

English 130: Writing Fiction

Section 01 Spring 2014

Instructor: Leah Griesmann

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Office Hours: Wednesday, 2-4pm

Class Days/Time: Mondays, 4:30-7:15pm

Class Room: BBC 128

Course Description:

In this course we will read, discuss, and write literary short fiction. The course will be taught using a combination of discussion and writing workshops. For the first several weeks we will be reading and discussing published stories from *Scribner's Anthology of Fiction*. We will also look at elements of the craft – character, conflict, point of view, etc from our readings in *The Fiction Writer's Handbook*. The goal is to practice reading like writers rather than critics. We'll also do writing exercises, in class and at home.

Every student will hand in two stories over the course of the semester. Students will receive comments and critique on their stories from classmates and the instructor. In addition to getting comments on their own stories, students will hone their writing and editing skills by giving thoughtful and thorough comments to other students on each of their stories.

Student Learning Objectives

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.
2. Write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and nature of the subject.
3. Develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively.

Required Texts and Materials: Important—Bring BOTH books to class!

Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft, Janet Burroway & Elizabeth Stuckey-French

The Fiction Writer's Handbook, Hallie & Whit Burnett

Thesaurus, folder, notebook, stapler

The ability to print and staple 8-16 copies of assignments for workshops, often 10+ pages

Required Assignments

- One original piece of fiction, photocopied for the class (SLO #2, #3).
- Written and verbal comments on your classmates' stories (SLO #1, #2).
- Reading assignments and craft reports from the textbook. (SLO #1).
- A substantial revision of one of your stories (serves as the final exam) (SLO #2, #3).
- Brief in-class and take-home writing exercises (SLO #2).
- Attendance at two literary readings of your choice, and a 2- page written response to each (SLO #1, #2, #3).

Classroom Policies and Attendance

Punctuality is a must. This is a once a week class, and your attendance, on time, for the full class is expected. Attendance on workshop days is mandatory unless prior arrangements are made.

No late or emailed work is accepted. Work is due at the beginning of class, at 4:30pm. All work for workshop **must** be distributed in paper copies on the day it is due for distribution (a week prior to the scheduled workshop), or the presenter will earn a failing grade.

No electronic devices may be on/used/or visible during class. Cell phones, iPods, texting, internet, MP3s and all other electronic devices are strictly forbidden.

Grades

Grades will be based on the quality and quantity of writing you do **as well as** the quality and constructiveness of the criticism offered during the workshops. Your written responses to others' fiction pieces are also a part of your grade.

Fiction writing, though subject to the instructor's individual subjectivity, can be evaluated according to general standards used to determine how well a piece of writing works. These include: 1) Textual and/or technical competence. 2) Mastery of craft components. 3) Energy and freshness of language. 4) Effective use of metaphor and other forms of figurative language. 5) Clarity and precision of detail. 6) Effective use of grammar, syntax, and rhythm. 7) Appropriateness of style to subject.

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

- Your Fiction (2 pieces and one revision) 40%
- Responses to Classmates' Fiction (handed in at workshop) 30%
- In class Writing, Presentations, Participation 20%
- Attendance at Literary Readings (and 2-page write-ups) 10%

Grades given conform to the English Department and university grading policy. The Department of English is committed to the differential grading scale as defined in the official 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.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT GRADING STATEMENT: In English Department courses, instructors comment on and grade the quality of writing as well as the quality of ideas being conveyed. All your writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

Workshop Procedure

Students must bring copies of their writing projects to class the week before workshop. Your story must be **double-spaced, single-sided**, and include **page numbers**.

Your classmates will read your story, make comments on the manuscript, and type up a half page to one page (minimum) of comments. At the next class meeting, we will discuss your story. At the end of the discussion, everyone will hand the author their marked-up manuscripts and the typed comments, and give an extra copy to the instructor. Be sure to retain a separate copy for your portfolio. This binder will, by the end of the semester, contain your responses to all of your classmates' stories, and their feedback on yours. You will turn it in with your final revision, and you will be graded on the quality and quantity of the feedback you provided your peers.

Workshop Feedback and Constructive Criticism

The core of this class is the workshop, where students will have ample opportunity to receive feedback on their work. When giving feedback, it is important to be specific. Statements such as “this sucked” or “I liked this” are not sufficient. Instead, approach the piece from an analytical standpoint in order to determine which elements are working well, and which could be improved.

So what exactly do you comment on? To begin with, you might indicate what you got out of the story. What's your interpretation of it? If the piece were in the *Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*, what would you say about it? This helps the writer understand what came across and what didn't. After summarizing the story, suggest avenues for improvement. How can the writer make this story better? Remember that you can help a fellow writer with thoughtful commentary even if you would not have chosen the same topic or style in your own work.

When receiving feedback, try to listen objectively, as it is your work, and not you that is being critiqued. Approach your work as a craftsman would, with an eye towards improving it.

Literary Events Response Papers

Besides reading published work, you are required to attend a **minimum of two readings** by poets and/or prose writers presented on the SJSU campus or elsewhere in the Bay Area. The Bay Area is one of the world's great literary regions, where seven days a week one can attend a reading by a renowned writer at a bookstore, college, community center, or library. Readings are listed in the Sunday books sections of the *San Jose Mercury News*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and in *Metro* weekly.

After attending each reading, write a one to two page paper that includes 1) background of the writer and some of the writer's works. 2) a description of the event. 3) your response to the event: what did you like and why? What did you learn? What questions did it raise? Would you attend a similar event again? At the top of the paper list the author's name, the title of the event, and the day, time, and location. For information on local literary events see:

www.pcsj.org/calendar.html (Poetry Center San Jose)

www.poetryflash.org (All Northern California Literary Events)

Here are some of the readings being offered on campus (MLK Library unless otherwise noted) this semester by the Center for Literary Arts <http://www.litarts.org/>:

Cristina Garcia

February 5, 7pm, Reading and Book Signing, SJSU University Theatre

D.A. Powell

February 19, 7pm, Reading and Book Signing

Rabih Alameddine

April 8th, 7pm, Reading and Book Signing

Joy Harjo

April 23, 7pm, Reading and Book Signing

The 2013-2014 Steinbeck Fellows

April 2, 7pm, Reading and Discussion, MLK 225

Final Portfolio & Fiction Reading

In lieu of a final exam, every student will turn in a portfolio including revision of major assignments. The class will conclude with a live reading.

A final note

Fiction writing is fun, but it's also hard work. Be prepared to write, read, revise, consider comments on your work, read, write, and revise again. Keep an open mind and be willing to take risks. Never take criticism of your work personally—separate yourself from the words on the page so that you can improve your writing. For the purposes of the class, the emphasis will be on literary fiction only—no science fiction, genre fiction, or fan fiction will be workshopped in class.

Academic Honesty

Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San José State University, and the University's Academic Integrity Policy requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the Office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The Policy on academic integrity can be found at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct>.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of somebody else's words or ideas and is considered an instance of academic dishonesty that instructors must report. You commit plagiarism by:

- buying, stealing, or borrowing a paper (or story)
- hiring someone to write a paper (or story)
- building on someone's ideas without providing a citation
- or copying from another source or using a source too closely when paraphrasing
- *turning in work written for another class (don't do it!!)*

Additionally, all work handed must be new work written during this class. Previously written fiction will not be workshopped in class.

LARC (Learning Assistance Resource Center)

The Learning Assistance Resource Center is an on-campus facility that provides peer tutoring for San José State University students. LARC offers assistance with writing, and if you feel as if you need intensive help beyond what I can offer during office hours, please request a writing tutor. The Center is located in The Student Services Center in the 10th Street Parking Garage, Room 600. The phone number is (408) 924-2587.

Disabilities Policy

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 requires that students with disabilities register with the DRC to establish a record of their disability.

Schedule of Classes (subject to change):

- January 27 Syllabus and introduction to literary short stories
Hot object stories
- February 3 Reading: *Customs of the Country* (craft report due)
FWH: The Usable Past, Reading, Notebooks and Diaries
WF: Chapter 2—Showing and Telling
Writing Due: Character Sketch (self or other)
- February 10 Reading: *First Day* (craft report due)
FWH: Character and Dialogue
WF: Chapter 3—Building Character
Writing Due: Eavesdropping exercise
- February 17 Reading: *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* (c.r. due)
FWH: The Subject of Your Story, Plotting and Narrative Development, Style
WF: Chapter 7—Story, Form, Plot
Writing Due: Story Exercise
- February 24 Reading: *Home* (craft report due)
FWH: Point of View, Development, Self-Criticism, Endings
Writing Due: Voice Exercise

March 3	Workshop Group A
March 10	Workshop Group B
March 17	Workshop Group C
April 7	Workshop Group D
April 14	Workshop Group E
April 21	Writers @ Work Guest Author: Natalie Baszile
April 28	Workshop Group F
May 12	Fiction Reading
May 16	Final Portfolio Due in English Department