Writing workshops are at ease with considerations of and deliberations over ways to start stories, as evidenced by the many prompts designed to encourage writers to jump into new material. Less relaxed are discussions about ways of finishing stories. This is due, in no small part, to our wise reluctance to commit to a definition of a good story. We recoil from definitions that are constructed from the weak scaffolding of exclusion; we abhor definitions that foreclose the possibilities of the unanticipated or unimagined. But far too often these obstacles becomes pretexts for leaving stories incomplete. This semester, however, rather than struggling over how to or why we feel the need to define what makes a good story, we will focus on crafting complete stories that satisfy each author’s intentions, whatever they might be. The goal will be for each writer to produce two stories that s/he believes are, indeed, complete (or in striking range of completion – i.e.: the author knows what else needs to be done and has committed to the time required to do so).

The only assumption with which will approach this work – a fair one, given that the course description indicating as much – is that each workshop member has some experience writing stories and is familiar with the basic elements of fictional craft – plot, characterization, voice, setting, point-of-view, etc. Class assignments will focus instead on a review of particularities, such as sentences, paragraphs, and dialogue.

Throughout the semester it will be essential to remember our purpose: this is a creative writing workshop, not an editorial board or publishing house where market values or other unfixed dynamics result in publication. There are no correct or incorrect answers in this writing workshop, or ironclad rules to memorize and abide by. Success, instead, will be the measure of how hard you work. Success will mean that you’ve invested yourself in becoming a more knowledgeable writer than you were when you entered this class whatever the outcome on the page, be it a polished piece of prose or a story that still feels just beyond your reach. Success will mean demonstrating an investment in the class itself by acknowledging that the writing life of your classmates is as important as your own.

CLASS STRUCTURE

For the first half of the semester, the opening of each class will focus on stylist strategies for telling stories, during which the assigned published stories will be referred to as examples. The topic and stories for each week are outlined on the syllabus. Francine Prose’s book Reading as a Writer will serve as our topic guide. Corresponding stories will be selected from the required anthology The Art of the Short Story or will be available on our Blackboard site as PDFs or External Links.
The second half of the semester will be devoted entirely to student work, with occasional reading assignments from the anthology and elsewhere.

Active, thoughtful, and serious participation by all students is fundamental to your learning process and to the success of these discussions. The quality of this participation will represent a significant portion of your final grade. This does not mean that you must speak at great length; rather, you should comment on specific aspects of your classmates’ stories in order to help them to identify what you believe are their strengths as well as specific opportunities for further development.

You will find that no readings are assigned for a number of weeks. This affords us the opportunity to consider additional topics or revisit those discussed earlier in the semester. Speak with me or email me if there is a subject or an additional story in the anthology that you would like us to look at.

WRITING REQUIREMENTS

Stories-In-Progress

You are required to produce two stories this semester. You will be writing 3 versions of each story, for a total of 6 required submissions. One version will be presented in class; the other two versions will be handed in to me. You will work your first story until spring break. You will work on your second story for the balance of the term. I will be assigning personal due dates to each of you for your own stories. This is less confusing than it sounds so long as you follow the schedule.

Workshop Manuscripts  (must be distributed to the entire class in printed form—no emailing)

Each student will on 2 occasions present longer, original manuscripts in class for workshop discussion. You are free to write about anything you chose.

We’ll work out a schedule for these workshops during our first class meeting. You will hand out copies of your story in class the week before your story is to be discussed so that each of us has ample time to read your manuscript and write a critique. These manuscripts should run somewhere between 8-12 pages, doubled-spaced, 12-point font. These manuscripts should be thoroughly proof read and corrected prior to distribution. Discussions about manuscripts containing recurrent grammar and punctuation errors often get sidelined by grumbling about mechanics rather than focusing, as they should for the sake of the writer, on the story being told. Spell Check and Grammar Check highlight many errors, but there is no better method for finding errors than reading your own work aloud. (Make certain that your Spell Check is set to Formal.)
The Short Story – A Workshop in Revising

If your story is much longer than 12 pages, ask yourself if you have included more than you need, if you are unnecessarily repeating material, or if you have gone off topic. If your manuscript is much shorter than 8 pages, ask yourself if your story is fully developed, or if there’s more to add that would enrich the story that you’re looking to tell. There is no magic number of pages that constitute a short story – or a novel, for that matter. I do, however, want you to experience the authority of a fully developed story. Likewise, while many short stories run longer than 12 pages, I want you experience the short story as an art of condensation, as opposed to the novelistic world of elaboration. On a practical note, it too often isn’t possible to give due diligence to the workshop stories at hand as well devote ample time to writing your own stories when reading long manuscripts in a workshop of this size.

Workshop Story Critiques (e-mail to me before class every week)

When you are reading the work of your classmates, do so with pen in hand and make succinct and legible notes on the manuscript. Also write a brief, narrative response to the work – a paragraph will suffice – in which you focus on some specific aspect of the story with respect to the manner in which it is crafted. While all authors appreciate complements, be sure to use these critiques as an opportunity to identify what you believe is the point of the story, as well as the way in which the author might enrich their story through the further employment of an element of craft. For example: Is the dialogue moving the forward story, or is it merely filler? Is it possible to distinguish one character from another, or should the author further develop attributes of characterization. Which ones? Try to be as specific as you can and as constructive as possible.

Print out your comments and give to the author along with your annotated copy of their manuscript. Be certain to sign your comments on both the manuscript and your note. Also e-mail a copy of your comments to me no later than 12:00 noon on the day of class. Write or paste your comments into the body of the e-mail (do not send as attachments).

READING

Published Stories

Each week, I will assign one published short story. Most of these stories are contained in the required anthology The Art of the Short Story (Goia, etc., editors). Other stories, etc. will be available on-line as PDFs or links, as indicated. The other required text is Reading Like A Writer by Francine Prose. These inexpensive paperbacks are the only texts for the class. They have been ordered and are available at Shakespeare & Company at 716 Broadway. Bring your anthology to class every week so that you can refer to the stories during discussions.
NUTS & BOLTS

Grades

Earning an excellent grade in this class is simply a matter of working very hard. All that I ask is that you work with serious intention (even when writing humorously) on all of your creative writing assignments and critiques; hand in all of your writing assignments on time; closely read all of the assigned stories; be an active and purposeful contributor to class discussions and have at least a very good if not perfect attendance record. As pointed out earlier, a writing workshop is not a publishing house. The goal is to learn about story writing by writing stories. In fact, you can earn an excellent grade even if your 2 stories don’t yet achieve all that you wish for them.

What will make it impossible to get a good grade?

- Missing deadlines. You only have six crucial deadlines for material this semester. These dates are the equivalents of exams. Regrettably, missing a deadline will result in a reduction of your final grade. You must distribute your workshop manuscript in class on the two dates that you are scheduled to do so. If you are sick, have a friend hand deliver them.
- Having an attitude that undermines the esprit d’ corps of the workshop. Please leave all attitude far away from this workshop.

Attendance

We only meet once a week, which doesn’t afford wiggle room for absences. If you have to miss a class due to illness or an emergency, let me know by email. You will still be responsible for returning annotated workshop stories to your classmates, along with the narrative commentary that you also email to me. Unfortunately, it won’t be possible for you to receive a passing grade if you miss 3 classes or more. Speak to me if you anticipate missing 3 classes so that we can be in touch with one of the deans about finding a way to help you work this out.

On a final note, be on time to class. If you arrive late, wait outside in the hallway rather than opening the door and letting yourself in. Don’t wander off, because you will be invited into the room when we reach a natural break in the action, much in the way that theater goers who arrive late are ushered to their seats between scenes. Because of the nature of the workshop environment, it’s far too disruptive waiting for latecomers to get themselves settled. Two late arrivals to class or late returns from break equal one absence. Speak to me if you have another class that ends right before ours meets and you have to get to Bobst from some distant NYU location. We’ll see if there’s a way to work it out.
Breaks

Two breaks are scheduled at some point during class, obviating the need for anyone to leave the room at other times except for an emergency. Because of our location in Bobst, 10-minute breaks don’t give you much time to leave the building in search of something to eat or drink. Feel free, though, to bring beverages and food with you.

Cell Phones + Computers + Other Electronics

Regrettably, this bears repeating: Turn off your cell phones, computers, and other electronics during class. If you must be available to receive an emergency call, let me know in advance so that we can anticipate your leaving the room. Text messaging, web surfing, etc. during class, will be treated as an absence (as well as a crime against humanity).