model. We'll study the elements of short fiction (dialogue, setting, character, conflict, etc.), write our stories, have them workshopped, and discuss them in class groups.

This is a workshop for literary fiction, a genre with very specific criteria. It is character-driven and dynamic. The tension derives primarily from psychological elements in play. The characters are unpredictable and life-like. They should not have fur or fuzzy ears. They cannot be dead or

ghosts. Consequently, keep your stories centered on real people and realistic scenarios. Verisimilitude is key, so base your stories on what you know. For instance, if you haven't been in a war, don't write about one. There will be plenty of opportunity for you to write your western, sci-fi, fantasy, battle, or horror stories in other venues, after you've made some headway understanding how to craft the story itself.

Pornography or needlessly violent material (action or language) will not be accepted. Let's maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect, good taste, high artistic standards, and a respect for our college environment.

Stories

Each of you will have your story discussed in the class workshop, followed by a conference with me in which we will further discuss the story. After that, you will revise the story.

Course Assignments (All work must be typed, double spaced, in Courier #12 font)

1. **One short story** in standard manuscript format (<http://www.shunn.net/format/story.html>), 15 pages in length, courier 12pt, double-spaced: 50 points. Marked down for poor grammar and formatting.
2. **A substantial revision** of that story, assembled in a packet ready for mailing: 50 points. A flawless draft.
3. **Creative Writing Exercises:** We'll do these in class. Attendance is required for credit.
4. **Workshop participation and peer critiques:** 10 points each.
 - a. Each student will write a thoughtful, considerate, response-letter to the author of a story discussed in class. ALL stories are to be ready thoroughly for discussion—no exceptions.
 - b. If you have not read a story, your grade for that day's review will be reduced by 1/3.
 - c. On the day the story is to be discussed, bring to class your **hard copy** of the student story assigned to you, complete with your comments in the margins and a response-letter stapled to it.
 - d. These letters are to be typed and signed, ***with an extra copy for me***. These will be graded (√-, √, √+) and must come in on time to get credit. Always be prepared. See the details for these below. This includes
 - e. **Oral participation** in class. Obviously, you have to be present to take part. The quality of your participation will count in the final determination of your grade. Marks deducted for arrogance and domineering.

Each student will have one story discussed in the class workshop. We will organize this together. Remember to distribute enough copies of your "workshop" story for the class and me ***On The Date it is Due***, which will be one week prior to its actual discussion date. All stories must be legibly typed DOUBLE-SPACED, formatted professionally,[1] and carefully proofread. Failure to get copies of your story in on time means you'll miss your workshop experience and the grade. No exceptions.

Hard copy of your feedback letters are due in class on the day we workshop the stories. No exceptions.

Evaluation[2]

Your story is worth 100 points of the class grade, and the rewrite must be substantive enough to earn that second 50%. But because this is a workshop and the process of writing is tied to the process of critiquing and comprehension—that is the grasping and deployment of fictive components—your participation in class is a part of your developing craft. The process of learning the craft takes precedence in this class over the writing of the story, or the product, so the grade for your story will involve your participation in the process—discussion and critiques.

Here are the specifics for the story.

- I'll make comments on the story with my impressions appended, including suggestions I expect to see implemented to varying degrees in your revision.

Format

Format your stories appropriately using see the template provided (correct margins, courier font, title page, header data aligned top right, etc. Bookmark this site: www.shunn.net/format/story.html .

Format your critical work using the Chicago Style. See any handbook, our web site, or http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c10_s1.html for details.

Late Work & Attendance

Beyond **one** pardoned absence during the term, your failure to be present will reduce your grade by 1/3 each time. Attendance is not an option in a workshop, especially when we meet just once a week. Nor is failing to provide the writers with their feedback an option. That, too, will reduce your grade by 1/3 each time.

Late peer reviews and professional critiques will not be accepted. We have an entire week to read and prepare. Do your critical work early and distribute it on time.

Stories that are not distributed by the due date will not be workshopped. Time is of the essence for all of us. The grade for that story will drop by 1/3 each day it is late.

Resources

My Web Page (<http://cf.linnbenton.edu/artcom/english/millet/web.cfm?pgID=54>) has a list resources and templates, including an important one to OSU's M.F.A. program in creative writing.

NOTE: Submit your stories to me by uploading them to the Moodle site as documents in Microsoft WORD format or .rtf and in Courier 12 font. Electronic submissions must be attached files with a subject line that begins with your last name, the class, the days, and the assignment, in that order. If you do not, they may be delayed or returned to you unopened. For example:

Hemingwaywr241TRstory#1.

E-mail me at terrance.millet@linnbenton.edu if you have any questions.

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(Further information at <http://po.linnbenton.edu/BP1015 - Nondiscrimination and Nonharassment Policy.pdf>)

Tentative Story Schedule

(Subject to revision, with notice)

Week 1: Assigned reading from the text:

Introduction to the syllabus and course. We schedule story submissions.

- 1. Creative Writing Exercise written in class.
- 2. Discussion of the components of literary fiction; we share perspectives.

Ù Writing discussion: the Heart of a story.

Week 2:

- 1. Story #1, 2, & 3 handed out:

- a.
- b.
- c.

- 2. Creative Exercise shared:

Ù Writing discussion of selected sections from the text: *Making shapely Fiction*. We talk about Poe’s “Single Effect” in structuring the short story.

Week 3:

- 1. Story #4, 5, & 6 handed out:

- a.
- b.
- c.

- 2. Story #1, 2, 3 Workshopped.

Week 4:

- 1. Story #7, 8, & 9 handed out:

- a.
- b.
- c.

2. Story #4, 5, 6 Workshopped.

Week 5:

1. Story #10, 11, &12 handed out:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
2. Story #7, 8, 9 Workshopped.

Week 6:

1. Story #13, 14, & 15 handed out:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
2. Story #10, 11, 12 Workshopped.

Week 7:

1. Story #16, 17, &18 handed out:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
2. Story #13, 14, 15 Workshopped.

Week 8:

1. Story #19, 20, & 21 handed out:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
2. Story #16, 17, 18 Workshopped.

Week 9:

1. Story #22, 23, & 24 handed out:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
- Story #119, 20, 21 Workshopped

Week 10:

1. Story #22, 23, 24 Workshopped.

Final Exam: Portfolio due ready for mailing.

The portfolio consists of a stamped manila 9x 12 envelope addressed to a publisher of your choice. The envelope will contain:

1. A SASE.
2. A cover letter.
3. A final copy of your rewritten story, proofed and formatted correctly.

I will review the contents and mail your submission.

The Workshop in Practice

“READERS: Please type an end-letter to the author of each story we discuss in workshop, and make smaller notes in the margins of the story itself. Before attaching this letter to the story, make a copy of it for me. I will collect these at the end of class. No late critiques will be accepted, nor those written during class. I will read them, mark them "done" in my grade book, and let you know if I see a problem. Please feel free to ask me for further advice or clarification during office hours.

In your letters and your oral remarks, begin by identifying the story's strengths. Name two or three (more than a sentence!) in the piece and give specific examples to support your impression. "I liked this" is dull and vague and will help no one. The idea here is to point out to the writer his or her best shot for a powerful, convincing, and authentic piece of writing. If you are at a loss, simply point out a specific moment that caught your interest and explain what worked for you there. If the moment is not adequately developed, or has some other problem, please say so—but focus first and in detail on what the writer "did right." or try to explain what you think the writer was trying to accomplish. Then, you may elaborate on areas that you feel need more attention.

Here are some sample areas to address. Choose one or two to focus on, and state at the top of your submission the topics you will be addressing.

1. **The story's beginning:** Tell the writer what the opening did for you--what it promised, and to what degree he or she followed through on that promise.
2. **Character:** do you have a strong sense of the characters? Which ones are best drawn; which are vague, unbelievable, etc. Is the protagonist in a realistic and original predicament? Is it predictable? Melodramatic? What makes it seem so? OR is there not enough at stake as the story proceeds.
3. **Point of view:** Can you define it? Is it consistently employed throughout the story, or does it wobble and shift? What is the effect of that wobbling? What gets lost? (This question is a big one--give it some thought.) Is this the best point of view for the story?

Why or why not?

4. **Detail**, imagery and setting: are the details sharp, sensory, and strictly necessary to the character and story? What is extraneous? Or not adequately developed? Why would a stronger sense of detail and place benefit this particular story? Be very specific.
5. **Language and style**: Often it is the writer's language that makes a story seem rushed or predictable or trumped up (melodramatic). Where is the writer's voice at its most believable? Give a specific example or two. Now ask yourself where the writer has fallen into overwriting, generality, abstraction, cliché—in a word: falseness. We all do it every day, but in this class, it is our work to recognize and zap it. We are looking for clear, vivid prose and the voice of a living, breathing person. Good writing—fiction or non-fiction—has a spoken quality. Be on the look out for stiffness and false formality, or the equally false super-cool slang. A test: does the writer seem more interested in him or herself than in the characters and their situation? If you feel this is the case, tactfully suggest what elements of the writing are clouding up the picture. Also be on the lookout for grammatical errors, typos, and misspellings: you need not try to correct them all, but do point out any patterns or problems you noticed, and mark one or two in the manuscript. Our goal is to bring these down to a bare minimum, and to train ourselves to be careful in all matters of craft from large to small. You will be irritated by typos and carelessness in others' manuscripts. Therefore proofread your own before you submit!
6. **The story line**, or dramatic action: is there too much plot jammed in, so that the story's action and characters seem summarized rather than alive on the page? Where could the writer slow down? What (and who) could the writer throw out of the story altogether—and why? Or, conversely: does not enough "happen?" Is there a rising action? A climax? Does the ending both surprise and seem the "only way" it could have ended? Look at one scene: does it rise to its full potential before the writer goes on? Does the progression of scenes make sense to you? Why or why not? Again, give an example to support your criticism. You might give an example of a specific scene (or even a small moment) that was convincing and well done, then contrast it to one that was not convincing or pertinent to the story.

WRITERS: Please sit quietly and stoically through discussion of your story. Do not interrupt, explain, apologize, etc. Just listen and take notes, because sometimes the workshop discussion bears very little resemblance to the written comments. At the end of the discussion period, I'll give you a couple of minutes to ask any questions that weren't covered in the discussion. *But again, please confine yourself to questions.* After class, you can discuss your own hopes and fears with your classmates. And please try to recycle all that paper after you've gleaned what you want from the commentaries!

EVERYONE:

I've thrown a lot of questions and material at you here. I don't expect you to try to cover all of this when you write your critiques and talk in class, but I do expect you to use this sheet as a guideline.

1. First read the student's story once through without marking it, then

2. Take a look at the critique sheet and focus on say, two out of the five areas of inquiry that seem most crucial.

Your critiques, over time, should show a range of analyses--in one you might find yourself concentrating on language and point of view; in another, you will be concerned with the story line.

Always, always, always, support your comments with specifics from the text, and explain what you mean. The only 'mean critique' is the unsupported one, and that, finally, suggests that the analyst is not serious about the craft of writing. Remember: I am reading these very closely, for tone, specificity, support, and constructive analysis." [3]

APPENDIX I: What A Grade Means

What Your Story Grade Means in this Workshop

A:

1. Turn your story in on the date it is due.
2. Read your peers' comments thoroughly and be able to tell me which advice seemed the most helpful and insightful, and why. And the reverse. Be prepared and articulate.
3. Your story will contain a minimum of grammatical errors and typos (1 small error max per page), and will follow the correct submission format.
4. Your story uses concrete details, has a sense of voice and place, and contains a minimum of clichés in language and situation.
5. The story contains some kind of conflict or tension within the main character.
6. The dialogue is believable and helps create a sense of the character's desires and fears, and contributes to the story's action and complication. None of it should be extraneous or not bear on the central issue.
7. Your story shows that you have full control over the point of view that you've chosen.
8. There are at least two complex, round, dynamic characters on stage at some point in the story.
9. It is clear that you have a grasp of the basic narrative structure: beginning, with its initial problem; rising action, in which the problem develops and intensifies; crisis, or epiphanic moment; and denouement, or tying it up with a resolution of the beginning problem.
10. The story feels fresh, vivid, original, and genuinely forays into a landscape of inner conflict and experience.
11. The story delves into deeper issues than lie on the literal level of action. That is, the story is active on the level of metaphor and applies to the human condition. It is not pulp.

B:

1. Turn your story in on the date it is due.
2. Read your peers' comments thoroughly and be able to tell me which advice seemed the most helpful and insightful, and why. And the reverse. Be prepared and articulate.
3. Your story will contain a minimum of grammatical errors and typos (2 small errors max per page), and will follow the correct submission format.
4. Your story uses concrete details, has a sense of voice and place, and contains a minimum of clichés in language and situation.
5. The dialogue has moments of believability, and it's clear that you've made an effort to portray the characters' fears and desires through it.
6. The story displays an effort to control the point of view you've chosen—a few errors are all right.
7. There are living, breathing characters who convince us they are real.
8. The story shows that you understand at least one of the elements of story structure.
9. The story has plenty of fresh, original, vivid writing, and a clear attempt to explore inner conflict.
10. The story falls a few pages short of the minimum.

C:

1. Turn your story in on the date it is due.
2. Read your peers' comments thoroughly and be able to tell me which advice seemed the most helpful and insightful, and why. And the reverse. Be prepared and articulate.
3. There are grammar and typo errors in your story. The readers have spent too much time correcting mistakes.
4. The story, while managing to provide some concrete detail and making an attempt to create characters, still contains clichéd language, flat or stereotyped characters, or melodramatic situations. Nevertheless, the effort is clear.
5. There are moments of inner tension in the character, and a good try at bringing the story to a crisis.
6. The story falls short of the minimum by nearly half.

Some sort of D

1. Turn your story in late.
2. Turn in a story so full of grammatical errors they detract from the story.
3. In spite of perceivable efforts at implementing dramatic action and characterization, the story is clichéd and melodramatic.

Failing

1. Plagiarize.
2. Turn in your story late.
3. Turn in a story so full of formatting or grammatical errors that they detract from the story.
4. Fulfill none of the story-mastery elements listed in the grade chart.

[1] See www.shunn.net/format/story.html for the details.

[2] See Appendix I for grading details.

[3] We are sharing Professor Marjorie Sandor's guidelines for her creative writing courses at OSU. Our WR 244 class is equivalent to WR 324 at OSU, and it's important that we speak the same language.