

Introduction to Short Fiction Writing
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1. ABOUT THIS COURSE

This is a course is about writing fiction, which means it is also about reading fiction. Close reading is a crucial skill for writers, and one we will work on in workshop format. One of the hardest things to learn is how to provide and receive constructive criticism. We will write spontaneously at the beginning of every class, as well as numerous short writing assignments and a great deal of reading. Once we have got a grasp of the basics, you will be workshopping each other's work.

Please note that a full 20% of your grade is based on attendance and participation.

In order to participate, you must be prepared. To be prepared, you have to have read the work assigned and thought about it. Note: I ask people to respond to discussion points at random.

I evaluate your written assignments one at a time, but I also look at your progress over the course of the semester. I do not compare your work to other students' work. You will get comments on everything you hand in, but no grades until the end of the quarter. Note that you will NOT be graded on your opinions, on your political or religious beliefs, on your hair style or accent, or on your taste in fiction. We will be reading from a variety of genres.

In addition to participation and your progress as a writer, your grade will also depend on how seriously you approach workshopping. That is, how carefully you prepare comments and feedback for other students (note that 'careful' doesn't necessarily mean 'positive' – unconditional praise is counterproductive), and how well you accept discussion and reactions to your own work.

Please come talk to me or email me about any problems or confusion without procrastination. I will not get angry because you ask a question, even if it seems to you like a silly question. Problems are easier addressed if you come to me right away. I will work with you to find equitable and fair solutions.

2. TEXT AND READINGS

There is only one text to buy, rent or borrow:

Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, and Ned Stuckey-French, Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft, 8th ed. Boston: Longman, 2011. ISBN: 9780205750344

Almost all additional readings (short stories, essays on writing) are available online through the university library system; you will have to log in to access them. More detailed instruction on how to find what you need can be found on the class website. I decide on readings week by week, based on class discussions and direction.

Not everything on this list will be assigned, but everything is worth reading.

3. SHORT FICTION

Alexie, Sherman. What you Pawn I will Redeem. The New Yorker. April 2003
Allen, Woody. The Kugelmass Episode. The New Yorker. May 1977
Atwood, Margaret. Rape Fantasies. Dancing Girls. 1977
Bambara, Toni Cade. My Man Bovanne. Gorilla my Love. 1972
Bloom, Amy. The Story. A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You. 2006
Bradbury, Ray. The Sound of Thunder. Collier's. 1952
Cheever, John. The Five-Forty-Eight. The Stories of John Cheever. 1954.
Cisneros, Sandra. Eyes of Zapata. Woman Hollering Creek and other Stories. 1991
Colwin, Laurie. The Lone Pilgrim. The Lone Pilgrim. Reprint. 2001
Cunningham, Michael. White Angel. The New Yorker. 19887
Erdrich, Louise. The Fat Man's Race. The New Yorker. November 2008
Everett, Percival. The Appropriation of Cultures. Damned if I Do. 2004.
Garrett, George. Feeling Good, Feeling Fine. Sudden Fiction. 2007
Goodman, Allegra. La Vita Nuova. The New Yorker. May 2010.
Hemingway, Ernest. Hills Like White Elephants. Men without Women. 1927
Hemingway, Ernest. A Clean, Well Lighted Place. Winner Take Nothing. 1933
Hughes, Langston. Why, You Reckon? The New Yorker. March 1934
Hurston, Zora Neale. Spunk. Selected Stories. 1985/1925.
Johnson, Denis. Car Crash While Hitchhiking. Jesus' Son: Stories. 1993.
King, Stephen. Herman Woulk is still Alive. The Atlantic Monthly. May 2011
King, Stephen. The Reach. Yankee. November 1981
Lahiri, Jhumpha. Improvisations: Rice. The New Yorker. November 2009.
Lehane, Dennis. Until Gwen. The Atlantic Monthly June 2004

Makkai, Rebecca. Painted Ocean, Painted Ship. Ploughshares Winter 2009-2010.
McCracken, Elizabeth. Property. Granta. Summer 2010.
Moody, Rick. Demonology. Demonology: Stories. 2002
Munro, Alice. Friend of My Youth. The New Yorker. January 1990
O'Brien, Tim. The Things They Carried. Esquire August 1986
Oates, Joyce Carol. Extenuating Circumstances. Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque.
1994
Oates, Joyce Carol. Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? Epoch 1966
Olsen, Tillie. I Stand Here Ironing. Tell me a Riddle. Delacorte 1961.
Orner, Peter. The Raft. The Atlantic Monthly. April 2000
Ozick, Cynthia. Envy, or Yiddish in America. Commentary. 1966
Prose, Francine. An Open Letter to Doctor X. Virginia Quarterly Review. 2006
Rosenfeld, Stephanie. Grasp Special Comb. What About the Love Part. 2002
Segal, Lore. The reverse bug. Shakespeare's Kitchen. 2007
Steinbeck, John. The Chrysanthemums. Harper's. October 1937
Trevanian. (Whitaker, Rod) The Apple Tree. The Antioch Review, Spring 2000
Updike, John. A & P. The New Yorker. July 1961
Walker, Alice. Everyday Use. In Love and Trouble. 1973.
Wallace, David Foster. Infinite Jest. The New Yorker. 1996
Walsh, M.O. The Vicinity of the Sick. Oxford American. August 2010
Weldon, Faye. The City of the Imagination. Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen. 1999
Welty, Eudora. Why I Live at the P.O. The Atlantic Monthly. April 1941

4. CRAFT

Baxter, Charles. Dysfunctional Narratives, or, Mistakes were Made. Ploughshares. Fall 1994.
King, Stephen. The Writing Life. The Washington Post. October 2006.
Paul, Richard and Linda Elder. The Thinker's Guide to How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading. 2008
Schwartz, Christina. A Close Read: What Makes Good Writing Good. The Atlantic. March 2006.

5. WEEK BY WEEK CLASS PLAN

Each class will begin with five-ten minutes of responding to a writing prompt in a classroom journal.

Week	Topics	Readings to be discussed this week
one	Story Form, Plot, and Structure; Conflict, Crisis, and Resolution; The Story Arc; Power Shifts How a writer reads	— Weldon, Faye. City of Invention. (Chapter 1) <u>Letters to My Niece Upon Reading Jane Austen.</u> — Makkai, Rebecca. Painted Ocean, Painted Ship. <u>Ploughshares.</u> Winter 2009-2010. — Burroway, Jane, et al. Chapter 7: The Tower and the Net: Story Form, Plot, and Structure — Burroway, Jane et al. Chapter 4: The Flesh Made Word: Characterization — Cheever, John. The Five-Forty-Eight. <u>The Stories of John Cheever.</u> 1954. — Paul, Richard and Linda Elder. The Thinker's Guide to How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading. 2008 <i>further readings TBA</i>
two	Character: the nuts and bolts; direct and indirect approaches, key questions: what does this person want, and why?	— Burroway, Jane et al, Chapter 3: Building Character: Dialogue — handout "On dialect in dialogue" — Bambara, Toni Cade. My Man Bovanne. <u>Gorilla my Love.</u> 1972 — Ozick, Cynthia. Envy, or Yiddish in America. <u>Commentary.</u> 1966 <i>further readings TBA</i>
three	Characterization through Dialogue: he said/she said, dialogue in relationship to scene, vernacular and dialect issues	— Burroway, Jane et al Chapter 8: Call Me Ishmael: Point of View — Hughes, Langston. Why, You Reckon? <u>The New Yorker.</u> March 1934 — Oates, Joyce Carol. Extenuating Circumstances. <u>Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque.</u> 1994 <i>further readings TBA</i>
four	POV: who is talking, to whom, and from what angle? Restricted and omniscient POV.	— See rubric in this syllabus; handouts — Welty, Eudora. Why I Live at the P.O. <u>The Atlantic Monthly.</u> April 1941 <i>further readings TBA</i>
five	POV, continued; The Story Machine; Stereotype: the slothful sin	— Burroway, Jane, et al Chapter 5: Far. Far Away. — King, Stephen. The Reach. <u>Yankee.</u> November 1981 — Erdrich, Louise. The Fat Man's Race. <u>The New Yorker.</u> November 2008 <i>further readings TBA</i>
six	Fictional Place: the five senses and how they can contribute to establishing an unfamiliar setting; world building	— Baxter, Charles. Dysfunctional Narratives, or, Mistakes were Made. <u>Ploughshares.</u> Fall 1994. — Colwin, Laurie. The Lone Pilgrim. <u>The Lone Pilgrim.</u> Reprint. 2001 — Garrett, George. Feeling Good, Feeling Fine. <u>Sudden Fiction.</u> 2007 <i>further readings TBA</i>
seven	Strong Emotion: the balancing act.	<i>further readings TBA</i>

eight Revision, Workshopping

— Burroway, Jane et al Chapter 9: Play it again,
Sam.

further readings TBA

nine workshop
ten

6. WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

These are not in the order in which they will be assigned; others may be added. Many of these exercises are ones I was assigned as a student; others are partially my own and partially someone else's. If I know where a particular exercise originated, I will state that.

1. Write one paragraph (100-150 words) describing a house in Weldon's City of the Imagination; It can be as grand as the castle built by Shakespeare or as dreary and dusty as I imagine a 1963 Introduction to Curriculum Planning textbook would be. The house you describe must be one built by a work of fiction, and one you know well. You can either dislike it or like it strongly. Your description can be of the house itself, its external or internal appearance, its situation on the street, or the people who come visit it, but you have to work concisely in the amount of space allowed. Indicate title and author of the work you are describing at the end of your description.

2. Find two pictures of faces in popular magazines which you find interesting. They should not be faces of known personalities (actors, politicians, etc), but anonymous to you. Once you have the faces, find names for them, and invent some facts about them. The names and facts will influence each other; remember that details are crucial but they must be motivated. Write one paragraph about each face. Attach the pictures of the faces to your paragraphs.

3. A middle-age man is waiting at a bus stop. He has just learned that his son has died violently. Describe the setting from the man's point of view WITHOUT telling your reader what has happened. How will the street look to this man? What are the sounds? Odors? Colors? That this man will notice? What will his clothes feel like? No more than 250 words.

4. Consider this (real) news item:

The Economist 12/5/98

At the border between United States and Canada, an irate father slugged a customs officer who was trying to pry excess Beanie Babies from his daughter.

Set up the story and make notes that answer the following questions: is there a 'bad guy' in this story, and if so, who? Father, border guard, little girl, or somebody not in the story, for example, the mother. Is this scene at the border

the beginning or the end of the story? Be ready to argue your position. Finally, write a few paragraphs (a) how the father sees the border guard before they even get to the front of the line; (b) how the little girl (age ten or so) is feeling about her Beanie Babies on a deeper level.

5. Another news item:

SEPTEMBER 23, 19:15 EDT Herald Wire Reports

Dead Groom Found in Storage Unit

UPLAND, Calif. (AP) — When Maria Blackburn opened the contents of an abandoned storage unit she bought at auction, she found wedding pictures, champagne glasses and the body of the groom. ... Darlene Bourk, 31, pleaded innocent to killing Robert Bourk, the San Bernardino County district attorney's office said Thursday. Investigators believe he died in December 1996 when he was 27. It was unclear when the couple married. Upland police Lt. Ed Gray wouldn't elaborate on the events that led to Bourk's death or say how he died, but he said Bourk would have remained listed as missing had his wife not failed to pay the Stor-King self-storage facility in Upland, about 50 miles east of Los Angeles. After two missed \$25 payments, Stor-King auctioned off the unit, and Mrs. Blackburn paid \$20 for its contents, which she planned to use to stock a thrift store in Los Angeles. As she began opening the 20 to 30 boxes in the unit, she pulled out wedding photos, champagne glasses and then bloodstained clothing. In a carefully wrapped wardrobe box, stuffed with two tarps, a blanket and a layer of thick roofing plastic, she found Bourk's body. Stor-King manager Susie Gonzalez said Mrs. Bourk called in a panic after receiving notice her belongings had been sold. She left two notes on the storage unit, saying she'd "give anything, anything to get the storage back," Mrs. Blackburn told The Press Enterprise of Riverside. Police arrested Mrs. Bourk on Sept. 15, the day after the auction, in nearby San Dimas where she lives. Although most of the contents of the storage unit were taken by police as evidence, Mrs. Blackburn said she was able to keep some of the items, including wedding pictures of a smiling Bourk. "He looked like a nice, handsome man," she said. She said she plans to send them to Bourk's mother.

Set up this story by providing short character sketches (no more than 150 words each) of four main characters. These can be people named in the story or not – you could add in a reporter, a police detective, the mother of the groom – anybody that makes sense to you. Be prepared to talk about story arc in class.

6. Listen to this very short conversation between two people as they drive (<http://goo.gl/NR6re>). You may have to listen a couple times to get a transcript down, but do that to the best of your ability. When you have the transcript, see if you can adapt real life conversation into a scene suitable for a short story. We will be comparing the various approaches you take in class.

7. Create an unreliable narrator, someone who is nothing like you. Put a wholly illogical, ignorant, bigoted, insane statement in the narrator's mouth. Write a passage, 1-2 pages, which gradually makes us understand -- if not sympathize -- with the narrator's point of view. Some examples. "The landing on the moon was an elaborate staged deception, the work of communists." "You won't believe me but it's true, my sister's newborn talks to me when nobody else is around." "Yellow children, brown children, red children, I've had them all come into my store and they all steal."

8. Find a picture in a magazine – someone you don't know – and write a one paragraph character sketch. Now write a one page scene which begins: "____ was the kind of _____ who _____". For example: "Mavis Lane was the kind of lady who counted her silver spoons before and after she invited her neighbors in for tea." This opening sentence should begin to establish character and conflict.

9. Write a one-page scene placing two characters in a very fundamental conflict: one wants something the other does not want to give. The something may be anything except money. See if you can manage to make the conflict clear without ever stating clearly what it is that the parties want.

10. For each of the following, provide an alternate that is more vivid. Example: Maria was addicted to gambling.

Rewrite: Man, that Maria could get up a craps game in a convent.

1. Sam saw Joe fall off his horse.
2. She read the manuscript five times.
3. "My grandfather is racist," she said.
4. He deceived his partner at every opportunity.
5. Mr. Mahoney was very rich.
6. Jane Capstone was 97 but she wasn't senile.
7. He would do anything to succeed.
8. They were the poorest people in the parish.
9. They had always been the proudest people in the parish.
10. He was the kindest person.
11. Joe was the meanest man I ever knew.

11. Your main character is a man or woman at least 80 years old, and very close to death. This person is having a conversation with him or herself – as a child. That is, the

younger version of the person is sitting there too, and the old and the young self are discussing an event that they don't agree on.

12. Write a monologue, in which you (as the main character, in first person) are explaining to a court-appointed psychologist why you hid your brother's girlfriend's prosthetic leg, and why you won't give it back. The dialogue is only yours; the psychologist doesn't speak.

7. THE STORY MACHINE

This is an exercise we will conduct in class more than once. Each person comes up with a short description of a character, and a separate, unrelated symbolic resolution (see examples below; this is something we'll discuss at length in class, at well). The slips of paper are gathered and shuffled, and then each individual draws a new character and a new resolution slip. On the basis of that pairing, we will consider the story arcs, and write scenes and dialogue. These short pieces will be workshopped in the last two weeks of the course.

Examples from an earlier class; these are the pairings that students worked with.

Character	Conflict	Crisis	Symbolic Resolution
A grandmother recently moved to Seattle from rural Iraq			buys a red velvet cape
The father of six month old twins			enters a cooking contest
A retired surgeon with a bad knee			takes a job as a toll collector
The shortstop of a softball team that has lost every game			tears up a letter unread

Basic terminology

plot	sequence of incidents or events through which an author constructs a story
conflict	a clash of actions, ideas, desires, or wills
protagonist	the central character in a conflict, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic
antagonist	any force arranged against the protagonist- persons things, conventions of society, or the protagonist's own character traits
suspense	quality of a story that makes the readers ask "What's going to happen next?" Includes mystery, dilemma, surprise
indeterminate ending	no definitive conclusion is reached
artistic unity	everything contained in the story is relevant and contributes to the meaning, nothing there for its own sake or excitement
plot manipulations	a turn in the plot that is unjustified by the situation or characters
rising action	the development of a plot in a story that precedes and leads up to the climax
climax	the turning or high point of a plot
falling action	the segment of the plot that comes between the climax and conclusion
characterization	the various literary means by which characters are presented
direct presentation	by exposition or analysis authors tell reader directly what a character is like, or has someone else in the story do so.
indirect presentation	author shows readers a character in action compelling readers to infer what the character is like from what is said or done by the character.
flat character	a character who has only one or two distinguishable moral qualities or personal traits
developing character	a character who during the course of a story undergoes a permanent change in some aspect of moral qualities, personal traits, or outlook
round character	a character with complex and many sided moral qualities and personal traits
static character	a character who is the same sort of person at the end of a story as at the beginning
stock character	a stereotyped character; one whose nature is familiar to us from prototypes in previous fiction
foil character	minor character whose situation or actions parallel those of a major character, by contrast sets off or illuminates the major character; most often the contrast is complimentary to the major character
epiphany	a moment or event in which a character achieves a spiritual insight into life or into his or her own circumstances.
theme	the central idea or unifying generalization implied or stated by a literary work
point of view	the angle of vision from which a story is told
omniscient	the author tells the story using the third person, but the author knows all and is free to tell us anything, including what the characters are thinking or feeling and

	why they act as they do
third person limited	the author tells the story using the third person, but is limited to a complete knowledge of one character in the story and tells us only what that one character thinks, feels, sees, or hears.
first person	the story is told by one of its characters, using the first person
objective	the author tells the story using the third person, but is limited to reporting what the characters say or do; the author does not interpret their behavior or tell us their private thoughts or feelings
