

## ENGL 201-01, Introduction to Fiction Writing, Spring 2001

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# Introduction to Fiction Writing

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## Introduction:

You will perhaps have heard it said that great writing cannot be taught. This is, in some ways, certainly true. Not, I believe, because you must be born with some mystical gift in order to write good fiction, but because good writing, the best writing, challenges what we think we know about good writing to begin with. In other words, some of the best short stories break the "rules" of good fiction writing.

Nonetheless, readers have certain expectations when they sit down to read a story. The more you know about those expectations, and what effect meeting them has, the more effective your writing will be, even if you should choose to (as I hope all of you will) defy those expectations.

This course will give you the tools needed for a rudimentary understanding of the effects your writing choices may have on your readers, and the reasons why a writer might make one or another stylistic, plot, character or structural choice.

## Requirements:

1. Readings from Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories. Reading a variety of masterful short fiction will allow us to see the techniques we are discussing in action, and also to explore how some authors have challenged the conventions of short-story writing.
2. Related discussion questions. To learn from your reading, you will begin to have to read critically, from the perspective of a writer. Each short story may be a textbook in how writers succeed in compelling and engaging their readers. The discussion questions will guide your critical reading. Reading questions should be written in journals.
3. Writing Exercises. A variety of in-class and journal exercises which will allow you to work in a directed way with specific new concepts in writing.
4. Participation. Thoughtful, respectful participation in the workshopping of others' stories. Workshop etiquette will be established in the first class session. It is essential that students follow protocol to maintain an active, critical and considerate environment in class. Essentially, students should offer specific praise and criticism, signaling specific sections of the text to back up their opinions. Students should keep in mind that every writer is invested in the success of his or her work and be sensitive in the phrasing of criticisms. Often it is helpful to think in terms of what works, or is effective, and what could be improved, or doesn't seem to be serving the story's apparent purpose. Students receiving criticism should recognize the privilege of having their work read closely by their peers and be open to hearing ideas for improvement. Students who are unable to follow protocol will be asked to drop the class.
5. Peer Critiques. Each student will be required to read twice and write commentary of 200 words on each story prior to the day it is workshopped.
6. Each student must produce three complete short stories of length 5-7 pages, typed and double-spaced in 12-point font. These stories should be spell-checked and corrected for basic grammatical errors. They should represent the student's best possible work. The topics will be open, but may draw on class or journal exercises.
7. Revisions: Each student will complete one revision in response to workshop critiques.
8. Portfolio: Students will keep all work and handouts in a divided three-ring binder which will be evaluated as a whole at midterm and finals. Students will not receive credit for work which is not in the portfolio
9. Attendance: Missing more than four classes will result in a severe grade penalty. Professor reserves the right to fail students for excessive absenteeism. According to Rhodes College policy, professor is required to report to the dean after three consecutive absences.

## Materials

1. The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories, Tobias Wolff, ed.
2. Portfolio
3. In binder 3-hole punch
4. Two composition books, clearly labeled with your name on the cover for assignments

## Technology

All stories will be submitted electronically. Stories may be dragged from your hard drive or a disk on any Rhodes-networked computer to the folder called "Conroy-Goldman In-Box." This folder is on the Alpha server, in the "Academic Volume" in a folder called "Faculty Folders."

I will then make combine a give weeks' stories into a single document, which you will print, read, and comment on for class.

Stories are due by class time, the class before they are to be workshopped, but you will receive a schedule detailing this during the second week of class.

All class notes will also be available on the academic volume. I may ask you to print these out and bring them to class occasionally.

## Grading Scale

Participation: 10%

Journal: 10%

Short-short 1: 20%

Short story 2: 20%

Short story 3: 20%

Revision: 20%

Fiction will be graded as follows:

A range stories:

Most of the following are true.

Plot contains a complete arc, without red-herrings, loose ends and a satisfying ending, unless the violation of one of these conventions serves a coherent purpose in the piece.

Content: Subject matter is unusual, or considers the familiar in a fresh light.

Characters: Main-characters are multi-dimensional, their actions are motivated in an accessible way, and they are emotionally engaging, unless the violation of these conventions serves a coherent purpose in the piece.

Language: Sentences are coherent, appropriate for the subject matter and consistent in diction. Word choice is precise, original, vivid and consistent. Spelling and grammar are nearly flawless.

Theme: Stories take on a coherent theme which, while accessible, avoids being explicit or essayistic. Story invites the reader to explore the underlying meaning, but still offers something to a reader who fails to grasp the author's intent. Unless, of course, the violation of these conventions serves a coherent purpose.

Risk: Stories, perhaps in one of the ways described above takes creative risks. By this, I do not mean pointless formal experimentation, though successful formal experimentation might qualify as a risk. What is harder, and more impressive, is emotional risk—willingness to write about the painful, the uncomfortable, the strange. To try to access this material, ask yourself, "what am I afraid to write," then, write it.

Balance: Story contains enough front story and back story to make the piece both exciting and accessible. Story contains an appropriate balance of exposition and in scene, such that the events can be explored in limited space, and the reader becomes engaged in the moment, unless the violation of these conventions serves a coherent purpose.

Focus: Story's opening directs the reader to chief thematic/character concerns, raises compelling plot/psychological/thematic questions, story does not digress too far from these concerns, and story concludes in a way that addresses these concerns, unless the violation of these conventions serves a coherent purpose.

B range stories:

A few of the following may be true. If most of the following are true, story is likely to be in the C-range.

Plot contains a complete a complete plot, but perhaps a stray end, character or digression which are not justified by theme/concerns.

Content: Subject matter may be familiar, but contains significant notes of freshness, such as an unusual character or a new setting, and real emotion.

Characters: Main character is multi-dimensional. Others may need development, but work on the page as is. Characters are emotionally engaging, and their actions are mostly motivated in an accessible way, utvotcsap.

Language: Language is precise and vivid, for the most part. Occasionally the writer may use a cliché or general, abstractions where a specific detail or action might serve better. Language may not always be appropriate to the subject. Diction is largely consistent. Spelling and grammatical errors do not interfere with understanding.

Theme: Writer has made a stab at thematic, but it is not fully realized or accessible, or it is excessively moralistic in presentation.

Risk: Writer may be trying something new, but story stays in the safety zone with regard to elements listed above.

Balance: Developing back or front story, using more in scene, or expository transitions might make the story more compelling or accessible.

Focus: Story may appear to have two parts, to digress from focus, or a scene may appear expendable. Ending may "leave us hanging."

C range stories:

Though containing some elements in the B or C range, a few of the following are true:

Plot does not contain a complete arc. The story may lack real conflict, lack a satisfying ending, or characters may not change in any significant way.

Subject matter is familiar, or lacks emotional content.

Main character needs development. Minor characters may be flat or stereotypical. Characters' actions may seem inconsistent with the reader's understanding.

Language: Some spelling or grammatical errors get in the way of understanding. Story relies on clichés, generalities or abstractions to convey meaning. By and large, language is comprehensible, and contains occasional moments of freshness, expressivity or well-made sentences.

Diction may be inconsistent. Language is in places inappropriate to subject matter.

Theme: Writer has not attempted to layer plot with other meanings, or plot and theme do not serve the same purposes.

Risk: Writer has not taken creative risks with regard to above.

Balance: the lack of back story, front story, exposition, or in-scene significantly flattens or confuses the story.

Focus: Story veers significantly away from opening, or contains irrelevancies, or ending does not address questions raised in the piece.

D range stories: contain most of the C-range elements, to the extent that the story does not seem complete, or is difficult to follow, even with careful study.

Story may not meet length requirements.

F: Story is grossly under length requirements, is incomprehensible, plagiarized or late.

Jan 10	Syllabus and Introduction to Class	Mar	Spring Break: Mar 3-11
12	Model Workshop. Write a list of things you've lost in the past year. Include the tangible as well as the intangible. Choose one item off the list, and write a short description of it such that a reader can understand its value.	12	Workshop: Group 3. Write critiques for Group 3. <b>Group 4, stories due.</b>
15	MLK jr. Day—no classes	14	Workshop: Group 4. Write critiques for Group 4. <b>Group 5, stories due.</b>
17	Drop/Add ends. Descriptive Writing. Read "Girl" and "A Vintage Thunderbird." Underline four physical descriptions in the stories that you respond to, and try to identify why you like them.	16	Workshop: Group 5. Write critiques for Group 5. <b>Group 1, stories due.</b>
19	Story Models. Read "Cathedral."	19	Workshop: Group 1. Write critiques for Group 1. <b>Group 2, stories due.</b>
22	Character. Read "Men Under Water." Complete the story questionnaire for a story you might write.	21	Workshop: Group 2. Write critiques for Group 2. <b>Group 3, stories due.</b>
24	Character. Read: "The Fat Girl."	23	Last day to withdraw with a W. Workshop: Group 3. Write critiques for Group .
26	Exposition vs. In-Scene. Read "Emergency" and "Train." Complete a character questionnaire for a character from your story questionnaire.	26	Experimental Vs. Traditional Fiction. Read handout.
29	Exposition vs. in-scene. Write a scene for the following piece of exposition. "The year after the divorce was difficult." Confine your scene to a brief moment in time, and use no exposition in the piece. After you've finished, write a two-sentence piece of exposition that describes what has taken place in the scene.	28	Beginnings and Endings. Read "The Darlings." Write a short piece with two separate sections which are not explicitly linked to one another
31	Front Story vs. Backstory. Read "Home" and "Where Are you Going Where Have you Been." Answer the following questions: At what moment does the story begin? What are two ways in which the events that take place before the beginning of the story are conveyed? How does the author move you back into the present time? Group 1, stories due.	30	Jayne Anne Phillips visits. <b>Group 4, stories due.</b>
Feb 2	Workshop: Group 1. Write critiques for Group 1. <b>Group 2, stories due.</b>	Apr 2	Workshop Group 4. Write critiques for Group 4. <b>Group 5, stories due.</b>
5	Workshop: Group 2. Write critiques for Group 2. <b>Group 3, stories due.</b>	4	Workshop Group 5. Write critiques for Group 5.
7	Workshop: Group 3. Write critiques for Group 3. <b>Group 4, stories due.</b>	6	Class Cancelled
9	Workshop: Group 4. Write critiques for Group 4. <b>Group 5, stories due.</b>	9	Figurative Language. Read "Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta." Write a short description of an extreme climate. <b>Group 1, stories due.</b>
12	Workshop: Group 5. Write critiques for Group 5.	11	Workshop: Group 1. Write critiques for group 1. Write three original metaphors each for a dog, the moon, and the night. <b>Group 2, stories due.</b>
14	Dialogue. Read "All the Way in Flagstaff, Arizona." Record an exchange of dialogue and transcribe it faithfully (including ums and coughs, etc.) One page.		Easter Break
16	POV—First Person. Read "Rock Springs." Write a page of dialogue in which one character tries to get information from another character without revealing what he/she is doing.	16	Workshop: Group 2. Write critiques for group 2. <b>Group 3, stories due.</b>
19	POV.—2 <sup>nd</sup> and third person. Read "A White Horse." Write a paragraph describing an auto accident in first person.	18	Workshop: Group 3. Write critiques for group 3. <b>Group 4, stories due.</b>
21	POV—Reliability. Read "Lawns." Write the same paragraph in the 3 <sup>rd</sup> person.	20	Class Cancelled
23	POV—Narrative distance. Read "Wickedness." Write a half-page first person monologue in an unreliable voice, using some of the techniques we've discussed in class. Do not reveal the subtext, but try to make it guessable to a reader.	23	Workshop: Group 4. Write critiques for group 4. <b>Group 5, stories due.</b>
26	<b>Group 1, stories due by 6p.m. No class</b>	25	Workshop: Group 5. Write critiques for group 5. EVENING: Make-up Class: publication
28	Workshop: Group 1. Write critiques for Group 1. <b>Group 2, stories due.</b>	27	Evaluations. Write a query letter for publication. Submit a story. Bring in completed portfolios.
Mar 2	Workshop: Group 2. Write critiques for Group 2. <b>Group 3, stories due.</b>		

Course Policies:

The following are additions to the Department of English Expectations and Policies (attached), to which students in this class are subject.

**Plagiarism:** All stories must be written for this class, and your own, original work. All stories are subject to the requirements of the honor code. If you wish to revise a story written prior to this class, you must get express permission from me, and I may not grant it. Students are, on the other hand, encouraged to use classmates as readers before they turn in a piece to workshop. As a reader, a student may offer critiques, and even propose general solutions, so long as he/she does not suggest specific plot-based alterations. Students who provide proof-reading to one another, or use the writing center for these purposes should note errors without correcting them. Please see me if you have any questions.

**Submission of work:** We will workshop five stories per week. Your stories will be due according to a rotating system, so that you come up for discussion every three or four weeks. You will submit stories electronically into my Faculty box on Monday. I will then compile all stories into an anonymous document which I will place back on the server, in time for you to read and critique the work. Each of you is then responsible for printing out that week's packet.

Only in the most extreme of circumstances will extensions be granted or late work accepted. For example, your big game, or your headache or cold, or your car running out of gas on the way back to school, will not encourage lenience. This is a strict policy, so I recommend getting started on work well ahead of due date. I am always overjoyed to accept work early.