ENGL 130
Introduction to Fiction Writing

General Description
The Teacher's Half of the Dialogue

Purpose of the Course

This course will help you develop the writing skills used to express, in the short story, whatever is already present in yourself. Assignments cannot make any beginning writer more talented, experienced, or sensitive. No teacher should dictate a writer's themes or revise his or her philosophy. While a creative writing course may encourage you to formulate such themes for yourself, it chiefly guides you in techniques other writers have found useful.

Is there a need to write these feelings, explore them, or share them? Such a need must occur in a student, not a lesson. Some teachers ask would-be writers: "Do you have something to say?" It might be more appropriate to ask: "Do you yearn to say something?" This course will try to help you say it well. It cannot make final judgment on your insights. Here you must submit yourself, as all writers do, to measurement outside the scope of any course. Judgment will be made by your own standards in the perspective of the recorded "best" of centuries of other writers, by the response of discriminating readers, and through the survival value of your work under the erosion of time. The course cannot bear that responsibility, but at the end of these lessons you should have a better estimate of your own talent. The least you can expect from ENGL 130 is to become a discriminating reader who will appreciate the skill of other story writers.

Since the course cannot provide you with material nor guarantee insights into it, these lessons must begin one-step-

removed from those raw events and feelings, at the point they are consciously shaped and directed on the page. Bernard DeVoto said the best reason for setting anything down on paper is “that one may then change it.” Through these lessons, you should learn to express what you feel, then change your work and intensify its effect.

A short story has its strongest effect when emotionally truest, when the writer shows honestly what it is like to be a human being in this world—to love, grow, hate, quarrel, learn, remember, and dream. Rooted in emotion but guided by intellect, fiction becomes durable when its truths are those many readers will recognize and re-experience, even in other countries and in later years.

The truths a writer uses may bend toward entertainment or toward literature. Successful short stories may be written as merchandise or art, though usually they fall between these extremes. Often a competent story in a slick magazine and a “quality” story will differ more in tone, subtlety, and complexity than in writing essentials. Because this course is part of a university English department, it will bend toward literature. The reading texts are devoted to examples of literary, serious stories.

No student should be discouraged by the emphasis placed on “experience,” which has little to do with world travel or a complicated biography. Henry James once said he agreed with the old adage, “Write from experience and experience only,” but found this rather tantalizing advice and preferred to add, “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost.” A good short story may be as easily found across the backyard as across the ocean, provided “nothing is lost” on the writer.

Required Texts and Materials

1. *Your own assignments.*

The most important textbook for ENGL 130 is the one each student writes during the course. Every prose assignment should be saved for study and comparison. Short prose written early in the course will prepare you for the story that you will write later in the course. Each paper will be marked by the

instructor to help you become aware of what can be rewritten or thought about in a different way, toward development of a complete story.

2. *Your own journal.*

Each student must keep a regular journal, which is only slightly less important than the written assignments you will mail to Self-paced Courses. This journal is not a “diary” for recording the day’s events, but a writer’s notebook. It should contain ideas for stories, notes on characters, snatches of dialogue and description, comments on books you are reading for study or pleasure. A good journal is shorthand research for many stories. The instructor may make extra “journal assignments” on an individual basis tailored to a student’s needs. You should, in addition, create your own assignments.

Resident students in creative writing also keep journals, but students far from the campus who must develop self-discipline and sharpen their senses have a special need for this regular practice in writing. It will help fill lapsed time between written contacts with the instructor. It will also provide a substitute for the stimulation that members of a writing class give each other. When a writer’s mind seems barren, the journal is a source book from more fruitful days.

Keeping this independent notebook on a regular basis is a **requirement** of this course and comes under the Honor System. On rare occasions, your instructor may request to see the journal.

3. Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, 7th edition, 2007. Longman Publishers (paperback)

This text contains thirty short stories as well as clear, invaluable discussion and illustration of techniques you will be using in your own writing.

4. Cassill, R.V. *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, 7th edition, 2005. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. (paperback)

This anthology gathers more than one hundred stories that will supplement and enrich your reading. Thirteen stories are required reading for this course. The text also includes a “Chronological Table of Contents;” sections entitled “Talking About Fiction,” “Writing Fiction,” “Writers on Writing;” and a “Glossary of Critical Terms.”

These textbooks may be purchased from the Higher Grounds bookstore, located in the Friday Center, using the book order form in this manual. You may also be able to find them at a local bookstore.

Optional Web Links

The Elements of Style (http://www.bartleby.com/141/): An online version of *Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., a text that details the rules and usage principles of composition.

The Norton Anthology of American Literature (http://www2.wwnorton.com/college/english/naal7/): This site offers author biographies and sections on historical context for the writers you will be reading in the class.

Open Directory: Arts: Literature: Magazines and E-zines (http://www.dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Magazines_and_E-zines/): This site offers an extensive list of links to mainstream and new literary magazines on the Web. You can sample publications and find places to submit your own work.

North Carolina Writers Network (http://www.ncwriters.org/): This site offers information on statewide conferences, writing contests, and news about NC writers.

Poets & Writers (http://www.pw.org/mag/0403/newsmagnet.htm): This site features news, interviews with published writers, a listing of magazines accepting submissions, and grant sources for creative writers.

Supplementary Reading

1. Anthologies of modern short stories and collections of stories by individual authors. The *O. Henry Prize Anthologies*, the *Pushcart Prize Stories*, and the *Best Short Stories* collections, issued annually, rank high on this list.

2. Literary magazines. Also called "little magazines," these are often available only through subscription. Most university libraries carry a good selection, and some may be available at independent bookstores. You will find thousands listed in the *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses,* published by Dustbooks, and available in many public libraries. Among those with a good reputation are: *Shenandoah, North American Review, Paris Review, Kenyon Review, Ploughshares, Story, ZYZZYVA, The Iowa Review, Carolina Quarterly, Antaeus.*

3. Glossies. These magazines, easily available, contain in each edition at least one story of current fiction: *The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, Harpers, Esquire.*

Course Plan

Lesson 1: The Student's Half of the Dialogue (Introduction)

From *The Norton Anthology*:
William Carlos Williams, "The Use of Force"
Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool"

Writing Assignments

Lesson 2: Showing and Telling (Scene)

From *The Norton Anthology:*
Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"
Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, "Passion"
Alice Munro, "What Is Real?"
Interview with Ernest Hemingway

From *Writing Fiction:*
Opening of Chapter 3 through "Significant Detail"
"Summary and Scene"

Writing Assignments

Lesson 3: Who's in Charge Around Here? (Viewpoint)

From *Writing Fiction:*
Chapter 7, Point of View, Part I
Chapter 8, Point of View, Part II
Tobias Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain"

Writing Assignments

Lesson 4: One Person at a Time (Characterization)

From *The Norton Anthology:*
John Steinbeck, "The Chrysanthemums"
Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find"
Anton Chekov, "The Lady with the Dog"

From *Writing Fiction:*
"Credibility"

Writing Assignments

Lesson 5: Are You Talkin' to Me? (Notes on Dialogue)

From *The Norton Anthology*:
Raymond Carver, "Cathedral"

From *Writing Fiction*:
"Speech"

Writing Assignments

Lesson 6: One Strong Thread in a Tight Design (Character in Context)

From *The Norton Anthology:*
Bobby Ann Mason, "Shiloh"
Bernard Malamud, "Angel Levine"
Opening paragraphs of four stories

Writing Assignments

Lesson 7: It's About Time (Chronology, Structure, Flashback, and More)

From *The Norton Anthology*:
Virginia Woolf, "Kew Gardens"
John Cheever, "The Enormous Radio"
Andrea Barrett, "The Littoral Zone"
Katherine Anne Porter, "Flowering Judas"

From *Writing Fiction*:
"Flashback"

Writing Assignments

Lesson 8: Learning from Scheherazade (Plot and Theme)

From *The Norton Anthology*:
Amy Tan, "Rules of the Game"
Bharati Mukherjee, "The Management of Grief"
Eudora Welty, "A Worn Path"
Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness"

From *Writing Fiction*:
"The Tower and the Net"
"I Gotta Use Words When I Talk to You"

Writing Assignments

Lesson 9: Letting It Go (Submitting Your Short Story)

Writing Assignments

Methods to be Followed in the Course

The nine lessons in this course correspond to one semester's work or three hours of college credit. In each lesson, you will read from your two texts, but the emphasis is on your writing assignments—the fiction that you write and submit to your instructor. You will be asked, occasionally, to write papers or make comments on stories you have read. Keep in mind that in this course, the emphasis is to analyze these stories through the eyes of a Writer rather than the eyes of a Literature Student. What is hoped is that through your study of "how writers do what they do," your own writing will become richer and fuller.

Most of your writing will be creative. The instructor is less interested in how well you analyze stories by other writers than in how well you can synthesize what you know and feel into fiction of your own. If you wish to substitute a creative assignment of your own for one given at the end of a lesson, you must secure advance approval from the instructor.

Additionally, you will write regularly in your journal and work toward one full story. You will not submit the story until you have completed eight lessons on the elements of fiction. Steady writing and hard work are essential investments. You may begin working on a story at any time. You will, however, need most of the background of the first lessons in order to work up to the story. You should begin to have an idea for your story by Lesson 6. The instructor will comment on your ideas at any time on request.

Pay attention to length minimums and maximums for each writing assignment. Though you may find on occasion that you can't help running slightly over the limit, you should know that your instructor may opt to read only to the noted maximum length of the assignment. Keep in mind that you always have your journal in which to expand.

No estimate can be made of the time required for a writing assignment. How long does it take to get an idea? Thirty seconds, three weeks? Stephen Spender called writing a form of *askesis*—a persevering energy passing between the self and the world. To the extent writing affects one's view of life and people, it may become a style of existence, during periods when no pen is put to paper as well as in times of heavy writing output. It is important, especially at the beginning, to remember that these are exercises; nobody expects perfect pieces. Work at them, stretch your imagination—"Lengthen the ligaments," Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary—but then let them go off in the mail and move on to your journal work.

Please type assignments whenever possible. The instructor understands that this may not be possible for some students, who will not be penalized if work is neat and legible. Since no magazine or editor will look at an untyped manuscript, however, a serious student should certainly acquire this skill.

Identify the number of each assignment. Double-space and leave a wide left-hand margin for the instructor's comments.

For those of you working with a word processor, the following suggestion is made: As you work and revise, make frequent hard copies (printouts). Often writers find that a certain style or flair, a breeziness of tone, gets lost in the shuffle of revisions. Your hard copies, dated or numbered, can be useful in tracking your progress through the creative process, and you can easily regain material you have tossed aside. It also appears to be easier for most people to recognize typos and other errors on a page than on a screen.

Attach the submission sheet to the front of each assignment, giving all information requested. If you have short questions or comments, this is a good place to list them. If your notes and queries need more space, attach them on a separate sheet.

Always keep a copy of your submitted assignment. You will need it not only as back-up, but as raw material for future assignments.

Though you are allowed to have writing assignments for two lessons out at any one time, it is best to wait for the return of each assignment before beginning work on the next one. This may not be practical for all students; however, you will get the most out of your course if you do so.

A word of caution: Do not neglect your journal assignments. You will need to refer to these later in the course.

On Being Critiqued

Many students begin this course apprehensive about the critiquing process. They send their writing off as if it were a fragile porcelain teapot, hoping for it to be examined and admired—or perhaps terrified that it will be scrutinized with a magnifying glass for flaws!

Better to think of your writing as raw clay, always malleable until the moment it is "fired in the kiln." That way, should your instructor say to you, "Well, you know, it's a fine teapot, but wouldn't it make a better sugar bowl?" you have left the option

open to tear off the spout and turn it into another handle, if the suggestion seems appealing. After yet another look, you may decide to turn it back into a teapot, or into something else altogether.

One of the major myths you need to get over when having your work critiqued by your instructor is that a mark on your page means only one thing: WRONG. Most of you have had twelve to sixteen years of this experience, and it's simply not valid in this case. There are very few "wrongs" in fiction writing, but there are, most definitely, many practices that don't work well. Many of these are brought about by years of training in expository writing, or by years of reading mediocre "formula" fiction, or by watching too many "formula" programs on TV.

So what do those marks mean? They usually mean: "try looking at it this way," which is a different animal altogether from "you are wrong." Your instructor has gained insight from years of working with novice as well as experienced writers, and can zero in on common practices that don't work well in fiction and help you to develop the unique writing strengths you already possess.

Other points to keep in mind: The instructor is critiquing the work, not the author; and the instructor is critiquing what is on the page, not what is in your head. Can you make the distinction between these? It can take some writers years of being critiqued to do so. Some writers never get over the feeling that having a story critiqued is a little like presenting your child to someone, only to have them whine, "Gee…I don't like the way you cut her hair!"

Being critiqued, like writing itself, does get easier with practice. A good way to think of it might be this: Your instructor is handing you tools, and you may decide to do with them what you will. Throw them away? Use some and lay some aside for later? Get up to your elbows in the engine of your story and tinker, not caring how dirty you get?

A Final Word

This correspondence course is part of a broad creative writing program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,

staffed by professional, practicing writers, and supplemented by visiting writers and poets of national repute.

Self-paced Courses students are invited to feel a part of this division of the University's Department of English. Students may submit their work to certain departmental contests for student writers, and may wish to offer manuscripts to the UNC-Chapel Hill literary magazine, *The Carolina Quarterly*, or to the student writing magazine, *Cellar Door*.

When you have completed this course, you may want to take a break and then enroll in ENGL 206, which takes up where we leave off in ENGL 130. In ENGL 206 you'll work on two more stories and revise one, and exercises will give you practice in the beginning, middle, and end of stories, imagery, and will further develop your own style and voice. Your instructor will answer any questions you may have about further study.