

ENGL 206

Intermediate Fiction Writing

General Description

Introduction

ENGL 206 is designed to help students develop the beginning, middle, and end of stories; to work with imagery; and to listen for their own voice and style. In addition to reading and analyzing published works, you will write several short dramatic scenes and two complete short stories, and revise one of the short stories.

The course follows ENGL 130, building on the writing skills presented by that introductory short story course. If you have taken ENGL 130 or its equivalent from an institution other than The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, you might want to ask yourself the following questions to see if you are adequately prepared to take this course:

- Can you recognize exposition, narrative, and scene within a story? Do you understand the use of each?
- Do you know how to count scenes? Write scenes?
- Can you recognize—and write—flashbacks?
- Do you know how to use transitions?
- Do you know the difference between direct and narrative dialogue?
- Do you understand traditional short story structure and the difference between plot and theme?
- Can you explain the time sequence of a story?
- Have you ever completed a short story and had it critiqued by an instructor?

A weakness in one of these areas can perhaps be strengthened over the length of this course, but if you feel deficient in several areas, you are not in a position to take ENGL 206.

**Purpose of
the Course**

This course will try to provide you with those writing skills used to express, in the short story, whatever is already present in yourself. Writing 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 crafts other writers have found useful.

Do you feel a need to write these feelings, explore them, or share them? Such a need must originate in the student, it cannot be taught in 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?" If 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. At the end of these lessons you should have a better estimate of your own talent. The very least you can expect from ENGL 206 is to become one of those discriminating readers 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 true—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 reexperience, 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’s English department, it will bend toward literature. The readings 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 Textbooks

1. *Your own assignments*

The most important textbook for this course is the one you write during the course. Save every prose assignment for study and comparison. Short prose pieces prepare you for later stories. Scenes and stories will be marked by the instructor to help you become aware of what can be rewritten or thought about in a different way, and to help you recognize and further develop your own unique storytelling strengths.

2. *Your journal*

You are required to keep a regular journal, which is only slightly less important than the writing assignments you will mail to Self-paced Courses. Keeping this independent notebook on a regular basis is a requirement of this course and comes under the Honor System. At the end of the course, you will be asked to quote from your journal, and journal items will be included in your final grade. 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 each student’s needs. You should, in addition, create your own assignments.

Resident students in creative writing also keep journals; but any student far from the campus who must develop self-discipline and sharpen his or her senses has 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 members of a writing class give each other. When a mind seems barren, the journal is a sourcebook from more fruitful days.

3. Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction*, 7th edition, 2007. New York: Longman (paperback)

This text contains short stories as well as clear, invaluable discussion and illustration of techniques you will be using in your own writing. Though ENGL 206 has few direct reading assignments from this text, it is an excellent reference and you may find its writing assignments to be useful exercises for your journal.

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

This anthology, referred to as *Norton* in the lessons, gathers over one hundred stories written since 1835. 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.”

The required textbooks can be purchased from the Higher Grounds bookstore, located in the Friday Center, using the book order form in this manual, or you can order them online at <https://s4.its.unc.edu/HigherGrounds/>.

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 Best Short Story 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*.

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.

Course Plan **Lesson 1: Beginning Your Short Story**

Reading from *Writing Fiction*:

“Whatever Works”

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

Zora Neale Hurston’s “The Conscience of the Court”

Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”

Writing:

Questionnaire

One story analysis

One short-answer paper

One writing exercise

Lesson 2: Moving Forward

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

R.V. Cassill’s “The Rationing of Love”

Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case”

Flannery O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must
Converge”

Reading from *Writing Fiction*:

Gish Jen’s “Who’s Irish?”

Writing:

One writing exercise

One informal discussion paper

Lesson 3: Writing From the Heart

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried"

John Updike's "A & P"

Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

Writing:

One story analysis

Two short-answer papers

Lesson 4: Vision and Re-Vision (Revising Your Story)

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

Franz Kafka's "The Hunger Artist"

Anton Chechov's "Gusev"

James Joyce's "The Dead"

Writing:

One complete short story

One short paper

Lesson 5: What is Fictional? What is True?

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

Ann Beattie's "Snow"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt"

Writing:

One story analysis

One short-answer paper

One story comparison

Lesson 6: Food for the Soul (Reading)

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

Louise Erdrich's "Matchimanito"

Richard Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"

Raymond Carver's "On Writing"

Writing:

Three story analyses

One writing exercise

One short-answer paper

Lesson 7: Voice and Style

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"

William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"

Writing:

One complete short story

One story analysis

One short-answer paper

Lesson 8: Endings and Inspirations

Readings from *The Norton Anthology*:

Andre Dubus' "The Intruder"

Phillip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews"

Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O."

Writing:

Revision of one complete short story

One short discussion paper

Lesson 9: Evaluating Your Own Work

Writing:

One informal paper

One critique

Methods to be Followed in the Course

The nine lessons correspond to one semester's work or three hours of college credit. In each lesson, you will read from one or both of your two texts, but the emphasis is on 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, you should analyze these stories through the eyes of a Writer rather than the eyes of a Literature Student. What we hope is that through your study of "how writers do what they do," your own writing will be come richer and fuller.

Most of your writing will be creative. The instructor is less interested in how well you analyze stories by others 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.

Pay attention to the 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 that writing affects one's view of life and people, it may become full time—a style of existence, during periods when no pen is put to paper as well as 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. Your 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 nor editor will look at an untyped manuscript, however, a serious student should certainly acquire this skill. Identify each assignment by number. Double-space and leave a wide left-hand margin for the instructor’s comments on specific passages and provide space at the end of each piece for some general remarks.

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 a 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.

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 set 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. Because it can take some time for the writing assignments to travel in the mail, be critiqued by the instructor, and finally, for the student to digest the instructor’s comments, it is not unusual for a student following this suggestion to require an extension to complete the course. Extensions are inexpensive and simple to acquire.

On Being

Many students begin this course apprehensive about the

Critiqued

critiquing process. They send their writing off as if it is 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,” or published. (Even then, at least one published author has been known to scour bookstores, actually crossing out and replacing prose!) 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. Most of these are brought about by your 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 writers as well as experienced ones, *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 manual for correspondence instruction reflects a broad creative writing program at the University that is staffed by professional, practicing writers, and supplemented by visiting writers and poets of national repute.

Correspondence students are invited to feel a part of this division of the University’s Department of English. Students may submit 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*. If you plan to be on campus and will make an appointment with the instructor in advance, office conferences can sometimes be arranged.

When you have completed this course, you may want to take a break and then enroll in ENGL 406. In ENGL 406 (Advanced Fiction Writing), there are no set assignments, but you will accomplish the equivalent of three semester hours’ work by writing five stories. Approval for admission to the course, based on a sample manuscript, is required.