Course Guidelines

The dream of this class is to help new writers explore the possibilities of fiction writing. How do narratives catch spark? What types of moments, images, voices and situations excite our attention? What form should the work take? How can a writer effectively imagine characters, and how do we download those imagined characters onto the page? And of course: once we’ve written that tentative first draft, how can we step back, see what needs to be done, and build to a finished and satisfying final version?

The heart of this course is fiction and the discussion of imaginative writing. Through a series of short initial exercises and weekly readings, we’ll consider ways of cultivating and expressing one’s fictive vision, and we’ll think seriously about craft and technique.

After several weeks we’ll begin workshop discussions of each member’s longer original stories. Both as a class and as individuals, we’ll refine and articulate responses to works in progress. Critiquing is the complex task of recognizing possibilities in unresolved works and sorting out how to get there from here, and it’s possible you’ll learn more from critiquing your colleagues’ work than from the discussion of your own writing.

The short writing assignments are designed to clarify your understanding of technique and to spark your ideas for longer works, and as such, they will sometimes will have defined guidelines. The longer assignments will have a few general guidelines and will be more open.

I. WRITING

We’ll begin with exercises, both in-class and take-home. I’d like you to use these as an opportunity to stretch and play a little, and though I hope you’ll take the work seriously, please don’t attach too much ego to these shorter writings. In fact, the silliest or most misguided exercise you create here may someday morph into your most profound finished story. Let yourself go!

In the same spirit of playfulness and lack of ego, I hope you’ll be willing to share your work with the class, and that you’ll listen to the work of your fellow writers in the spirit of generosity, enjoyment and constructive critique. Credit will be given for class participation.

After the first month of class each of you will present a complete work of fiction for group discussion—the classic “workshop” experience. Your submission should be deeper, longer, and more seriously considered than an exercise, even if the premise is comic, ribald or fantastic—and your story must be—to the best of your abilities—complete. This means you should attempt a beginning, a middle, and an end. (Novel excerpts are not ideal.) For these reasons reason I advise you to begin working soon on something that intrigues you. Cobbling together a story the night before it’s due is sure to lead to embarrassment when your work is discussed.

This is not to say that I expect the longer stories to be flawless; this is, after all, a workshop, and most of what we consider will be honorably in progress. But I’d like you to be able to stand behind your submissions. To that end, a few fundamentals:

Most student stories will be between 6 and 12 pages long, though obviously page length is incidental to quality. If a story is only a few pages, take a minute to ask yourself if you’ve truly developed your idea or merely sketched out a scene (there’s no uniform answer here). Students who are purposely working very short may submit two pieces simultaneously if they like, though this is not required.
Conversely, if your work is unusually long, ask yourself if it truly needs that length to reach its destination. Some stories do, of course, but ask yourself if your superlong piece needs a little cutting.

Absolutely do us all the courtesy of proofreading your work before you pass it out. I recommend printing out a hard copy for this, rather than attempting to proofread onscreen. More about editing techniques as the course progresses.

Later in January we’ll create a schedule for student submissions and also discuss the circulation of manuscripts. Your work should be available to your readers the weekend before it is discussed.

Manuscripts should be double-spaced in a standard 12-pt typeface such as Times or Times Roman.

In addition, you will be asked to write a brief response to each story submitted for workshop. More on this later.

Most weeks there will be one additional reading assignment for which a short online response is also required. (Please see below).

And finally, I’d like you to attend a public reading of your own choosing and create a one-page reaction—using the term reaction loosely, if you like. Your page may be a straight review or critique, a response in kind, a dramatic monologue, biting satire, tragic screenplay, lavish Broadway musical, or anything else you can dream up.

Please note:
It goes without saying that all writing you submit for this course must be your own. Likewise, responses to previously published essays and stories should be both your own words and your own ideas.
(An exception will be made for creative work that is metafictional or pointedly collaged out of found texts, but even in these cases the writer’s intention should be clear and the attributions made available to the reader.)

Please speak to me if you have questions about this policy. The penalty for intentional plagiarism is failing the course (at my discretion).

II. READING

Most weeks a previously published story or short essay will be assigned. Once you’ve read the assignment, please go to our class blackboard site and post a brief remark. These remarks needn’t be comprehensive; a handful of smart sentences will suffice, and one keenly developed observation is preferable to a ramble that doesn’t go very deep. Please post your comments by noon on the day we have class. Don’t forget to proofread!

It’s axiomatic that writers and readers have plenty in common, but it’s not necessarily true that all writers are careful readers. For this class, especially, I feel you will grow as a writer if you develop your skills as an active, thoughtful reader, so here are some guidelines:

In reading your colleagues’ fiction, try thinking like a writer—that is, strategically. What choices has the author made, whether in the imagining of scenes and introduction of characters or in questions of style and form? How has the author shaped an exercise to his or her own preoccupations? And how are these choices serving the work? Try to be aware of each author’s successful decisions as well as his or her stumbles.

Consider the assigned fiction the same way. What is the author doing? (Can you describe it?) What makes this story unique? Is there a particular relationship (honest, unreliable, confiding, or something else) between author and reader? How is that relationship achieved?
III. CLASS PARTICIPATION

I encourage you to join in classroom discussions; a portion of your final grade is keyed to participation. Most weeks, the class session will be divided among several activities: readings, exercises, class discussion, and so on. Please take the opportunity to join the proceedings at all stages of the class.

Usually I’ll ask that exercises be shared with the rest of the class. If for some reason you’re uncomfortable reading your work aloud, just let me know. I do expect you to turn in all assignments.

When commenting on colleagues’ work, please be aware that there’s a human being beyond the page. Writers are natural egotists, and most of us invest significantly in our work, even if we don’t pull off every attempt. At times it may feel necessary to tell someone a hard truth: a particular tactic isn’t working or a certain character strains credulity. Please remember that at such times it behooves us all to be precise and clear in our comments and to avoid undue wounding once the point has been made.

Before speaking in class, please think about what you want to say. This is a mandate in all seminar courses, of course, but it especially bears repeating in workshop, where sensation and intuition can color our observations. Often a moment’s reflection will help you clarify your point, and that’s a benefit to both you and your listeners. And just as a personal preference, I value concision.

Of course, I expect you to listen when others speak.

IV. ATTENDANCE

Because this class is interactive, attendance is mandatory. Every writer needs readers, and each participant depends on the rest of the group for help and criticism, so absences are strongly discouraged.

If you miss a class, you remain responsible for all reading and writing assignments, and if you have work scheduled for submission, it’s still your duty to get it to me and your colleagues. If you miss more than three classes, you will not pass the course.

Emergencies, of course, are a different matter. If you are unable to fulfill your responsibilities due to a personal or family emergency, please contact me at your earliest convenience so we can accommodate everyone’s needs. Ditto religious observances.

V. CLASSROOM DECORUM

I expect you to be on time to class and to pay attention during our sessions. I also hope you will join in group discussions, but please don’t carry on private conversations while others are speaking. During in-class exercises, please grant your colleagues the courtesy of a quiet room. If you finish the assignment, use the extra time to improve your work.

If you need to leave the classroom for personal reasons, you may do so, but please minimize these interruptions. Cell phones and similar devices should be turned off during class. Do not step out of the room to make phone calls or conduct personal business. Each class session will include a short break midway through.
VI. OFFICE HOURS

I encourage you to schedule private conferences with me as needed. I’m happy to discuss your work, the mystery of writing in general or the realm of literature—as well as the structure and management of our time together. I will be in my office by 5pm on class days, but I have the office reserved beginning at 4, so I’ll come then if need be. If these times are impossible for you, let me know, and we’ll work something out. I do my best to be available to students, though I am generally not around on weekends.

Note that I’m likely to mark up your homework and story manuscripts liberally. It’s just my way. If my scribbled comments are not clear to you, please do visit my office so I can explain my thoughts. It does neither of us any good if we’re not communicating!

VI. GRADERS

Exercises are graded √+, √ or √-; consider these marks a general estimation of how the piece stacked up within the class and not a reflection of your overall worth. Blackboard responses are graded the same way, and if you want to know how you’re doing in that area, you need simply ask. Unsatisfactory exercises may be rewritten if the author chooses, but if you do, please include both the original and the rewrite when turning a second version in.

Final grades are based on class and discussion board participation, exercises and a final portfolio, due at our last session. More on this later, but your portfolio will most likely contain:
  A response to one public reading.
  (Most importantly,) a strong revision of your workshoped story plus a short “principle of revision” in which you discuss how you approached the rewrite.