

CRW 2100 Fiction Writing

The Possibilities of Fiction

Fall 2014 • Section 1656 • W9-11, TUR 2318

Instructor: Colin Williams (cbwilliams@ufl.edu)

Office Hours: W 2-4pm and by appointment in Turlington 4108

If CRW1101 is a course about learning to tell a story, then this course—The Possibilities of Fiction, as we'll be calling it—deals with improving storytelling techniques and learning how to deconstruct and reconstruct a story for the sake of deeper meaning. By reading, analyzing and writing fictional texts, students in this course will develop the skills necessary to go beyond the workshop clichés of introductory courses and develop a personal framework on which to build and rebuild their narratives.

Reading is fundamental to writing and will be an essential part of this course. Students will encounter a variety of storytelling styles, which will in turn give students a deeper contextual sandbox in which to experiment. Some of the stories will be short and to the point. Others will be strange and perhaps challenging. Still others will be long, intricate and deeply human. All of them will show the full range of possibilities within the nebulous artform of storytelling.

By the end of this course, students should be comfortable writing in a variety of styles and should, above all, be comfortable with revising—and perhaps completely rewriting—their work to reach its maximum potential. By the end of this course, students will, if nothing else, have encountered new voices and had the chance to rework their narratives in order to find their own.

Many a book is like a key to unknown chambers within the castle of one's own self.

– **Franz Kafka**

Good fiction's job [is] to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

– **David Foster Wallace**

•

Course Policies and Requirements

Required Texts

- *Making Shapely Fiction* by Jerome Stern (Norton)
- Fiction texts by various authors, available electronically through Ares course reserves

The instructor will furnish other texts in PDF form or as handouts as needed.

Recommended Texts

- *The Brief Penguin Handbook* (Penguin)
- Any collection containing one or more of the stories to be read

Assignments and Grading

For this course, you will be required to write the following:

- **Ten 500-word short reading responses** that examine each week’s assigned reading. The Stern chapters and other critical texts may be informative to the response and provide valuable context when responding to each text—for the first five responses, you will receive a specific prompt;
- **One 1000-word presentation and discussion opener** to one of the short stories assigned. For this, students will be required to prepare a brief (5-10 min) analysis of a story and ask the other course participants questions to prompt an engaging discussion of the story. For example, one might analyze voice in the work of Grace Paley and pose questions to get other students thinking;
- **One 500–1000-word flash fiction piece** which will draw on the short works read in the first third of the semester;
- **One story at least 750 words in length** drawing on the works encountered in the second third of the semester;
- **One story at least 1000 words in length** drawing on the longer works read in the final third of the semester;
- **A revised and improved copy of one of the above stories** to be submitted with a **250–500-word letter** detailing the changes made in conjunction with the previously assigned critical texts. This revision will constitute this course’s “final exam.”

The course will also involve a number of shorter in-class activities and analytical exercises related to the assigned works of fiction. Full details and requirements for each assignment will be posted online.

The grading for this course will break down as follows:

Assignment	Points and Percentage
Short reading responses	250 (25 points each) (25%)
Presentation and discussion	150 (15%)
Story assignments (graded for completion)	300 (100 points each) (30%)
Revised final story (graded for quality)	300 (30%)
Total	1000 (100%)

There will not be opportunities for extra credit on assignments as such, but **you may earn ten credit points by attending the MFA@FLA Readings and/or the Florida Writers Festival** during the semester (dates TBD). You may not earn more than twenty extra credit points total for attending readings. Final grades may be appealed by contacting Carla Blount in the English Department (cblount@english.ufl.edu).

As in art, technical mastery consists not only of incisive content but also of skill. Picasso had to learn how to draw a realistic human form before deconstructing one, after all.

Flash fiction and stories submitted will be **graded for completion** as noted, meaning they will be assessed on whether or not they meet course guidelines. These guidelines are as follows:

1. The submitted assignment meets the required word count;
2. The submitted assignment includes the proper heading (incl. student's name, course number, instructor's name, date and exact word count of story);
3. The submitted assignment is double-spaced, written in an acceptable font and otherwise correctly formatted;
4. The pages are numbered in the header with the student's last name included;
5. The submission has a title, centered at the top of the first page;
6. The submission is handed in on time and submitted in printed form to the class a week prior to workshop.

Revisions will be **graded for quality**, which means that they should fulfill the above requirements **and** demonstrate effective writing. What this means may differ story to story, but the general requirements are that the story be original work that demonstrates effective use of point of view, verb tense/temporal logic, setting, sensory detail and dramatic tension. Revised stories should exhibit clear differences from submitted first drafts.

Work that is graded for quality—that is, all work except for stories submitted to the workshop—must meet a certain level of quality. Students can reasonably expect the following grades based on the quality of work received:

- A (excellent work)** Work submitted exceeds all requirements in refinement, quality and insightfulness. The assignment takes risks that pay off, is correctly formatted and is free of distracting errors. An example would be a particularly insightful presentation with challenging questions or a refined, unique, creative final story.
- B (good work)** Work submitted meets all requirements and shows the beginnings of insight. The assignment takes risks that may or may not pay off and is largely free of errors. Responses that show insight but take a wrong turn or do not fully pursue a question posed could merit such a grade.
- C (acceptable work)** Work submitted meets most requirements but takes few risks or is laden with summary/shallow analysis. The assignment takes few risks and/or contains distracting errors. An example would be a response that summarizes without analyzing or a directionless presentation.
- D (poor work)** Work submitted does not meet most requirements of the assignments and/or takes few risks and/or is full of distracting errors and/or is careless in execution.
- E (unacceptable)** Work fails to meet even basic requirements and shows an egregious lack of creativity, insight and carefulness.

The grading scale used for this course is as follows:

A	4.0	930-1000 (out of 1000)	C	2.0	730-769
A-	3.67	900-929	C-	1.67	700-729
B+	3.33	870-899	D+	1.33	670-699
B	3.0	830-869	D	1.0	630-669
B-	2.67	800-829	D-	0.67	600-629
C+	2.33	770-799	E	0.0	0-599

Submitting Work for Workshop

In order to ensure that everyone has time to read the flash fiction/stories that are due for workshop, students who are due to be workshopped must bring in printed copies of their completed stories **and** submit their story electronically **the week prior to workshop**. Failure to do so will result in a deduction of at least a letter grade on said assignment depending on its completion. Contact the instructor if you are struggling, or use a prompt to help you get started.

Workshop Feedback

Feedback is essential to helping your peers improve their stories—just as all students would wish for constructive, useful feedback, so should all students provide constructive, useful feedback to their classmates.

Each student should **read each submitted story twice** and make marginal notes or comments to suggest changes to structure or content. More detailed feedback for overarching issues such as plot, character or theme should be addressed in a **brief note or letter**, which should contain at least **three comments on what was effective** and **three comments on what could be improved**. Letters may be handwritten at the end of a work (or on the back page) or typed separately and included with the marked-up draft.

Attendance and Expectations

This course is organized in a three-hour block in order to maximize the amount of time we have to discuss, critique, read and analyze. Because of this, you will be expected to arrive on time and to limit your total absences to **two missed courses maximum** (six course hours). Students missing more courses than this will **not pass** unless the circumstances surrounding the absences are extenuating (e.g., a family emergency, extreme illness, etc.). Please discuss any extenuating circumstances with the instructor **before** any absence.

Anyone more than **ten minutes late** to class will be counted **tardy**, and three tardies will count as an absence.

Attendance on the day on which your flash fiction/story is to be workshopped is **mandatory** unless cleared with the instructor due to aforementioned extenuating circumstances.

In addition to the basic expectation of timely attendance, everyone in workshop is expected to help ensure that, for the three hours of the course, everyone feels comfortable, safe and willing to share his or her writing. Writing can be very personal—much of the best fiction draws to some extent on the author's own experiences—and some students are not as comfortable

sharing their writing as others. For this reason, all students should be careful to avoid bigotry, insensitivity, insults and derision. A successful workshop should be a critical environment but not a hostile one. If a student personally offends other students, he or she may be asked to leave, which could result in an unplanned absence.

Laptop and Smartphone Policy

Though laptops and tablets will be necessary for those students exclusively reading electronic versions of the reading, texting and being constantly tapped into social media greatly affects concentration. **Texting and checking social media in class will not be tolerated.** If it is an emergency, please leave the room to use your phone; if it is not, I may ask you to do so anyway. Phones should be kept on silent or vibrate mode to minimize distraction.

Course Credit and Academic Honesty

This course can satisfy the UF General Education requirement for Composition or Humanities. This course can provide 6000 words toward fulfillment of the UF requirement for writing. For questions about meeting course requirements, see the course catalog or contact the Registrar's Office.

All students must abide by the Student Honor Code. Plagiarism is a very serious offence and may result in a zero for an assignment, failure of the course and/or a referral to the Dean of Students' Office. If you copy some or all of your work from any source without citation—including your work in past courses—you are committing plagiarism. Plagiarism is relatively easy to check and consequences will be immediate.

For more information, see: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php> and/or consult with the instructor.

Sexual Harassment

UF provides an educational and working environment that is free from sex discrimination and sexual harassment for its students, staff, and faculty. Anyone found harassing or degrading course participants will be subject to expulsion from the class, a referral to the Dean of Students and/or other disciplinary action. Students should immediately report any harassing behavior.

For more about UF policies regarding harassment, see: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/sexual/>

Students with Disabilities

Every effort will be made to accommodate students with disabilities or other special needs. Students who meet this description should contact the instructor and/or the Dean of Students prior to the course's first meeting so that any arrangements can be made. The Disability Resource Center in the Dean of Students Office provides information and support regarding accommodations for students with disabilities. See also: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/>

Course Meeting and Reading Schedule

Unit 1: Reduction

- 8/27 Introduction to course and syllabus:** Explanation of course policy and required readings, brief activity with Jamaica Kincaid
Reading: Ch. 1-4 in Stern, Paley in course reserves
Note: drop/add by Aug. 29th
- 9/3 Large Voices in Small Rooms:** Economy of voice, discussion of Paley, targeted word choice, individual and group activity on reducing to the essentials
Reading: Ch. 5-8 in Stern, Robison and Carver in course reserves
HW: Finish first flash (group 1)
- 9/10 More Bang for Your Buck:** Discussion of Robison, evoking big emotions in a short space, discussion of Carver, Lish's editing: good or bad?
Due: flash fiction (group 1)
Reading: Ch. 9-12 in Stern, Hughes in course reserves
- 9/17 Upping the Voltage:** Discussion of Colette, creating tension, discussion of Hughes, dealing with transgression, activity
Flash fiction workshop group 1
Due: flash fiction (group 2)
Reading: Ch. 13-16 in Díaz in course reserves
HW: Finish first flash (group 2)
- 9/24 Condensing the Other:** Discussion of Díaz, multiculturalism
Flash Fiction workshop group 2
Reading: Kafka stories in course reserves, critical text on Kafka

Unit 2: Rule-breaking

- 10/1 Getting Weird:** Discussion of "Before the Law," purity of language, the parable, discussion of "A Country Doctor," blending reality and surreality
Reading: Borges and Handke in course reserves, Gardner excerpt
HW: Finish short story (group 1)
- 10/8 Beyond the Plot Arc:** Discussion of Borges, abstraction and metafiction, discussion of Handke, direct address and unusual voice
Due: short story (group 1)
Reading: Lispector in course reserves
HW: Finish short story (group 2)
- 10/15 Inner Lives:** Discussion of Lispector, writing trauma
Short story workshop group 1
Due: Short story (group 2)
Reading: Murakami in course reserves
- 10/22 Art Imitating Life Imitating Art:** Discussion of Murakami, pop culture and the arts in writing
Short story workshop group 2
Reading: Erdrich in course reserves

Unit 3: Refinement

- 10/29 Inner and Outer Lives:** Discussion of Erdrich, interiority as a product of culture, getting beyond the canon with the canon's help
Reading: Trevor in course pack
- 11/5 No class – Writing from Reality:** Activity on your own, writing from art or writing outside of your comfort zone (to be discussed)
- 11/12 The Essential Moment:** Discussion of Trevor, sharing activity results
Reading: Leavitt & Munro in course pack
HW: Finish third short story (group 1)
- 11/19 The Complete Story:** Discussion of Leavitt, boiling things down, meta-symbolism, discussion of Munro
Due: third stories group 1
- 11/26 No class: Thanksgiving holiday**
HW: Finish third short story (group 2)
- 12/3 Workshop third stories group 1**
Due: third stories round 2
- 12/10 Workshop third stories group 2**
Course wrap-up: final thoughts, course evaluations
- 12/17 Due: Final stories & revision letters (submit to instructor via email by midnight)**
Happy holidays!

Timeline of Presentations/Discussion Questions

Please sign up for a story to present on. During the week on which you present, you will not be required to submit a 500-word reading response.

Date	Story	Presenter
9/3*	Grace Paley – “The Loudest Voice”	
9/10	Mary Robison – “Yours”	
	Raymond Carver – “The Bath”	
9/17	Langston Hughes – “Thank You, M’am”	
9/24	Junot Díaz – “Fiesta 1980”	
10/1	Franz Kafka – “Before the Law”	
	Franz Kafka – “A Country Doctor”	
10/8	Jorge Luis Borges – “The Library of Babel”	
	Peter Handke – “Welcoming the Board of Directors”	
10/15	Clarice Lispector – “The Crime of the Mathematics Professor”	
10/22	Haruki Murakami – “Nausea 1979”	
10/29	Louise Erdrich – “Fleur”***	/
11/12	William Trevor – “Broken Homes”**	/
11/19	David Leavitt – “Territories”**	/
	Alice Munro – “The Turkey Season”**	/

*The student presenting on Grace Paley will receive 5 extra credit points for going early.

**For the later stories, two students will present. These students will need to either coordinate their presentation or communicate to ensure an appropriate division of themes and topics.

Timeline of Story Due Dates & Workshop Dates

	9/10	9/17	9/24	10/8	10/15	10/22	11/19	12/3	12/10	12/17
<i>Due (paper & online)</i>	FF1	FF2	-	SS1	SS2	-	TS1	TS2	-	FRL
<i>Workshop (feedback due)</i>	-	FF1	FF2	-	SS1	SS2	-	TS1	TS2	-

FF# = Flash fiction & group number

SS# = Short story (>750 words) & group number

TS# = Third story (>1000 words) & group number

FRL = Final story revision & letter