

San José State University Department of English and Comparative Literature
English 241: Fiction Writing Workshop (Section 01) – Fall 2017

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“I remain a believer in the power of creative writing to change, heal and transform.”
— Wanda Coleman

“The artist must bow to the monster of his own imagination.”
— Richard Wright

Course Description

ENGL 241 is the most advanced fiction workshop offered at SJSU and is designed for students pursuing writing as a vocation. Students enrolled in the MFA Program in Creative Writing will have registration priority; if there is extra space, graduate students in other disciplines and Open University students may enroll with the instructor’s permission.

The graduate workshop is a place for students to engage in an advanced study and practice of reading, writing, and critiquing fiction. Over the course of the semester students will focus on craft elements such as plot and story structure, characterization, point of view, voice, and of course, revision to create new work and further develop their own writing styles. Students should be prepared to focus considerable energy in thoughtfully responding to peers’ writing, and engaging with the local literary community, as well as generating and revising their own work.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLO)

This course addresses the following Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) approved for the MFA in Creative Writing:

- SLO 3: Students will demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge of literary history, literary theory, and craft and theory of creative writing.
- SLO 4: Students will demonstrate critical and analytical skills in the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts.
- SLO 5: Students will demonstrate a command of written academic English, including the abilities to:
 - a) organize and present material in a cogent fashion;
 - b) formulate and defend original arguments;
 - c) employ effectively the language of their discipline;
 - d) write under time constraints.

Required Texts

- Photocopied reader of published short stories selected by your fellow classmates (available during the third class meeting)
- Other reading materials, including student work, craft essays, and published short stories, will be sent to students via e-mail.

Recommended Texts

While not a requirement for this course, the following would be of much value to any fiction writer:

- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
Hale, Constance. *Sin and Syntax*. New York: Broadway Books, 1999.
Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
Stern, Jerome. *Making Shapely Fiction*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1991.
Wood, James. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Course Requirements and Assignments

Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend, for each unit of credit, a minimum of 45 hours over the length of the course (normally 3 hours per unit per week with 1 of the hours used for lecture) for instruction or preparation/studying or course related activities including but not limited to internships, labs, clinical practica.

1. Two new pieces of fiction. At the end of the semester, there may be an opportunity for students to turn in additional work. [SLO #5]
2. In place of a final exam, students will turn in a substantial revision of a piece previously discussed in workshop. [SLO #5]
3. Each week students will provide written comments to their classmates' work. [SLO #4]
4. Students will engage and participate in meaningful class discussions. [SLO #4]
5. Students will give a presentation on a published short story of their choice. [SLO #3]
6. Over the course of the semester, students will attend at least two literary readings and write 1,000-1,500 word responses to each. [SLO #3, #4, #5] (See 1-Unit Enhancement below)

Because this is a 4-unit course, students can expect to spend a minimum of twelve hours per week preparing for and attending classes and completing course assignments. This course will have integrated into the syllabus the following 1-unit enhancement:

- Service Learning/Field Experience/Civic Engagement
- International Education/Cultural Enrichment

1-Unit Enhancement: Attendance at Literary Readings & Written Responses

During the semester, you are required to attend two fiction readings by published authors (who have published at least one book) at SJSU or in the greater 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 editions of the *San Jose Mercury News* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and in *Metro*.

You are to write a short review essay (1,000 – 1,500 words) about each of the readings you attended, analyzing language, structure of at least two specific story collections or novels that the author read (giving the titles and quoting specific lines/passages). Turn in each review within one week of attending said readings. Each review essay will be peer-reviewed by another student in the class and supervised by the instructor. Finally, you will revise each essay, incorporating comments from the peer reviewer and the instructor.

You may include secondary sources or commentaries the author has published about their work (documented in conventional MLA-format for research papers). Look for examples of the author's work you heard read by getting their books, or finding their work on reputable websites. Should you

be unable to attend two readings live in-person, you can find full-length streamed recordings of readings given at UC Berkeley, San Francisco State University, and other Bay Area universities and universities around the nation.

Final Examination or Evaluation

In place of a final exam, students will turn in a substantial revision of one of their workshop submissions. There are many possibilities for revision. Some examples of changes that might be included in a substantial revision include developing a metaphor, adding or deleting a character, reworking syntax and tone, changing the point of view, inserting a new scene, and altering the ending of the story. It is not enough simply to correct the spelling and grammatical errors of the first draft. To earn a high grade on the revision, you must alter the story in some significant way. The revision is due the last day of class.

Grading Information

Creative writing 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 and eloquence.
2. Imaginative risk.
3. Energy and freshness of language.
4. Effective use of metaphor and other forms of figurative language.
5. Clarity and precision of detail.
6. Capacity for mixed feelings and uncertainty.
7. Effective use of grammar, syntax, and rhythm.
8. Naturalness and believability.
9. Appropriateness of style to subject.
10. Compelling audience interest.

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.

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

- Student work (2 short stories and a 1 revision) 60%
- Participation and written critiques 20%
- Student-led discussion of a published story 10%
- Responses to two literary readings 10%

Determination of Grades

The Department of English and Comparative Literature reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A- = excellent; B+/B/B- = above average; C+/C/C- = average; D+/D/D- = below average; F = failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

Workshop Procedure

During the first class meeting, students will sign-up for workshop, choosing at least two dates to hand in their work. Your story must be between 10-25 pages, double-spaced, and paginated. Your

classmates will read your story, make comments in the margins, and type a 1-page written commentary of constructive criticism. A copy of the critique must be turned in to the instructor as well. We will discuss 2-3 stories per class. At the end of the discussion, everyone will hand the author their marked-up manuscripts and critiques.

Peer Commentaries

Your typed commentary on each student story will address (a) your interpretation of the story (what the story is about, what the author is trying to accomplish) (b) comments and analysis of what is working well and (c) suggestions for improvement. Send two copies of your commentary – one for the author and one for the instructor. A portion of your final grade will be determined by the quality of your peer commentaries.

Workshop Etiquette

Workshop is a place for respectful and constructive criticism. Spoken and written commentary must always be directed at the work, not the writer. Personal attacks and offensive or inappropriate language will not be tolerated. Students who cannot follow these guidelines will be dismissed from the course. If you receive any offensive comments on your work, please let me know as soon as possible so I can address the problem.

Procedure for Discussing Published Fiction/Student Presentations

One of the most useful skills you can learn in graduate school is how to lead a discussion. Each student will present a published short story of their choice, focusing on a craft issue that speaks to their own work, and will then lead the class discussion.

Students will submit a copy of their chosen story to the second class meeting. The instructor will take the stories to the print shop. A photocopied reader of all the stories will be available for sale in class. Expect the reader to cost around \$15.

Late Work

As a writer, you must become very disciplined about setting your own deadlines and sticking to them. Turning in your stories when you say you're going to is the most important responsibility you have in the workshop. **Late work will not be accepted.** If you need to change your workshop date, it is on you to find a classmate willing to swap. It is also your responsibility to notify the instructor asap.

Absences

In the rare case of an absence in workshop, the student will be assigned a published short story for which they must compose a short 500-word analysis of the author's handling of an element of craft. The assignment will be due on the class meeting following the absence.

University Policies

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' [Syllabus Information web page](http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>.

ENGL 241 / MFA Fiction Workshop, Fall 2017, Course Schedule

The Fiction Workshop meets every Monday of the Fall 2017 semester, starting on Monday, August 28. The last class is Monday, December 11. Class will not be held on Monday, September 4 (Labor Day). In lieu of a final exam, you will submit your final revision on the last day of class. Reading assignments meet SLO #1, writing assignments SLO #3.

Note: This schedule is subject to change. Announcements will be made in class.

| Week | Date | Topics, Readings, Assignments, Deadlines |
|-------------|--------------|--|
| 1 | 8/28 | Welcome and Introduction, Discuss "Bad Neighbors" by Edward P. Jones, Small Group Workshop, Mini Student Reading |
| 2 – 8 | 9/11 – 10/16 | First Round of Workshops |
| 9 – 15 | 10/23 – 12/4 | Second Round of Workshops |
| 16 | 12/11 | Final Revision Due |