

English 130 (Section 03): Fiction Writing
Fall 2012

SH 410
Thursdays 6-8:45 p.m.
office hours: Tues. 5-6:30 & by appointment

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“If you are pointing out one of the things a story is about, then you are very probably right; if you are pointing out the only thing a story is about you are very probably wrong - even if you're the author.” - Neil Gaiman

“Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.” - Scott Adams

Course Description: The focus of this course is inventing and crafting fiction. Our primary focus will be the short story, but we will also address the novel and flash fiction. Through exploring various writing activities, work-shopping your pieces, and discussing the pieces of published writers, we will speak to the observable and the subtle aspects of fiction—for good writing entails both skill and mystery.

Prerequisite: English 71 or instructor consent.

Required Texts: Photocopies of various activities and student stories for the class. (Please note that bringing copies when required is in lieu of buying a course text.)

Course Requirements:

1. *Fiction Writing:* Each student will submit stories and fiction writing activities of approximately 35-45 pages of **new** writing (*no recycled pieces, please*). You will receive a great deal of feedback on this writing from both me and the class; however, individual pieces will not be given letter grades. Instead, you will receive credit for writing the required number of pages, being in class to participate in the activities, and for turning in 21 copies of the longer story on time (see schedule). If stories or other assignments are particularly weak due to a “rush job,” if they aren’t sufficiently edited for surface errors or if they don’t meet other requirements, they will receive partial credit.

- Small assignments: approx. 25 pages
- Workshopped Story: approx. 15-25 pages

2. *Craft Reading Responses to Classmates’ Stories:* For each story, write down your thoughts about the following on the student story in order to a) be prepared for discussion and b) share your thoughts with your classmates. You can type on a separate sheet or neatly handwrite at the end of the story:

a) Write down in brief (no more than 1 short paragraph) what you think the *story’s main plot line, focus, patterns, repetitions* are (a good way to start is to say, “This story is about...”).
There is no judgment here, just noticing.

b) Next, write about what is intriguing, surprising and/or puzzling about the piece. *Always begin with positive feedback.* Focus at least some of your response on *craft—e.g., how the story is written*. It’s helpful to include a quote or two from the story, with page number, to illuminate a point. The following prompts might help, but by no means must you respond to each one—and by no means do they cover everything you might address:

- How does the story make you feel? What does the writer do to elicit those feelings?
- What’s exciting, intriguing and/or puzzling about this piece?
- What do you notice about how this piece is written? Is there anything unique about its voice, structure, pacing, point of view, etc.?

- What do you notice about setting: Where and when the story takes place? How does this setting illuminate or enrich certain aspects of the story (or not)?
 - What do you notice about where the story begins? Does it begin in the middle of a certain action? How might the story be different if it started in a different place, or were told from a different point-of-view?
 - How are back-story and or back-flashes handled?
 - What do you find intriguing/notable in terms of how the writer developed certain characters? Which character would you want to hang out with and why?
 - What's left out—and how does that help or hurt the piece?
 - Where does the story move fast? Slow? How does this pacing affect your experience with the story?
 - What word choices are surprising, intriguing or confusing?
 - What questions (about the content or the writing, or about anything else) does this story raise for you?
- c) Write to the writer: e.g., “Hi Evelyn.”
- d) You may also comment in the margins of your copy as you go along (it can be especially helpful to a writer to know what you are thinking as you read).
- e) Always make an extra copy of your comments for me to see. (Either photocopy the handwritten parts or print out an extra copy of you typed it up.)

3. *Literary Event Paper*: You must attend a literary event this semester. Write an approximately 3-page paper that carefully examines *what you feel you learned about writing* and the public presentation of it during this event. Think about ways you might apply any of what was said. Discuss what resonated with you, as well as any critique you might have of the event, or questions it raise. You may also investigate more about this writer online and incorporate some of your findings into your paper (include citations). At the top of the paper, include the day and time of the event.

4. Extra Credit Opportunities: If you attend more than one literary event, you may write another paper (guidelines above) for up to 2% extra credit added on to your final grade, depending on the quality of the extra credit paper.

5. *Choices for Final Project (all of which include **writing and reflection**):*

- a. Considering the feedback you received during workshop, revise your story. Turn it in with the first draft, with my comments on it, attached. Staple on top (no folders, please) a typed explanation of: a) What you changed and why, b) what you learned while writing and revising this piece, c) what new insights you got into your writing overall in this course, d) any other comments or questions you have about your experience in the course.
- b. Choose one of the fiction writing activities and expand upon it, writing a longer piece of fiction (7 or more pages). Staple on top a typed reflection that includes: a) What you learned writing this piece, b) What new insights you got into your writing overall in this course, and c) Any other comments or questions you have about your experience in the course.
- c. Write two more pieces of flash fiction (complete stories approximately 1-4 pages each, double spaced). Staple on top a typed reflection that includes: a) What you learned writing these pieces, b) What new insights you got into your writing overall in this course, and d) Any other comments or questions you have about your experience in the course.

- d. Write the first chapter of a novel that you've always wanted to write. Prior to doing so, re-read the first chapters of three novels you love. Staple on top a typed reflection that includes: a) The titles of the three novels and what you learned reading the first chapters, b) What you learned writing your first chapter, c) What new insights you got into your writing overall in this course, and d) Any other comments or questions you have about your experience in the course.

Students will demonstrate the ability to

- 1) Read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, or rhetoric. (Fulfilled with assignment #3.)
- 2) Show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American, and World Literature. (Fulfilled with the variety of readings assigned and discussed in class.)
- 3) Write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and nature of the subject. (Fulfilled with assignments #1, 2 & 5 above.)
- 4) Develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively. (Fulfilled with assignments #2, 3 & 5 above.)
- 5) Articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts. . (Fulfilled with the variety of readings assigned and discussed in class.)

Grading

Workshopped Story (approx. 15-25 pages w/copies)*	20%
Additional fiction assignments	40%
Workshop Written Responses & participation in workshop	20%
Literary Event Paper	10%
Final	10%

SJSU Grading Policy: The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the SJSU Catalog (“The Grading System”). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A=excellent; B=above average; C=average; D=below average; F=failure. Courses graded according to the A, B, C, No Credit system shall follow the same pattern, except that NC (No Credit) shall replace D or F. In such classes, NC shall also substitute for W (Withdrawal) because neither grade (NC or W) affects students’ GPA.

***To receive full credit:**

- story will be a **complete story** (a strong draft), not a chapter and not “to be continued.”
- will show evidence that you have considered the story craft we’ve discussed in class.
- and will be carefully edited for correct format and surface errors.

Policies

Late Work. No late work accepted for any reason (broken printer, gerbil ate your paper, etc.). All exercises will be used in class in some way, so if you haven't completed them you will not be able to participate fully. And for workshop, we have a tight schedule; if your story is not ready on time, you disrupt the whole class. *To relieve stress, have your story printed and copied the day before it's due.* In addition, if you haven't written your responses to student stories on the day of the workshop prior to class (and are ready to provide the extra copy of your comments for me), you are not fully prepared to give quality feedback to your fellow writers.

No Work by Email. No work in my mailbox. No Exceptions. I do not accept work by email or in my campus mailbox. If you need to miss a class session, ask a classmate to turn in your work and to collect handouts and assignments for you.

Your Responsibility If You're Absent. If you miss class, contact a classmate to get notes, assignments, etc. It is your responsibility to figure out what's going on and to show up prepared the next class session. Please do not ask me to do extra things for you if you choose not to come to class. Because so much happens during class, it is very difficult to pass the class if you miss more than 3 class sessions.

Arriving Late and Leaving Early. Don't do it. It's too disruptive to the class.

Paper format:

- * All work must be typed. Use 12-point Times New Roman.
- * NAME and **PAGE NUMBER** must appear on each page.
- * Stories must be double spaced with 1-inch margins
- * Staple your papers BEFORE class.
- * GROUP NUMBER must appear on the first page.

Be Fully Present. No electronic devices are to be on/used/visible during class. This is an old-fashioned, non-technology-driven class. No use of internet, laptops, cell phones or any other electronic devices is permitted during class.

Disabled Student Services: Any student needing special assistance should contact Disabled Student Services, located in Administration 110, and discuss with the instructor the sort of assistance involved.

Low-energy or cliché story moves to avoid:

- Don't begin with your character waking up in bed in the morning and turning off the alarm clock. That's a "throat-clearing" maneuver, and the real beginning of your story is likely elsewhere. We will discuss a variety of other ways to open stories.
- Don't have a trick ending (e.g., your character wakes up and it was all a dream, or at the end we find out the narrator is really a lizard). If you twist your story around to make it "fit" such an ending, it invariably comes off as corny or awkward. There's a difference between a trick in a story and a surprise. Jokes have tricks, which are called punchlines. Stories have surprises (often several) that authentically evoke a response in the reader.
- Don't have your characters say what they mean!
- Don't kill off a character just to end the story. See if you can avoid death in the story. If you can't, consider having the death be something that has already happened, or that happens part-way through the story instead.

When writing as story, DO:

- Try different things. "Veering off" in unexpected directions can add juice to a story.
- Play against type: e.g., a sexy (but not lecherous) grandfather, a doctor who has three kids and wishes she were childless and free to travel the world, an ornery (as opposed to angelic) cute little girl, a popular teacher whose secret wish is that her husband would die...
- Give your characters mixed feelings.
- Consider this: "The best stories aren't good vs. evil but good vs. good." Leo Tolstoy knew what he was talking about. The human experience is complex.
- Learn from what you read. *Read like a writer*, noticing how the writer develops a character, makes you care about something that happens, uses the perfect word, moves from scene to scene—whatever it is that the write seems to do well. Whenever you have a question about writing (such as "how do I end a story?"), look to how other writers do it.
- Have fun!

Workshop Guidelines

BUMPER-STICKER VERSION FOR THOSE WHO ARE CRITIQUING: Do a *sympathetic reading* of each piece. This means you attempt to understand and communicate fully what the writer seems to be trying to do in a story (despite its flaws). Then, as needed, suggest ways to bring that vision into focus.

1. In the class session before we will critique your work, submit 20 copies of your typed, double-spaced piece(s). Your piece(s) should be as complete as possible, and be titled.
2. Before we discuss the piece, the writer will read aloud a passage of her/his choice. The writer will not explain, justify, or otherwise say anything related to the piece.
3. On the day of workshop, the writer will be a “fly on the wall” as the class discusses the work. This gives you as a writer an opportunity to really hear what people are saying without being compelled to respond or explain. Listen carefully and take notes. Try not to judge the feedback—you can sort it all out later when you are home, away from the heat of the moment. You are the writer; you get to decide what to do with the feedback you get.
4. The person to the right of the writer will begin discussion by giving a “reading” of the work, telling the class what it seems to be about literally and thematically.
5. Subsequent reactions will be offered in the form of dialogue with the class. Don’t speak to the writer because she/he can’t respond.
6. Begin with positive responses—what you liked, and why. Other responses can focus on how the piece made you feel and why.
7. Still other responses can focus on places where you were confused or would like to know more—honoring what seems to be the intent of the piece. Don’t try to make it into something it’s not.
8. Be willing to be exploratory during workshop: ask questions, ruminate. Try to learn during critique, not just to pronounce. Ask the class, for instance, “Why do you think the character did X here?”
9. Keep your criticism short and don’t repeat yourself. Critics should not dwell. Be clear and tactful—then move on.
10. Don’t get so wrapped up in improving the writing that you lose sight of the writer.
11. Keep in mind as we discuss that there are no definitive rules in creative writing. There are guidelines, suggestions, general rules of thumb—however, all of those are broken often, and well.
12. If you are a person who tends to dominate conversation, pull back the reins so others can speak; if you are a person who tends not to talk in groups, challenge yourself to say something because we benefit from hearing all perspectives.
13. When the critique is finished, the writer may ask a clarifying question, or may ask the class to comment on something that was not addressed. The writer may not explain or justify the piece.
14. Writers should be humble, and most importantly, thankful that someone is taking their work seriously
15. Giving criticism is an art in itself. We are all learners.
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Course Schedule

(This course schedule is subject to additions and changes. Most class sessions you will be assigned short writing activities and will be asked to bring copies to share. We will also do in-class writing activities most class sessions.)

Week	Date	What's on Tap
1	8/23	Introduction to class; creation of groups; beginning to write.
2	8/30	<p>Due: Card with your name and picture.</p> <p>Due: Describe yourself in the third person—your physical appearance and personality—as though you were a character in a book. No more than 1 page, double-spaced. (Bring 21 copies.)</p>
3	9/6	<p>Due: Have read Karen Tei Yamashita interview http://phrenz.org/juliachiapella.html and story (handout). Write response and reaction (details discussed in class 8/30).</p>
4	9/12 9/13	<p><i>Wednesday: Karen Tei Yamashita Reading at 7 p.m.</i></p> <p>Due: You are an astronaut. Describe your perfect day. Feel free to write this in first person “I,” second person (“you”) or third person (“he/she”). 1-3 pages max, double-spaced. (4 copies)</p>
5	9/20	<p>Due: Have a person who stole something explain why she/he stole it. 1-3 pages max, double-spaced. (4 copies)</p>
6	9/27	<p>Due: Re-read the first page of two or three novels you love. Write down the titles and authors of the novels, and make a list of things you notice that writers do in the first page of a novel. Then, write the first page of your own novel (<i>new writing only</i>). Double-spaced, no more than 1 page. Bring 4 copies of the list <i>and</i> the first page you wrote.</p>
7	10/4	<p>Due: Flash Fiction piece (a “complete” story in 1-4 pages, double spaced) using words brainstormed in class on 9/27. Write the story: a) in 26 sentences, beginning each sentence with a letter of the alphabet starting with A; b) as a “To Do” list; <i>or</i> c) as an email or text exchange.</p>

Week	Date	What's on Tap
8	10/11	Due: 4 copies of the first 1-2 pages of your longer story.
9	10/18	Stories due (Approximately 15-25 pages with 21 copies for the class. For full credit, you must bring the copies and be on time to class.)
10	10/25	Workshop Group A*
11	11/1	Workshop Group B*
12	11/8	Due: Have read “Why I Write” (http://therumpus.net/2009/08/why-i-write-2/) and Stephen Elliot story (handout) and write reaction and response as discussed in class.
13	11/13	<i>Stephen Elliot Reading, Tuesday 11/13, 7 p.m.</i>
	1/15	Workshop Group C*
	11/22	<i>NO CLASS; Thanksgiving</i>
14	11/29	Workshop Group D* Due: Description of what you are doing for your Final Project. Typed, double-spaced, just about a paragraph or so.
15	12/6	Workshop Group E* Due: Literary Event Papers. Class discussion of the literary events.
16	12/13 5:30-7:30	Due: Final Project. Come to class on time, prepared to talk a bit about what you did and to read an excerpt to the class. Feel free to bring food to share!

*To receive credit for Workshop days, you must read the student stories in advance, write a Craft Reading Response (2 copies; one for writer, one for Kate—*not accepted late, no exceptions*) and participate in class discussion.

Groups

Group A

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Group B

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Group C

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Group D

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Group E

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.