

Spring 1-15-2007

ENG 2007-001: Creative Writing: Fiction

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Recommended Citation

Moffitt, Letitia, "ENG 2007-001: Creative Writing: Fiction" (2007). *Spring 2007*. 60.
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2007-001

SYLLABUS
English 2007 Section 001, Spring 2007
Creative Writing: Fiction
MWF 11:00-11:50, Coleman 3159, EIU

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(for questions only; do not e-mail assignments without my permission)

Objectives

If I asked the class what the difference is between “creative writing” and “critical writing” (meaning terms papers, essays, etc.), many people might say that in creative writing, there are no rules—you can write any way you want. Well, OK, but it’s important to understand that “writing any way you want” is *not* the same thing as “writing the first thing that comes to your head, without thinking about it.” Writing any way you want suggests that there are many ways to write; thus our main goal for this class is to explore these many ways—to experiment with the possibilities of the written word, with a focus on the basics of style, structure and technique in the short story. This is a lot more fun than it may sound here! We read and write stories because we *want* to, and trying new ways of writing only increases our enjoyment of them.

Text

3 X 33: *Short Fiction by 33 Writers*. Ed. Mark Winegardner; I will also occasionally provide copies of other stories not available in this anthology.

Note: You may be surprised how large the book is (don’t worry; you won’t have to read everything in it). Why do we need to do all this reading in a writing class? Well, part of that goal of “writing any way you want” is to see what ways there *are* to write. It helps to see what other writers have done, because from there you can get your own creative ideas (and, who knows, perhaps end up creating a story that ends up in a story collection like this one). While I don’t guarantee that you’ll love every story, I did try to pick a wide variety of interesting contemporary authors, all of whom have something different to offer and may challenge many notions you might have had about what a short story can be.

Assignments

Story #1	Due Friday, January 26	15%
Story #2	Due Friday, March 2	15%
Story #3	Due Friday, April 6	15%
Revision	Due Friday, April 27	15%
Portfolio	Due Friday, April 27	15%
Workshopping	As scheduled	20%
Reading quizzes	After each assigned reading	5%

Stories: You will write three original stories for this class. (“Original” means that you will be the author, but it also means that you won’t use stories you’ve already written for other classes.) These stories should be at least *3 full pages, with a suggested maximum of 5-6 pages* (longer is OK within reason, but keep in mind that longer stories tend not to be read as thoroughly). These should be typed and double-spaced, with default margins and font, all pages numbered and fastened together with a staple, your name on the front page. These will be broadly based on the writing exercises we do in class; I will provide more details as we go along. See the section on “Grading Criteria” for information on how these will be graded.

Revision: You will also do a substantial revision of one of your three stories. When I say “substantial,” I mean that you won’t simply change the names of the characters and correct the punctuation mistakes. You will need to look at the comments that your classmates and I give you during the workshop and also consider alternate ways you could rewrite, add to or enhance your story. I will provide more information on this as we get closer to its deadline.

Portfolio: Your portfolio consists of different writing exercises that we do in class (or, occasionally, that I will assign for you to do outside of class). Keep all of your portfolio writings together in a notebook or folder devoted solely for creative writing, and *put the date* on each new work. If you work on your portfolio assignments at home on computer, print these out and keep them together with the in-class, handwritten assignments. If you are absent from a particular class, please don’t ask me “what was the writing exercise” for the class you missed and expect me to summarize a 50-minute class in ten words or less. (Consider this incentive to come to class on a regular basis.)

At the end of the semester, I will collect and grade your portfolios. Grading on the portfolio is largely objective—meaning that if you have done the exercises, and shown sufficient effort in them, your grade will reflect this. These are experiments in writing; I’m not expecting complete, polished works that are ready to be sent to *The New Yorker*. At the same time, if you simply scribble down a random sentence or two for each exercise, this suggests less experimentation than it does a desire to get credit for having written something without caring what it was. Experimentation in writing, painting, cooking, science, or anything else takes time and effort.

Workshopping: Each of your three stories will be workshopped in class. What this means is that when you hand in your stories on the due dates, you need to hand in not just one copy but enough copies for every member of the class (I’ll provide the final class count when that becomes firm). (What this means, by the way, is that there is no way you can simply wait until 20 minutes before class to start writing—you’ll still need enough time to get copies made.) We will then set up a schedule for when each story will be workshopped.

On the day your story is workshopped, the class will have read the story and will discuss various aspects of its craft, providing specific and constructive critiques. If you are the writer being workshopped, your job is to listen to the class’s comments with an open mind. Don’t take every criticism as a sign that you are a bad writer and a terrible person—keep in mind that criticism may be based on personal preferences. At the same time, don’t get so defensive that you close your ears to what may be extremely valuable observations on your writing. You will also have time to ask questions of us if there’s something in particular you want us to focus on.

If you are workshopping another student's story, you need to come in to class having read the story thoroughly and having typed *a half-to-full page of clear, specific, constructive comments* (I will provide a guide); you may also write comments in the margins to point out specific areas of note. I will collect these critiques on the day the story is workshopped and read them, and then return them to the writer the following class. If you turn in your critiques one class late, you will receive half-credit; after that you will receive no credit.

Writers can be sensitive about their work, and a lot of the things we write about may be personal; therefore, it is important that workshop comments be professional critiques, not personal attacks. Lest you think that workshop days are classes in which you don't have to do any work, here's some incentive: workshops account for 20% of your grade, both in terms of the comments you write and the comments you share in class. If you don't like speaking, write detailed comments; if you aren't shy, speak up, and perhaps encourage others to speak as well!

Reading quizzes: That one got your attention, didn't it. Don't worry: this is a *really* easy 5% of your grade. Each time I assign a reading from our book or from a copy provided in class (this does not include student writing), the following class I will give a very short quiz (no more than three questions) based on the reading. The questions will be extremely easy, such that anyone who has read the story all the way through should be able to answer them instantly; they won't require any kind of analysis and won't be trick questions. The point, if you haven't figured it out already, is to ensure that you *do the reading*. These stories are a crucial part of this class. Many students balk at the idea of having to do "serious reading" for a creative writing class, but as I explained before, you can't possibly learn to write different ways without exploring what the possibilities of those "different ways" are.

A Note on Attendance

I don't take attendance. *HOWEVER...!* In every single class, we will do something that counts toward your grade. Most of these activities cannot be made up if you are absent; for example, if you miss a particular workshop, there is no way you can contribute to the discussion unless you have a time machine. The reason *why* you were absent doesn't matter, because it doesn't change the fact that you still missed what happened in class. If you come up to me and announce "I was sick!" and stick a doctor's note under my nose, all I can say is, "Sorry; hope you feel better," because I *can't* realistically say "That's OK, don't worry, it won't affect your grade," given that it *could* very well affect your grade—after all, you are now one class behind everyone else. I don't say this to be mean, and my point is *not* that you should slavishly drag yourself to class when you have a fever of 104. It is natural to expect that events may occur that force you to miss class. My point is simply this: attend as many classes as you humanly can; if you miss class, for whatever reason, make sure you keep up with the work, and expect there to be consequences that range from negligible (if the absences are isolated incidents) to severe (if you make a habit of it).

Grading Criteria

"How can you possibly grade a *creative writing* class?" That's a good question; let's take it one term at a time:

Creative: As discussed under the “Objectives” section, the goal of this class is to explore different ways of writing. If all of your writing is exactly the same from the beginning of class to the end—that is, if you always write about the same subjects, or write every story as though it were a personal essay or a diary entry or a blog, or if you don’t bother trying some of the techniques and styles discussed in class—then you won’t have fulfilled this particular goal, and your grade will reflect that fact. If you do try different things with your writing, you will have fulfilled this major learning objective. I’m not looking for the next Pulitzer Prize winner (though, if you do win, be sure to mention my name as the person who helped you get there); what I am looking for are signs that you are experimenting in your stories.

Writing: This may seem painfully obvious, but I’ll say it anyway because it always seems to escape some students’ notice: you can’t possibly pass a creative writing class without doing any writing. Every semester I meet wonderful writers who end up with less than top grades because they somehow have gotten the idea that writing is a state of mind, rather than an actual labor-intensive endeavor. Put more plainly, this class is like every other class you’ll ever take at EIU or anywhere else: you have to do the work. I can’t grade you on your intentions or your talent unless I can actually *see* those intentions and that talent.

Thus it may dismay you to find that I am very strict on deadlines. Why? Speaking as a writer myself, I assure you that no matter how imaginative you are, you won’t get any creative writing done without discipline. (Many writers I know actually impose deadlines upon themselves—they’ll say, “I’ll finish writing Chapter Three of my novel by the end of the week,” because they know that if they don’t, “Chapter Three” will never exist.) *My policy is that if your assignment is late by one class (that is, you turn it in on the class following the due date), your grade for that assignment will be dropped one full grade—that is, from “A” to “B” and so on. After that, I won’t accept it.* If you think you might have to miss a class when an assignment is due, get someone to come to class and turn it in for you, or turn it in early. (Note that I don’t accept assignments by e-mail unless you get permission from me beforehand, nor will I accept them shoved under my office door or in my mailbox or simply left in the classroom for me to find. It is not my responsibility to get your work; it is yours to get the work to me.)

Another thing that may horrify you: I expect you to *proofread* your writing just as you would for any other class. Why? Well, if your reader can’t understand what you’ve written because there are typos, spelling mistakes, random punctuation, etc., it won’t matter how creative you are—we’ll be too distracted and annoyed to care. The best creative writing you’ll ever read is *never* “dashed off at the last minute.” Writing is a *process*, and it involves a great deal of thinking, experimenting, rewriting, revising, editing, and proofreading—yes, even in creative writing.

Other aspects of grading to note: I don’t provide “extra credit.” I don’t allow “make-up” assignments. I don’t grant extensions of deadlines. I don’t allow late assignments other than as described above (and the assignments due on the last day of the semester absolutely cannot be late for any reason). Grades are not negotiable, and all grades are final. Again, I don’t make these rules to be mean, but to be clear, so that you know exactly what you have to do as far as the “technicalities” and can focus your energies on the fun stuff.

Basic grading rubric:

- “A” range: Story is creative, well written and well thought-out in every way; there are few if any technical errors, and the writer clearly challenged himself/herself.
- “B” range: Story shows elements of creativity and may make some use of writing techniques, but perhaps needed more time and attention or might have tried something different in terms of form, language, or subject.
- “C” range: Story fulfills the basic requirements of the assignment but shows little sign that the writer was experimenting with language and storytelling or trying anything different with his/her writing; it may also have numerous technical errors.
- “D” or “F”:
Story doesn’t fulfill many or any of the basic requirements of the assignment.

Plagiarism Warning

Plagiarism means word-for-word unacknowledged copying of another writer’s work *or* unacknowledged paraphrasing of another writer’s ideas. The minimum penalty is a grade of “F” on the assignment. In addition, you may fail the course, be placed on probation, or even be expelled from the university. It may seem silly to talk about plagiarism in a creative writing class, but I’ve actually caught several students in the past who plagiarized their stories. One student turned in a story that another student had written; another turned in a story by a published author—and then did it again, even after he’d been caught and reprimanded the first time. The first student received an “F” on the assignment, which substantially lowered her final grade (she would have gotten an “A” otherwise); the second student was kicked out of the class.

The saddest thing about this is that there is simply no reason for it. These are not 20-page research papers; they are short works of your own creative fiction. And yet this is precisely what leads students to think they can do nothing in this class and still get a good grade. Both of those students admitted that they waited until the last minute to do the assignments because they figured this was an “easy” class (and then, when they ran out of time, resorted to plagiarism—with disastrous results). Well, this *is* an “easy” class—if you do the work. The bottom line: absolutely do not for one second consider plagiarizing any part of any assignment, ever. If you are having trouble writing an assignment or meeting a deadline, please talk to me about it.

Second to Last Item

Keep this syllabus, and refer to it whenever you have any questions about the class. A good half of the questions that are asked during the course of a semester have already been answered here. Do not let this document somehow fly out of your hands the second you leave the room.

Final Word

Now I suppose you are all scared and have no desire ever to write creatively ever again. Fear not! This is all the unpleasant (but important) technical stuff; now comes the fun part. My final word on this syllabus is that we all do our part to make this class as enjoyable an experience as we can. I promise to do my best in this regard!

Schedule (subject to change as necessary)

Date	What we'll do in this class	What you'll do at home for next class
Mon., Jan. 8	Introductions; syllabus	Read Danticat story (copies to be provided)
Wed., Jan. 10	Writing exercises: character	Read Diaz, "Fiesta 1980"
Fri., Jan. 12	Writing exercises: character	Read Moore, "How to Become a Writer"
<i>Mon., Jan. 15</i>	<i>Holiday; no class</i>	
Wed., Jan. 17	Writing exercises: plot	Read Updike, "A&P"
Fri., Jan. 19	Writing exercises: plot	Read Diaz, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars"
Mon., Jan. 22	Writing exercises: plot	Work on Story #1
Wed., Jan. 24	Writing exercises: plot	Finish Story #1
Fri., Jan. 26	Story #1 due	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Jan. 29	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Jan. 31	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Fri., Feb. 2	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Feb. 5	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Feb. 7	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Fri., Feb. 9	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Feb. 12	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Feb. 14	Workshop	Read O'Brien story (copies to be provided)
<i>Fri., Feb. 16</i>	<i>Holiday; no class</i>	
Mon., Feb. 19	Writing exercises: narration	Read Butler, "Jealous Husband..."
Wed., Feb. 21	Writing exercises: narration	Read Jen, "Who's Irish?"
Fri., Feb. 23	Writing exercises: voice	Read Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"
Mon., Feb. 26	Writing exercises: language	Work on Story #2
Wed., Feb. 28	Writing exercises: language	Finish Story #2
Fri., Mar. 2	Story #2 due	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Mar. 5	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Mar. 7	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Fri., Mar. 9	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
<i>Mon., Mar. 12 through Fri., Mar. 16: Spring break; no class</i>		
Mon., Mar. 19	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Mar. 21	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Fri., Mar. 23	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Mar. 26	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Mar. 28	Workshop	Read Butler, "This Is Earl Sandt"
Fri., Mar. 30	Writing prompt exercises	Bring in a "writing prompt" (I'll explain)
Mon., Apr. 2	Writing prompt exercises	Work on Story #3
Wed., Apr. 4	Writing prompt exercises	Finish Story #3
Fri., Apr. 6	Story #3 due	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Apr. 9	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Apr. 11	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Fri., Apr. 13	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Apr. 16	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Apr. 18	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Fri., Apr. 20	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Mon., Apr. 23	Workshop	Read and critique stories to be workshopped
Wed., Apr. 25	Workshop	Finish Revision of Story #1, #2 or #3
Fri., Apr. 27	Portfolio and Revision due	
Wed., May 2, 10:15-12:15: Pick up graded portfolio & revision in my office (this is your "final exam")!		