

Required texts:

-*How Fiction Works* by James Wood (ISBN-10: **0312428472**)

-*Making Shapely Fiction* by Jerome Stern (any edition)

-Course Pack (available at Book It on NW 13th St. & University Ave., bottom floor of Holiday Inn, or at <http://book-it.myshopify.com/>)

Course objectives:

1. To leave this course writing better than you did when you entered.
2. To leave this course reading better than you did when you entered.
3. To write fiction with more precision, force, and surprise than before.

Course format:

1. **Reading** - to be a great writer you must read.
2. **Writing** - to be a great writer you must write.
3. **Critiquing** - to be a great writer, you must critique thoughtfully and frequently, knowing that this close reading of another's prose will, in fact, help your own.

Beware: this course is reading intensive and writing intensive. Do not fall prey to the pandemic impression that creative courses are easy.

Reading

Read. Class time is wasted if no one has anything to say about the reading. If I feel people are not reading, I will give quizzes. On the schedule, the "Readings" section tells you what you should read before the class on that date. If I have to give quizzes, your performance on these will factor into your participation grade.

Writing

1. **Short creative exercises:** You will write short exercises every week. Please always bring the completed exercise to class (see below).
2. **Shorter critical response papers:** You will be required to write ten shorter critical response papers (see below).
3. **Longer critical response papers:** You will be required to write one longer critical response paper (see below).
4. **Shorter stories:** Near the beginning of the semester, you will write a 5-7 page story to be workshopped by your peers. This story will be in response to a prompt. You will be expected to use the prompt as inspiration for a story that is character-driven and for an adult audience.

5. **Longer stories:** The second half of the semester, you will write an 8-12 page story to be workshopped by your peers. You may write this story about anything, but you will be expected to incorporate what you have learned in the course—from your previous workshop and from the readings and discussions—when writing the story. This story should be literary, meaning, again, character-driven and for an adult audience.

Warning: *There is no late delivery.* There is no switching. No last-minute writing. Get the work done. And remember: You are responsible for knowing the basic conventions of style and usage—see Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, or me, for guidance.

Critiquing in workshop

You will write comments on each workshop story: marginal notes in ink or pencil *and* a typed letter to the author. **Attach this letter to the piece and return it to the author at the end of class.** In order for the critique to be valuable, it needs to be balanced and SPECIFIC.

On the **manuscript:**

1. Note grammatical and mechanical errors.
2. Edit sentences for variety, clarity, and sound.
3. Mark areas—scenes/content—in need of clarification.
4. Feel free to include personal reactions to content or language, especially if something is working well.
5. Note any logical incongruities or missing information.

In the **letter**, concentrate on more general comments. Point out suggestions you found yourself making repeatedly. Also talk more about the content of the story—characterization, plot, structure, dialogue, setting, etc. Be sure to say both what you liked and what you thought needed improvement.

Shorter critical response papers

You must write **ten critical responses to the assigned readings.** You will analyze the stories from a writerly perspective, concentrating on authorial choice. You should read the guide to writing critical responses included at the end of the syllabus before you begin to write.

If there is a reading from James Wood that week, you will be expected to begin the critical response with a short summary of the section you’ve read.

Each critical response must be a minimum of **700 words.** No late papers will be accepted. Note that you will be required to turn in ten papers, though you will have twelve opportunities to do so. This means you may skip a few shorter critical responses, **though you should still do the reading.**

These papers require no library or Internet research. Your ideas should be original and fresh. Give *me your* take on the material. Your grade will be decided based on clarity of writing, depth of analysis, application of the aspect of writing for that week, and your adherence to the guidelines at the end of this syllabus regarding citation and content.

It is required that you come to class each day fully prepared. We are here to study and create serious fiction, which requires serious work. **If you're hoping for an easy A, this class is not for you.**

Longer critical response paper

Near the end of the semester, I will ask you to choose from a list of novels. You will apply 2-3 of the aspects of writing covered over the course of the semester to the work. The response should follow all of the guidelines at the end of the syllabus—the only difference between the longer response and the shorter responses should be scope.

Presentations

Each week, someone will be expected to make a short presentation. See the end of the syllabus for further guidance.

Graded Assignments and Other Course Components

1. Class Participation*:	200 points
2. Creative exercises:	100 points (10 each**)
3. Shorter response papers:	100 points (10 each)
4. Longer response paper:	100 points
5. Presentation:	25 points
6. First story:	75 points
7. Second story:	100 points
8. Final Story Revisions:	300 points

1000 points total

**Class participation includes written and oral peer critiques as well as your presence and regular contributions in class. If I feel that I need to give reading quizzes, your performance on them will affect your participation grade.*

***You will turn in 13 creative exercises. I will count your 10 highest grades.*

Attendance

You are allowed two absences *without explanation*, but **do not miss your stories' workshops**. Skipping a workshop will result in a failing grade for that story. A third absence will lower your final grade by **one full letter**. If you are absent a fourth time, **you will fail the class**.

There is **no distinction** between excused and unexcused absences. Arriving more than a few minutes late to class is considered an absence. **Leaving class early is considered an absence**.

Meeting Outside of Class

You may come to my office hours to discuss any questions you have about the class.

Final Notes

1. You are responsible for checking your university emails. I will sometimes give or change assignments via email, as well as make any necessary changes to the schedule. *You are responsible for checking your email and approaching me with any questions*. If I have sent an email to you, I will assume you have read and understood it.

2. I may change anything on this syllabus at any time.

3. *Use of cell phones (with hands or ears) is NOT permitted in class.* (That is rude.)

The following is useful information on university policies you should know. Please read over the links provided.

Statement of Writing Requirement (WR1)

This course can satisfy the UF requirement for Writing. For more information, see: <http://gened.ua.ufl.edu/writing-math.aspx#Writing>

Statement of student disability services

The Disability Resource Center in the Dean of Students Office provides students and faculty with information and support regarding accommodations for students with disabilities in the classroom. For more information, see: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/>

Statement on harassment

UF provides an educational and working environment for its students, faculty, and staff that is free from sex discrimination and sexual harassment. For more about UF policies regarding harassment, see: <http://regulations.ufl.edu/chapter/1006.pdf>

Statement on academic honesty

All students are required to abide by the Student Honor Code. For more information about academic honesty, including definitions of plagiarism and unauthorized collaboration, see: <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php>

Statement on grades and grading policies.

Note: UF has recently instituted minus grades. As a result, letter grades now have different grade point equivalencies. For more information, see:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

Assessment Rubric for critical papers

Below are the criteria by which I will grade your critical response papers.

CONTENT	Ideas and analyses should be complex and critical. Papers should offer personal, fresh insights into the material. Go beyond surface matter!
ORGANIZATION AND COHERENCE	Use an orderly structure that facilitates reading, sustaining the reader's interest through effective paragraph development and use of proper transitions, presenting a logical flow of ideas.
RISK-TAKING	You must deal with the material in creative and challenging ways, developing main points based on self-initiated criteria independent of my class discussion comments, and avoiding summary unless necessary.
EVIDENCE	You must support your ideas with actual examples from the text, and use relevant details from stories that explain and support your main ideas. Try to use quotations from stories that support your points (one or two lines will do—you will be marked down for excessive use of quotations').
DEVELOPMENT	Analyze evidence in a way that supports your claims and overall thesis, including identifying literary devices/figures of speech and explaining how they contribute to the meaning of the text. AVOID SUMMARY.
MECHANICS	Spelling, grammar, punctuation must be correct. Papers must show careful proofreading, subject-verb agreement, no run-on sentences or sentence fragments, clear pronoun usage.

A Guide to Writing Your Short Critical Responses

The ways in which you will be asked to analyze fiction in this class will probably be new and difficult for you at first. Expect to find this process challenging. Expect to improve dramatically through practice. You will start out with an advantage if you follow all of the guidelines on this handout. If you read my comments and apply them to your next response, you will get better, and you will do well in this class. If you don't read my comments and/or don't apply them moving forward, you will not get better, and you will not do well in this class.

A good critical response begins with good reading. This means that as you read a story you are interacting with it. You are thinking about it deeply. You are underlining important parts and making notes in the margins. If there is a Writing Basics handout and/or section of *HFV* that week, you should read it/them first. You should then apply what you learned from the handout and/or from James Wood to the fiction as you read it.

Each week we will focus on a different aspect of writing. Your short critical responses should discuss the ways in which that aspect is used in the stories you've read. Rather than concentrating simply on examples of the aspect, like setting or dialogue, concentrate on how the author is using that aspect to further plot, deepen understanding of the characters, and/or emphasize the theme(s). I pick these stories because I think they are good examples of that aspect of writing, so you should have a lot to say. **Avoid judgments and remarks of taste.**

You should mention **all of the reading** for that week in your critical responses. You should always back up all arguments with quoted, specific evidence from the stories.

The best critical responses will do these things:

1. Show thoughtful, deep thinking about the stories.
2. Show thoughtful, deep thinking about the aspect of writing and what James Wood has said about that aspect of writing (if applicable).
3. Make a clear argument about specific choices made by the author regarding that aspect of writing with a focus on the theme(s) of the story.
4. Use quotations from the stories and James Wood in order to support and clarify that argument.
5. If there is a section of James Wood that week, begin with a short summary/discussion of it.
6. Cite sources correctly.
7. Show that the response has been edited to eliminate punctuation, spelling, grammatical, and other errors.
8. Show that the response has been edited to make the writing clear, forceful, and enjoyable to read.
9. Be double-spaced, 12-point font, with normal margins.

Citing Your Sources

All direct quotations should be formatted and cited correctly. You should also cite any summarized ideas or content from the Wood or the stories.

-Shorter quotations can look something like this:

As James Wood says in *How Fiction Works*, "the house of fiction has many windows, but only two or three doors" (3).

-Or they can look something like this:

While technically stories can be narrated in second person, "in reality, we are stuck with third- and first-person narration" (Wood, 3).

-When quoting longer passages, meaning more than two or three connected sentences, you should use a special kind of formatting, like this:

While most readers assume that third-person narration is more reliable than first person narration, James Wood insists that the reliability of a given point of view is more complicated than that:

Actually, first-person narration is generally more reliable than unreliable; and third-person "omniscient" narration is generally more partial than omniscient. The first-person narrator is often highly reliable... Even the apparently unreliable narrator is more often than not reliably unreliable. (5)***

***Notice that, while the text introducing the quotation is double-spaced, when the quotation begins it's **single-spaced**. The quotation is **indented** on the left side. It is also **11-point font** instead of 12-point. An **ellipsis** is used when skipping a portion of Wood's writing between the two relevant ideas.

-Finally, **if you have summarized an idea that is not your own, you should also cite it**. This will most likely only come up when you are discussing *How Fiction Works*. You should simply put (Wood, #) after any restated opinion or argument of his.

Presentations

January 16th - _____

January 23rd - _____

January 30th - _____

February 6th - _____

February 13th - _____

February 20th - _____

February 27th - _____

March 13th - _____

March 20th - _____

March 27th - _____

April 3rd - _____

April 10th - _____

For your presentation, please choose a poem published in the last five years by the Poetry Foundation (poetryfoundation.org). You should pick a poem that you like, and that you feel illustrates good use of whatever aspect of writing we're concentrating on that week.

You should be prepared to begin a short discussion on the use of the aspect of writing in the poem.

To discuss:

1. What about the poem you feel is utilizing or focusing on your aspect of writing.
2. What you think the theme or meaning of the poem is, and how the aspect of writing is serving to deepen, emphasize, and/or clarify that theme.
3. What you feel you learned as a fiction writer from the use of the aspect of writing in the poem.
4. Anything else you particularly liked about the poem.

This is not a poetry class, and I do not expect you to be an expert. I believe that fiction writers can learn a lot from poetry and vice versa. This presentation should aim to point out what we can learn, *as fiction writers*, from your chosen poem.

Schedule

N.B.: The assignments listed for each week are due *that week*. So, for example, the reading/writing listed for Week 2 is due the second week of class.

Week 1, January 9th

In Class: First day -> Introductions/getting to know you, syllabus stuff, in-class exercises.

Week 2, January 16th, Point of View I:

Readings: Pages 1-46 of *How Fiction Works*, critical response guide in course packet, "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver and "Forever Overhead" by David Foster Wallace (in course pack).

Creative Writing: Write a scene in the first person from the point of view of one of the following characters (500 words):

1. A washed-up country singer sitting in a bar in Los Angeles.
2. An old man waiting in the snow for a bus.
3. A twelve-year-old girl from Ohio who is seeing the ocean for the first time.

Critical Response: This is a slightly different critical response than usual. Bring in a summary of what James Wood said about point of view in this reading. For each story, make a list of 3-5 examples of uses of point of view that you feel were doing a lot of work to further plot and/or emphasize or deepen the theme. **Be sure to bring your course packet and book to class.**

Week 3, January 23rd, Point of View II:

Readings: Read Writing Basics handout #1, "Sex Lives of African Girls" by Taiye Selasi and "Axis" by Alice Munro (in course pack).

Creative Writing: Write a scene in the first person. Now, write the same scene in the third person. Do not simply change the pronouns, but write a whole new piece—take advantage of the freedoms/limitations offered by each point of view. (Each scene should be a minimum of 250 words.)

Critical Response: Discuss the use of point of view in the three stories. Think about why the writer chose this specific point of view for the story—how does it serve theme and content?

Also Due: Workshop #1A stories. Critique them for Week 4.

Week 4, January 30th, Dialogue:

Readings: Writing Basics handout #2, dialogue worksheet, Dialogue section in *HWF* (pp. 213-223), "Terrific Mother" by Lorrie Moore, "The Dungeon Master" by Sam Lipsyte (in course pack).

Creative Writing: Eavesdrop on a conversation between two or more people. Transcribe the conversation word for word. Then, write a scene in which you put that dialogue into a new context. Don't change what is said, but fictionalize the characters and setting (300-500 words).

Critical Response: Look at the use of dialogue in the two stories. How does dialogue serve to characterize? How does it serve to move the story forward?

Also Due: Workshop #2A stories.

Week 5, February 6th, Significant Details:

Readings: *Detail* section in *How Fiction Works* (pp. 59-94), Writing Basics handout #3, "Diem Perdidi" by Julie Otsuka, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor (in coursepack).

Creative Writing: Read "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens and "Oh My Pa-Pa" by Bob Hicok. Then either: 1) Emulating Stevens, pick an object or animal and use significant detail to look at it in 13 ways; or 2) Emulating Hicok, make a list of significant details about a parental figure in your life (300-500 words).

Critical Response: Write about the use of significant detail in "Diem Perdidi" and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Concentrate on specific descriptions—find an example or two in each story and do a close reading of its significance regarding characterization, plot, etc.

Also Due: Workshop #3A stories.

Week 6, February 13th, Plot/Form/Structure:

Readings: Writing Basics handout #4, "A Conversation With My Father" by Paley, "The School" & "Some of Us Had Been Threatening Our Friend Colby" by Barthelme, "The Orphan Lamb" by Hempel, "Losing the Wax" by Powell.

Creative Writing: Either write a scene mimicking the style/voice of one of the stories (300-500 words); or, write a complete story in 300-500 words, using the short-shorts as a model.

Critical Response: Discuss the limitations and advantages of writing fiction with so few words. Apply the handout to the stories.

Also due: Workshop #4A stories.

Week 7, February 20th, Characterization:

Readings: *Character* section in *HFW* (pp.95-137), Writing Basics handout #5, "Access to the Children" by William Trevor, "Bullet in the Brain" by Tobias Wolff (in course pack).

Creative Writing: Find a photograph online. It should have at least one person in it. Answer these questions about them:

What do they do for a living? How old are they? Where are they from? Where do they live? Are they in a relationship? With whom? Are they happy? What is their biggest regret? What are they most proud of? Do they smoke? What do they wear when they sleep? What is their favorite food? How is/was their relationship with their mother and/or father? How do they shake hands? How do they sit in a chair? What do they feel guilty about? When they were five years old, what did they want to be when they grew up?

Then answer **two or three questions of your own**. Bring in the questions & answers (300-500 words).

Critical Response: Write about characterization in the Trevor & Wolff stories. Concentrate on the significance of actions/details regarding the characters, as well as dialogue & their reactions to conflict. Think about the treatment of minor & major characters.

Also Due: Workshop #1B stories. Critique them for Week 8.

Week 8, February 27th, Tense/Time:

Readings: Writing Basics handout #6, "Welcome to Your Life and Congratulations" by Ramona Ausubel and "Above and Below" by Lauren Groff (in course pack).

Creative Writing: Write a scene in the present or future tense (300-500 words).

Critical Response: Discuss the use of tense and time in the Millhauser & Groff stories.

Also Due: Workshop #2B stories.

Week 9, March 13th, Language, Style, & Voice:

Readings: *Language* section in *HFW* (pp. 181-212), excerpt from *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov and "Victory Lap" by George Saunders (both in course pack).

Creative Writing: Write about the first five years of your life in the same rhapsodic, immersive language as *Lolita* (300-500 words).

Critical Response: Discuss the use of language in *Lolita* and "Victory Lap."

Also Due: Workshop #3B stories.

Week 10, March 20th, Setting:

Readings: Writing Basics handout #7, "Yours" by Mary Robison, "A Bridge Under Water" by Tom Bissell (in course pack).

Creative Writing: Make a map of the neighborhood where you grew up. Mark where you lived and where anyone important to you lived, if they lived nearby. Mark where 3-5 significant things happened to you. "Grew up" can mean first five years, first ten years, first fifteen years, whatever (300 words).

Critical Response: Write about setting in "Yours" and "A Bridge Under Water."

Also Due: Workshop #4B stories.

Week 11, March 27th, Unconventional Style/Structures:

Readings: "Happy Endings" by Margaret Atwood, "The Dead Sister Handbook" by Kevin Wilson (in course pack). You may also want to take another look at Writing Basics handout 4.

Creative Writing: Using the format/language of an instruction manual, write a scene w/characters, plot, etc. Title it "How to _____" (300-500 words).

Critical Response: Discuss the choices made by Atwood & Wilson regarding form and structure in these stories. How do these unconventional forms help to reflect the meaning of these stories & strengthen their impact?

Also Due: Workshop #5B stories.

Week 12, April 3rd, Surrealism & Alternate Realities:

Readings: "CommComm" and "The Semplica Girl Diaries" by George Saunders.

Creative Writing: Find a work of surrealist art online. Use the work to inspire 300-500 words of creative writing.

Critical Response: What is surreal about these two stories? How does Saunders use an alternate reality, with different rules, to reflect the meaning of these stories, strengthen their impact, and make a commentary on realities of society?

Also Due: Workshop #6B stories. Critique them for Week 13.

Week 13, April 10th, Creative Nonfiction:

Readings: *Truth, Convention, Realism* in *HFW* (pp. 223-end), "The Fourth State of Matter" by Jo Ann Beard (in course pack). Start reading your novel if you haven't already.

Critical Response: Discuss the literary elements of Didion's essay. Apply *HFW* where appropriate, including other sections of it.

In Class: Discuss realism & creative nonfiction, readings. Sixth Workshop.

Also Due: Workshop #7B stories.

Week 14

Readings: Keep reading your novel. Work on finishing *HFW*.

Critical Response: Apply one of the sections we haven't yet read/discussed from *HFW* to what you've read in the novel so far.

In Class: Seventh Workshop.

Week 15

Readings: Finish your novel & *HFW*.

Longer Critical Response due: Write at least 1,000 words on the novel you've chosen to read. Discuss the use of at least two of the following in the novel: point of view, characterization, significant detail, form/structure, or dialogue.

Final Drafts of Stories due.

List of Novels for Longer Critical Response:

Jesus' Son by Denis Johnson
Let the Great World Spin by Collum McCann
A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan
The Family Fang by Kevin Wilson
Tinkers by Paul Harding
Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf
Why Did I Ever by Mary Robison
White Teeth by Zadie Smith

Extra Credit Opportunities:

1. For Week 15, apply one of the sections we haven't discussed from *HFW* to the novel you've chosen to read in a 500-word critical response. (I will add a 10/10 grade to your short critical response average).
2. Read another of the novels from the list above by the last class. Meet with me to discuss it and write a 500-word response. (I will add 5 points to your longer critical response grade.)
3. Attend one of the readings at Volta and write a 250-word response. If you "Like" the MFA@FLA Reading Series on Facebook, you can keep track of when they are. (I will add two points to your lowest critical response grade. I will add one point for each additional reading you attend.)

Recommended Reading: In choosing the readings for this course, I tried very hard to mix more established stories with newer stories. I did this because I think college-level courses should give you a good foundation in the tradition of literature while also introducing you to writing you might not see otherwise. Here is a list of very, very recommended reading that did not make it onto the schedule: "A&P" by John Updike, "Hills Like White Elephants" and "The Killers" by Ernest Hemingway, "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien, "A Small, Good Thing" by Raymond Carver, "Hands" by Sherwood Anderson, "Babylon Revisited" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Mrs. Silly" by William Trevor, "Hunters in the Snow" by Tobias Wolff, "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" by J.D. Salinger, "Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry, "You're Ugly, Too" by Lorrie Moore, "Woman With the Little Dog" by Anton Chekhov, "Gusev" by Anton Chekhov, anything else by Anton Chekhov.

Please feel free to ask me for specific recommendations. I also seriously urge you to take a look at the "Art of Fiction" interviews on *The Paris Review*, specifically those of the authors recommended above and whose work we're reading in this course, www.theparisreview.org/interviews.

Faculty Reading List: The collected stories of David Leavitt, *Heroic Measures* by Jill Ciment, *The Interrogative Mood* by Padgett Powell, *32 Stories* by Mary Robison. You should also take a look at *Subtropics*, the MFA@FLA's literary journal.