

LT142: Writing Fiction

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Office Hours: By request

One of the things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water.

- Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

This course serves as an overview of fiction writing craft and an introduction to/examination of the contemporary creative writing classroom.

We'll begin the semester looking at some of the larger questions surrounding fiction writing and reading, continue through exploration of craft terms, and end the semester with writing workshops and discussing revision methods.

You'll be writing both from assigned prompts and from your own fascinations, obsessions, and literary impulses. You'll be reading widely, both work assigned by me and work suggested by your classmates. You'll do a lot of editing, because writing is rewriting. You'll write a complete short story (and then revise it). You'll write a portfolio of smaller fragments.

You'll develop the most valuable asset of any writer: a consistent, curious writing practice.

This class isn't designed to provide any single answers to questions like *What is fiction?* or *What makes a story good?* Instead, we'll spend the semester interrogating those questions while considering the myriad possible responses.

Requirements

Reading assignments

Good writers read; we'll be close reading, on average, two short stories per week. Much of our discussion on the theory of creative writing craft hinges on these stories. Please make sure to complete the assigned reading before coming to class.

Workshop pieces

Each student is required to submit a fictional piece for peer workshop. You're not bound by genre: these can be anything from series of speculative flash fiction to a realist short story to an excerpt from a detective novel.

However, there are a few rules: the pieces should be *1,500 to 4,500 words*, double-spaced, twelve-point font, and they are due the **Friday before your assigned workshop**.

Workshop revisions

Workshops are a great editing tool. Following your workshop, you'll be revising your fiction piece and handing in a second draft. The revised piece should also be *1,500 to 4,500 words*, double-spaced, twelve-point font.

The revision is due **May 22nd**.

Revision Key

In addition to your revised fiction piece, you'll be handing in a *750-word* informal key to the revisions you made. What did you change about your piece, and why? How does this reflect the feedback you received in workshop? How do you believe these revisions improved your fiction?

This revision key is due **May 22nd**.

Author Statement

Think of this as long artist statement or a short manifesto: a *1,000-word* analysis of your aesthetics, your literary interests, your obsessions, and your plans for future writing.

Your author statement is due **May 22nd**.

Presentation

As stated above, good writers read. They also recommend—an invaluable part of any writing community is the constant back-and-forth of reading suggestions. To this end, you'll be asked to give an informal, conversation presentation on a piece of fiction that you recommend. There's no need for a written component or essay: just spend a thoughtful ten minutes telling the class why they should read this particular piece of fiction.

You'll sign up for **one presentation** slot. We'll have one presentation each week.

Writing Exercise Portfolio

Every week we'll be experimenting with writing exercises in class—exercises that are crafted to isolate and strengthen various aspects of your creative writing craft.

But these in-class exercises are only half the battle. In addition, you'll be expected to revise and expand these weekly writings to be at least 500 words each. You'll type them up and edit them, and turn them both weekly and in the form of a final portfolio.

This project is due every Wednesday, and the final portfolio is due **May 22nd**.

Workshop Letters

You're required to submit workshop letters to each workshopper. These are due in class **each week we have workshop**. They must be at least 250 words long.

These letters serve as analysis and guidance for the fiction being workshopped. They should answer the following questions: what is the fictional piece about? and what the story's biggest strength? They should

also then examine the weaknesses of the fictional piece and give constructive, critical advice on how to improve the story.

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Syllabi should note that, instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences, whether excused or unexcused.

The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Classroom participation: 40%

We're here to challenge one another in our perception and comprehension of fiction: this means showing up prepared and engaging in discussions *or*, if you're unable to attend class for whatever reason, completing in class assignments at home. Part of your participation grade also includes the workshop letters you write to your fellow workshoppers.

Workshop piece, revision, revision key, and portfolio: 40%

These pieces are the crux of the class. While I'm not going to grade you on in terms of aesthetics, I will be grading you on the thoughtfulness of your revisions and your revision key, and the inclusion of all writing exercises in your portfolio.

Presentation and author statement: 20%

These should be thoughtful pieces; your presentation should be well prepared and your author statement overview should demonstrate a thorough consideration of the aesthetic values and intent.

Class Schedule:

Note: There is no class on January 31. The first class is February 7, and the last class is on May 15, during completion week.

February 7th

Syllabus and course overview

Exercises: William S. Burroughs' cut-up technique; The influences that shape you

In-class reading: "Shitty First Drafts," Anne Lamott, "The Husband Stitch," Carmen Maria Machado

Homework:

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "The Weirdest Story Ideas Come From Your Own Obsessions," Kelly Link

February 14th

Discussion: The agony and ecstasy of influence

In-class reading: Lorie Moore "How To Be A Writer," Etgar Keret, "Creative Writing"

Exercises: "How To Be A(n) _____," The stories within stories

Homework:

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "Fascinated To Presume: In Defense of Literature," Zadie Smith, "They Pretend To Be Us While Pretending We Don't Exist," Jenny Zhang

February 21st

Discussion: Compassion, presumption, and aesthetic responsibility

In-class reading: "The Huntress," Sofia Samatar, "The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket," Yasunari Kawabata, "Oranges," Miranda July

Exercises: Nuances of structure, sense, and drama

Homework:

Revision: Extension of an in-class exercise

Reading: "Modern Fiction," Virginia Woolf, "Is Show Don't Tell A Colonial Relic?" Namrata Podder

February 28th

Discussion: Inhabiting fiction through desire

In-class reading: "On Seeing The 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning," Haruki Murakami

Exercises: Unconscious vs. conscious desires, creating character via desire

Homework:

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "Bliss," Katherine Mansfield, "Work," Denis Johnson, "Take It," Namwali Serpell

March 6th

Discussion: Plotting desire; plotting propulsion

In-class reading: "The School," Donald Barthelme, "The Perfect Gerbil," George Saunders

Exercise: Freitag's triangle, "gas stations," and pattern and surprise

Homework:

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "Old Boys, Old Girls," Edward P. Jones, "Mothers, Lock Up Your Daughters Because They Are Terrifying" Alice Sola Kim

March 13th

Discussion: Suspense, tension, and conflict

In-class reading: Excerpt, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*

Exercise: Generating cinematic suspense in literature

Homework:

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "The Woman And The Blue Sky," Ma Jian, "The Rockpile," James Baldwin

March 20th

Discussion: The role of setting; location as character

In-class reading: "Before You Can Write A Good Plot, You Need To Write A Good Place," Linn Ulmann

Exercise: A 360-degree examination of place

Homework:

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "Brownies," ZZ Packer, "Cathedral," Raymond Carver

April 3rd

Discussion(s): Direct and oblique dialogue; How to run a productive workshop

In-class reading: "On Dialect, Dialogue, and Good Books" Angela Flournoy

Exercise: Crafting dialogue to explain and thwart explanation

Homework:

Workshop letters

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "Misery," Anton Chekhov, "Point of View," Lucia Berlin

April 10th

Discussion: The impact of POV

In-class reading: "The Team," Tommy Orange

Exercise: Shifting POV; shifting the focus of the story

Workshop 1: _____, _____

Homework:

Workshop letters

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "Why I Like Country Music," James Alan McPherson, "The Dirty Kid," Mariana Enriquez

April 17th

Discussion: POT: Point of telling

Exercise: Temporality and meaning

Workshop 2: _____, _____

Homework:

Workshop letters

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "My First Goose," Isaac Babel, "Going For A Beer," Robert Coover

April 24th

Discussion: Scene vs. Summary

Exercise: Compression, expansion, and the effect of both

Workshop 3: _____, _____

Homework:

Workshop letters

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "Fairy Tale As Form," Bernheimer, "The Bloody Chamber," Angela Carter, "Is Your Blood As Red As This," Helen Oyeyemi

May 1st

Discussion: Genre I: Breaking the rules with/of fairy tales

Exercise: Flattening characters, strengthening logic

Workshop 4: _____, _____

Homework:

Workshop letters

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

Reading: "The Night Face Up," Julio Cortázar, "Bloodchild," Octavia Butler

May 8th

Discussion: World-building, building horror

In-class reading: "A Night Visit," Sheika Hussein Helawy

Exercise: Plotting fear

Workshop 5: _____, _____

Revision: Extension of in-class exercise

May 15th

An introduction to graphic narratives—field trip to Comicbibliothek Renate and guest lecture

Project Deadlines

Workshop piece (first draft): **the Friday before your assigned workshop**

Workshop letters: **At the beginning of class before each workshop**

Workshop revision, with revision key): **May 22nd**

Author statement: **May 22nd**

Final Portfolio: **May 22nd**

Reading Materials

There is no reader/book purchase. Hard copies of the assigned fiction readings will be given out in class each week, and PDFs will also be made available.