

English 498: Advanced Fiction
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Office Hours: Wednesday: 2:30-3:30 and by appointment
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English 498 is an advanced course in the theory, practice, and reading of fiction. We will start with the idea that the willingness to experiment, the willingness to practice, and an interest in language are the prerequisites of becoming a committed writer. Experiment is essential because it allows you to discover new ways of seeing; practice is important because it allows you to make the best use you can of those insights. Your interest in language—both in the language you produce and in the language others produce—is the most important element of the class; your slippery medium and sometime ally, it can make or take apart a whole world.

In this class we'll read tons of fiction for all the reasons a person usually does: to be entertained, to be surprised or inspired, to participate in our own print culture. But the difference is that as writers of these forms, we will also be reading with an eye to the tricks, strengths, tools, and techniques of other writers. Nobody, the truism goes, can teach you how to write: writers learn for themselves how to do it—from example (reading good work), from experiment and practice, and from feedback (listening to and responding to the comments of others). So, in a nutshell, that's what this course is about.

Course Goals

1. To understand the importance of elements of the craft of fiction: image, voice, character, setting and story.
2. To read examples of published fiction, as well as examples of student work.
3. To develop skills in writing and revising fiction.
4. To practice and develop discussion and analysis skills through written and oral assignments.
5. To learn self-motivation for developing your writing from an idea into a polished final draft.
6. To appreciate the development and revision processes of creative writing.

Required Texts

Anti-Fiction: An anthology of experimental fiction (edited by Stevick)
Best American Short Stories, 2010 (edited by Richard Russo)
Bringing the Devil to His Knees (edited by Charles Baxter and Peter Turchi)

Supplies & Costs

You need some sort of slender folder to serve as your writing portfolio—not a big three-ring binder. In addition to the books, you may be required to make copies of exercises or drafts for the class or for your group.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory in this class. As a seminar-style class, we just don't get much done if people are missing all the time. To this end, I am very serious about my attendance policy. Basically, you get two absences. After that, you lose a third of a letter grade in the class with each absence. Let me repeat myself: I'm serious about this. So for instance, if you have four absences over the course of the semester and all of your assignments tally to an A-, you'll drop a third of a letter grade and will actually get a B+. Once you miss five classes you fail the course. No exceptions. I just can't justify passing someone who has missed five weeks of a fourteen week course.

It's worth noting, too, that not coming to class can hurt you in two ways. The first is outlined above; the second is through your participation grade. That is to say, if you're not here, it's difficult to see how you're participating in the class.

I take attendance at the beginning of class—as well as make announcements—so if you're late, it's your job to catch me after class to make sure that I marked you present (and to make sure you know what's going to be happening in the coming classes). Being late, by the way, also counts against you; three tardies equals one absence. Feel free to check with me at any time to remind yourself of where you stand.

If, for whatever reason, you do miss class, you are responsible for knowing what you missed and for getting the assignment(s) for that day and completing them on time; the best way to do this is **not to send me an email** saying something like, "Did I miss anything important?" Much better to write or call a classmate and say, "What do we need to do for Wednesday?" Although most of the texts you need to read will be mentioned on the schedule, some may be passed out in class and added at the last minute. It's your job to be caught up with everything.

Finally, if you have an on-going medical problem, please see me. I will try to work something out insofar as that's possible. Unfortunately, sometimes it's just not; that is, missing nine classes with or without a medical excuse is still going to compromise your performance severely in the course.

Revision Policy

You are allowed to revise any of your formal pieces for the final portfolio. You have two options for this. The first requires more of you, but might allow you to improve your grade more than the somewhat superficial second option. Here are the two options:

Option One for Revision

If you choose this option for either of your workshop pieces, you need to submit a proposal to me that is meant to convince me that you have a master plan for real, serious revision. To do this, you will need to submit paper copies to me of two things:

1. A 150-200 word description of what your plans are for revision.
2. The copy of the draft with my comments OR the note that I wrote to you about the piece (depending on which you received from me).

I will take a look at your plan and if I think it makes sense—that it is more than just superficial “cleaning up,” then I will okay it. If I okay it, then you can carry on with your plan, or we can meet to discuss your plan further if you like. In either case, though, the absolute final version will be due at the end of the semester in the portfolio, and I will regrade the story/chapter wholesale (though understand that your grade cannot go down). You can move from a C- to an A, if the improvement is that great.

On the other hand, if I don't okay the proposal, then, well, sorry: you are not able to revise the story and your grade stands.

Option Two for Revision

The second way you can improve your grade, as I suggest above, is an easier and somewhat more superficial approach. If you don't want to go through the rigmarole of submitting a proposal to revise—and if it's not important to you to potentially raise your grade by more than a third of a letter grade (a B- becomes a B, etc.)—then you can indeed address yourself to the comments you've received on your draft and do general tidying up of the story. I will re-grade the piece(s) with an eye toward your thoroughness in addressing my comments, and if it seems you've done so satisfactorily, I'll raise the grade a third of a letter

grade. To revise in this manner, all you have to do is submit the revision in the final portfolio with the word REVISION at the top and stapled to my comments on the first draft.

Groups

We will frequently work in groups in this class. You will be randomly tossed into one group early in the semester and will remain with that group throughout. You will rely on these folks (and they will rely on you) to be your support system, your cheerleaders, your champions. They will be the folks most intimate with your work (because they will be reading it closely on a weekly basis and all semester long). In essence, groups are important to the success of the class and they are important to the success of the individuals in the class. I like the group format because it gives you a different, smaller dynamic in which to operate (to complement the class-wide discussions we have).

In your groups you'll be responsible for various things, including leading reading and workshop discussions. If you have problems with your group, please come see me to talk about it. If you feel like someone is not holding up their end of the bargain in your group, it's important that the problem get addressed. You can do it, or I can do it. It's up to you.

Course Conduct

- All cell phones must be turned off before you enter class. Common sense. No one would even think about answering a cell phone during class, right?
- You need to bring to class the text(s) that we are discussing (this includes any texts that I email to you or post on the wiki, and those that get passed out in class). If you do not have a copy of the assigned reading—and, worse, haven't done the reading—you'll get a zero for participation for that day.
- Do not keep your opinions to yourself. A big part of the success of this course is rooted in the participation of everyone. In essence, you learn not just from the texts and from me, but from each other. So it's vital that you jump in.

Conferences

At least once during the semester, you'll meet with me to discuss your writing. We'll be canceling class to do this, and missing the meeting is the same as missing a class. I'll ask you to prepare for the meeting closer to the time. You can of course meet with me any time; just email me to schedule a time to get together.

Workshopping

Workshop days have a number of ground rules, which we'll go over early in the semester. When taking in to account that we'll also be workshopping some of the exercises we write, you can see that more than half of our class time will be spent workshopping one another's work. It is important, then, that we respect one another in this process. That we come to these interactions with the best of intentions and that we work very hard to step outside of our "likes" and "dislikes" to see what the story is actually doing. You can find the guidelines for leading workshops under "Documents" on the wiki.

A Word about Pulp Fiction and Genre Writing

On the topic of genre writing (horror, fantasy, science fiction, etc), I want to be clear up front so there's no confusion down the road. I won't accept genre writing in this class. In this course, we are interested in character-based fiction only. We will talk (ad nauseum probably) about what this means, but in a nut-shell, it means that the fiction we're interested in talking about and writing is rooted in the development of a character (or characters). The formula is relatively simple: your character starts out at Point A, something

happens, he/she moves to Point B. There is change in your character wrought out of the situation he/she finds him/herself. This is perhaps a little simplistic as an explanation, but note that change in the character is an important part of this.

Before you cry foul, let me clarify. This course is situated within an English department. The endeavor of this—and every other—English department is to examine what literature and writing have to offer us in terms of understanding the world and the human condition. The vast majority of genre fiction has much less lofty aims—that is, to entertain. Which is fine. Important, actually. And I enjoy reading some genre fiction myself now and then. It's just that this class isn't the place for it. If this is a deal breaker for you, then I suggest you reconsider your decision to take the course.

Communication

It's best to reach me by email at gdgabriel@smcm.edu. I generally check my email a few times a day. I communicate with the class often by email and will expect you to check your email at least once between each class.

Plagiarism

Each student in this course is expected to create the works they turn in themselves. Plagiarism is the act of appropriating and using the words, ideas, symbols, images, or other works of original expression of others as one's own without giving credit to the person who created the work. For a detailed account of what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, read the College's description:

http://www.smcm.edu/academicservices/policies_misconduct_plagarism.html

If I catch you plagiarizing in this course, you will fail the course, end of story.

Assignments

Formal Writing Assignments 35%

You will turn in three formal assignments in this course, one of which will be "workshopped" in your group and two of which will be workshopped by the whole class. You will be required to turn two short stories and the first chapter of a novel (including a synopsis of the whole novel). This work is entirely of your own making.

I base the grade for these pieces on two important aspects of the work:

1. The ambition of the piece: What I mean by this is: how well you use the fundamentals and tools we will be discussing in class and working on in the many exercises we do during the semester.
2. The success of the piece: How well does the story achieve what it has set out to achieve.

Obviously, these are subjective criteria, as are most things related to grading. Don't be surprised if your grades are not what you'd hope on the first go. But don't fear, you have ample opportunity to revise and improve your grade(s).

Formal Assignment Submissions: the nitty gritty

Formal One: short story (15 points)

Formal Two: short story (15 points)

Formal Three: novel chapter and synopsis (5 points)

For the novel chapter, you need to bring copies for your group; for the two stories that will be workshopped, you need to bring one copy to class on the due date. Please **use page numbers**, but don't staple the ones I'll be making copies of. Don't wait until the morning an assignment is due to print it on campus; something will invariably go wrong, and you will hold up class while you straighten it out.

The first draft of the stories must be between 1000 and 2000 words (4-8 pages, double spaced in Times New Roman). The novel chapter can be up to 3000 words (12 pages). In addition to turning paper copies in for the class, I'd like you to also upload an electronic copy (Word file or PDF) to the wiki under Uploaded Drafts. Follow the directions at the top of the "Upload Drafts and Posts" page for how to upload your files (it can be a little confusing).

If you turn your piece in late—that is, if you come to class the day it is due and you don't have it or you just don't come to class that day—you will get an automatic C on the assignment. Technical issues (printers, computers, whatever) are not acceptable excuses. Revision cannot improve this grade. The uploaded assignment is an important part of this, too.

Please turn in your formal writing formatted as follows:

- Your piece must have a title
- Typed, standard 12 point font
- Double-spaced or single-spaced are both fine
- One inch margins
- Numbered pages
- Your name, course name, and date in the upper left corner of page one
- All drafts must be proofread and spellchecked

Exercises 15%

Because this class is oriented towards experimentation and practice, we will do exercises throughout the semester with the intention of promoting successful writing practices—everything from getting started to drafting and revision. In general, the idea with exercises is to stretch your limits as writers. A willingness to try new things is no less crucial in this course than a weekly commitment to writing. Sometimes we will do these exercises in class, sometimes outside. On occasion I will comment on this work; other times, we might workshop it in class (usually in small groups). Exercises are a vital part of the experience of this course, helping you prepare your thoughts for discussion or work on an important concept. I will ask you to save all of these and will collect them at the end midterm and at the end of the semester.

Late exercises will be treated the same as late assignments with an automatic C.

Due: Midterm & Final Portfolio

Class participation 10%

This should go without saying: You are this class. So, really, you need to be here (see the syllabus for a very clear explanation of the attendance policy). But you also need to be awake, involved, contributing. I assume that you're taking this course because you're interested and I assume, too, that you are going to be prepared for our meetings. This means that you have read the material carefully and have a considered response to it that you are ready to articulate and integrate with the discussion. Everyone needs to find both a way to contribute to the class and a way to help others contribute. If you're not doing those things, it can't help but be reflected in your participation grade.

Group Work: 10%

You will work with the same group of folks (3-4 people, depending on the class size) all semester, especially in prepping to lead workshop and reading discussions. In leading discussion, you will be responsible for creating materials for the class that will promote discussion and discovery.

For the group work grade, I will assess you as a group (that is, each member will receive the same grade on these assignments, unless I feel there are extenuating circumstances).

I will ask your group to be responsible for leading a certain number of workshops throughout the semester as well as a certain number of reading discussions (I'll clarify how many as soon as we know exactly how many people are in the class, but if things go as planned, it appears that this will mean four workshop leads and four discussion leads). On these days, everyone in your group must be present and be prepared to guide us through the discussion. You can find guides for leading workshops and leading reading discussions on the wiki under Documents.

In terms of what to turn in from these tasks:

1. Your group will generate a list of discussion questions for every reading that the group is in charge of (this should be two or three readings). You'll need to post these questions to the wiki twenty four hours before the class meets to discuss the reading.
2. Your group will generate a list of discussion questions for every workshop that the group is in charge of (the number of workshops your team will lead will depend on the course enrollment, but shouldn't be more than three days of workshops, or six stories). You'll need to post these questions to the wiki twenty four hours before the class meets to workshop the stories.
3. Every member of the group is responsible for writing a letter to each author the group is in charge of workshopping (see below under "Responses to Peer Stories" for details).
4. I will also ask you to submit an assessment of your group's work habits twice during the semester (once in the midterm portfolio, once in the final portfolio).

Public Reading 5%

All students will give a polished 5-7 minute public reading at the end of the semester. You will need to read a piece that you have written and revised over the course of the semester; this can be one of your three formal pieces or one of your exercises, or some combination thereof.

Responses to Peer Stories 5%

You will be required to write a response (at least 300 words) to the formal pieces that your group is in charge of leading the discussion on. I will expect a copy of each of these letters in your portfolio (another copy should go to the authors of the stories/chapters at the end of the class they've been workshopped in).

Due: Final Portfolio

Reflections on Literary Events 5%

There are some great writers coming to campus this semester and you will be required to attend at least two of the readings and write a response to them (at least 300 words for each). The schedule is available under “Literary Events”

Due: Final Portfolio

Author Presentation and Discussion Lead 5%

For this assignment, I will team you with another student and together you will be asked to choose two stories (one from *The Best American Short Stories* and one from *anti-story*) to lead the discussion of. You’ll also give a five to ten minute presentation on each of these authors, which should include the biography of the writer (where is she from? what does she do? where did she study? etc.), as well as thoughts they’ve had about writing (taken from multiple interviews). The presentation could also include a (short) audio/visual element. This most likely will mean a clip or clips from an interview or a clip of the author reading a short passage of their work. It could possibly also be a short clip from a screen adaptation of their work.

Due: Presentations will occur throughout the semester

Portfolio & Midterm Portfolio

At the midterm and at the end of the semester, I’ll be collecting a few things from everyone. I would like you to compile the items in a thin folder. Here’s what you’ll need:

Midterm Portfolio

- Exercises 1-8
- Group Assessment

Due: March 11

Final Portfolio

- Exercises 9-11
- Any revisions you’ve done for your stories (as well as revision plans if you’ve done them and a copy of my comments on the first draft)
- Two Reflections on Literary Events
- Responses to the stories your team has led the workshops of
- Group Assessment

Due: at final exam

Final Exam 10%

The final exam will consist of a few essay questions that ask you to synthesize material we’ve discussed this semester. I will probably ask you to exam a small handful of stories from the text books in light of one of the craft essays we will read. The take-away here is this: do the reading, come to class, participate.

Team One

Victoria Jones
Nathan Rapp
Grace Toulotte
Barrett, John

Team Two

Devorah Gabai
Christopher Lopez
Robert Wolfe

Team Three

Robert Hayunga
David Taylor
David Clarfield
Caroline Pugsley

Team Four

Renato Paucar
Alexia Thirumalai
Carmen Conner
Nicolas Lyle

Presentation Teams

1. Robert Wolfe, Renato Paucar
2. Robert Hayunga, Christopher Lopez, Carmen Conner
3. Nicolas Lyle, Devorah Gabai
4. David Taylor, Grace Toulotte
5. Nathan Rapp, David Clarfield
6. Victoria Jones, Caroline Pugsley
7. John Barrett, Alexandra Thirumalai