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# ENG 2007-001: Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction

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2007-001

English 2007-001  
Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction  
Fall, 2007  
TR 12:30-1:45, CH 3752

**Current Assignment**

Readings as assigned

**Next Due Date:** Workbook, Thursday, September 13.

## SYLLABUS

**Course Description:** An introductory, workshop-style class devoted primarily to discussion of the students' own work. Early on the approach will be fairly prescriptive, with discussion of model stories and blunt how-to advice on plot, character, style, and narrative form. Later on, in very careful discussion of stories by class members, we'll be much less prescriptive, appreciating and applauding what seems to work, then trying to fix what doesn't. Students will complete a number of exercises in a workbook, participate in a group project that involves evaluating and presenting published stories, and write three stories of their own, submitting two of these for workshop discussion. Attendance and participation will be very important. An enjoyable class, but lots and lots of work. Prerequisite: English 1002G. Group 6. To access an updated version of this syllabus (if you are seeing it in hard copy), visit my home page at <http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~jdkilgore/>.

grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: 0-3 absences = A, 4 = B, 5 = C, 6 = D, 7 = F; more than 7 = continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade). The effect of this formula, by design, is that perfect or near-perfect attendance will give your grade a healthy boost, while chronic absenteeism will make it impossible for you to pass the course.

Note that you have 3 “free” absences. Use these if you have to, but otherwise keep them as insurance. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, but **I will not normally award attendance credit for any session that you have missed.** In truly exceptional circumstances, however, I **MAY** be willing to assign difficult and challenging make-up work for attendance credit. See me if you prefer make-up work to taking the absence. (Hint: It’s easier just to be here. Honest.) Another possibility is that you can attend **public readings by writers visiting EIU**; I will accept attendance at such readings in lieu of make-up work for any missed days. Note: it is your responsibility to find and sign the attendance sheet at each session, to make arrangements for make-up work if necessary, and to ascertain that the record has been corrected when the work has been done.

**The textbook.** Burroway’s *Writing Fiction* is a comprehensive, readable, wise how-to manual for fiction writers. Liberal chunks of it have been included in the assigned readings, and the book is certain to be helpful – eventually – to anyone who keeps trying to write fiction over a period of time. The problem with excellent advice on writing, however, is finding out where and how to apply it. Every story and every writer is different from every other, and what works wonderfully in one place (or for one person) may be completely counterproductive elsewhere. As a result, what I call a Platonic approach to writing instruction – giving complete and detailed instructions first, and only *then* turning to the writing task – tends not to work. You can spend a whole semester developing an excellent conceptual understanding of fiction without ever finding out what really works *for you*.

Our approach will be quite different. We will plunge in; we will learn by doing; we will muddle through; we will fly by the seat of the pants; we will shuck and jive; we will improvise; above all, we will write page after page, whether we really know what we are doing or not, trusting that, given sufficient energy and good will, at the end of the process there will be something worth turning in and showing to the class.

It works. Trust me. But one corollary is that there will be no reasonable time or place to go over the textbook. We will need to spend the class time on more focused activities: writing, brainstorming, critiquing one another’s work, arguing about stories we have all read.

Please understand that I am **NOT** saying “Don’t bother reading it.” **DO** bother reading it, very patiently and carefully, as assigned; but decide for yourself when, where, and how to apply Burroway’s principles. Eventually – well before semester’s end, with any luck – you will start seeing some important connections and your writing will benefit from it.

**The workbook.** Will be a place where important basic exercises are done all semester long, and where (with luck) many stories start. Please be aware, though, that your workbook can be very difficult to read and evaluate unless you take special pains to keep it organized. Accordingly, **please observe the following guidelines:**

- Use an accordion file or pocket folder, **NOT** a spiral notebook, **NOT** a looseleaf binder, so that you and I can conveniently reshuffle assignments.
- Write your name in large, clear letters on both the file and on every assignment.
- Type every assignment. In-class writings done by hand will sometimes serve

as drafts for assigned exercises, but should then be typed up out of class, with revisions as you see fit.

- Make sure every assignment has a date, your name, and a heading and exercise number drawn from the table below (e.g., "Exercise #1, Personal Statement."). **I will not read or give credit for items that lack headings.**
- Since I will collect several assignments at a time, the "do dates" usually do not correspond to the due dates (if you catch my meaning). Try hard, nonetheless, to complete the assigned writings on schedule. You will get more out of class discussions, and have more to contribute, if you keep up.
- Make a habit of bringing the folder to class with you, as you will have the chance to read from it and get feedback.
- Keep new work waiting to be graded clearly separate from exercises already graded. Organized work clearly in chronological order, earliest to latest. Keep class handouts (you will be getting a ton of these) in another file or folder, please.
- In general, the exercises are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills needed by fiction writers; b) stimulate story ideas. With luck some of the exercises will take off and turn into stories, and **you are welcome to turn in the same prose twice, though extensive revisions should normally take place between the workbook stage and the finished-story stage.**

**Stories.** Should be the fruit of long and thoughtful revision – third or fourth drafts, put into the very best form you can manage at the moment, though subject (of course) to further revision should you have new ideas after workshop discussion. Clear and articulate writing at the sentence level is a must (yes, even for first-person stories in dialect) because everything starts there. Writing is endless labor (though endless pleasure as well), and publishing writers spend huge amounts of time and energy tinkering, revising, and polishing. They keep dictionaries and other resource books handy and know the rules of grammar (on some level, anyway) even when they decide to break them. Try to follow this example; cultivate your own readiness to take pains.

**Short Story Guidelines.** (Rules of thumb I urge you to follow, probably, most of the time, unless you feel strongly that you shouldn't.)

**A word about grading.** (Click here for my harangue on the topic.)

**MANUSCRIPT FORM. PLEASE NOTE CAREFULLY.** All assignments must be typewritten. Workshop stories should be **SINGLE-SPACED** (to save copying expense), and you must provide multiple copies – two for me, one for every other member of the class. Skip an extra space between paragraphs when single spacing, as you would for instance in a single-spaced business letter. Please use no fonts smaller than 10 point. The final story will not go into workshop, so it should be **DOUBLE-SPACED** with twelve-point font, and no extra copies will be necessary. Ditto for workbook assignments and rewrites. Omit extra spacing between paragraphs on double-spaced manuscripts.

Whenever you hand in something you prefer not to have read by the rest of the class, write "DR" ("don't read") at the top of the first page. I will feel free to read aloud – or even to copy and distribute – anything you hand in that does not bear this warning, though I will not announce your name in doing so.

**Late work.** Always get in touch with me **BEFORE** the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment; the chances are pretty good that I can give you a short extension. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from B+ to B) for each calendar day of lateness, weekends and holidays included. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate.

**Miscellaneous.** There will be no midterm or final examination.

I will be more than happy to grant reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact me or the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) if you will be needing such an accommodation.

Please make a habit of bringing this syllabus to class with you, as we will need to refer to it rather frequently.

Please be aware that the penalty for cheating or plagiarism, which I trust I will not have to impose, will be automatic failure of the course. See me if you need further explanation of what constitutes cheating or plagiarism.

## **SCHEDULE**

Note: **READ AHEAD** to make time for writing projects. Be sure to read the stories included in the chapters in WF when they are specifically scheduled for discussion; otherwise they are optional, though recommended. See end of schedule (or link at right) for detailed instructions for Workbook exercises.

### **1) August 21, 23**

**READING:** WF, Chapters 1-3. Williams, "The Use of Force," WF 42; Cummins, "Red Ant House," KM 21.  
**Exercise # 1, Journal. (See instructions below.)**

### **2) August 28, September 30**

**READING:** WF, Chapters 1-3, continued. Miller, "Bulldog," BSS 250.  
**EXERCISE #1, Journal. (See instructions below.)**

### **3) September 4, 6**

**READING:** Hood, "How Far She Went," WF 42.  
**Exercise #1, Journal.**  
**OTHER:** Begin Story #1 whenever you feel ready.

### **4) September 11, 13**

**READING:** Sharma, "Surrounded by Sleep," BSS 304.  
**In-class, paint-by-numbers story. (Instructions will be given in class.)**  
**Workbook due on Thursday; include Exercise 1 and Tuesday's in-class writing.**  
**Start Story #1.**

### **5) September 18, 20**

**READING:** WF, Chapter 6, pages 178-85 only; Chapter 7, all

(but stories are optional). Wolff, "Bullet in the Brain," WF 190.

**6) September 25, 27**

**Story #1 due on Thursday, in multiple copies.**

READING: WF, Chapter 8. Stories for workshop discussion.  
Workshop.

**7) October 2, 4**

READING: Stories for workshop discussion.  
EXERCISE #2, Narrative Expansion. (See instructions below.)  
Workshop.

**8) October 9, 11**

READING: Stories for workshop discussion.  
EXERCISE #3, Point of View Experiment. (See instructions below.)  
Start Story # 2 ASAP.  
Workshop.

**9) October 16, 18**

READING: Erdrich, "Saint Marie," WF 156.  
Preliminary meeting with Group to choose story for Group Exercise. Individuals provide story copies to their groups. (See below for detailed instructions.)  
Workshop or conferences as needed.

**11) October 23, 25**

Group meetings in class Tuesday, to choose story for class presentation.  
Groups provide copies of chosen stories to class on Thursday.  
READING: WF, Chapter 5. Stories assigned by Groups. Be working on Story # 2.

**12) October 30, November 1**

Class presentations: Groups 1 & 2 on Tuesday, Groups 3 & 4 on Thursday.  
Volunteers hand in story #2 early.  
EXERCISE #4, Write-up of Group Presentation. (See instructions below.)

**13) November 6, 8**

Workshop.  
**Story #2 due in multiple copies on Tuesday.**

**14) November 13, 15**

**Tuesday: Workbooks due. Include Exercises 2-4.**  
Workshop.

Thanksgiving Break, November 19-23

**15) November 27, 29**

Workshop.

**Thursday: Optional Rewrites due.**

**16) December 4,6**

Workshop as needed  
**Story # 3 due on Tuesday. Keep copy for your records.**  
Group reading.  
Review and catch-up.



## **Workbook Exercises**

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**Note:** all exercises should be double-spaced and paginated, with appropriate headings.

### **1. Journal**

Write on **ten** different days during weeks 1-3 (August 20 - September 6), about 200-300 words per day. If an entry gathers momentum and takes off, you may let it count for two consecutive entries, but no more. (Of course, you are always free to continue it on your own, perhaps turning it in later as a story.) Date all entries, and give double dates for double entries.

The purpose here is to build the habit of daily writing, to give some valuable practice in basic fictional techniques, and with luck to scare up a few story ideas. **AVOID** giving tedious summaries of the day's events, unless something really exciting has happened. Choose topics from the following list instead, or invent projects of your own that are more focussed and lively than a listing of what-I-did-Tuesday.

**Suggested topics:**

**\*\***In about 1-2 pages, describe your previous reading experience and your goals as a writer. What do you look for in a story? What authors have you most enjoyed in the past? What kind of fiction do you aspire to write? Reach all the way back to childhood, if necessary, for examples of favorite reading. If you simply haven't read any fiction you can recall — well, explain how in that case you propose to write fiction, and why you would want to. Where will you turn for models? (If you end up talking about favorite movies, TV shows, or even comic books, fair enough.)

**\*\***In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narration "now" and the experience "then." Feel free to fictionalize and invent.

**\*\***Capture in writing the *voice* of someone you know well. As your speaker narrates some fairly ordinary episode, let his or her character emerge vividly through his (your) choice of language and detail.

**\*\***Go to some public place and "collect" a few of the people you see there, discreetly sketching them (in prose) in your notebook. Describe 2-4 in terms of clothing and personal items; 2-4 in terms of physical characteristics; 2-4 in terms of tics and behaviors. Make this a double entry (count it for two days) and try above all to make your brief sketches vivid and concrete.

**\*\***Sketch from memory 3-5 places you know well, trying to "put us there" as directly and quickly and completely as possible. Notice how concrete details matter more than anything else in this effort.

**\*\***In the first person, confess to the commission of some evil or illegal or shameful act. Feel VERY free to fictionalize and invent.

**\*\***Describe some person you dislike, using a made-up name, bringing the portrait to life with significant, vivid detail. Fictionalize as freely as you like.

**\*\***In a sketch of at least 100 words, capture the most interesting thing that has happened to you in the last year. Avoid summary; concentrate on concrete details and images. Tell us nothing that we could infer for ourselves.

**\*\***Overhear a dialogue in some public place. Transcribe exactly what you hear. Then edit the transcript and write an imagined continuation of the dialogue. *Note:* you won't have to overhear much — dialogue fills up the page in a hurry.

**\*\***Remembering that the impact of fiction depends less on what happens than on how vividly that "what" is realized, write something **shocking**. Write rapidly and continuously for no more than 40 minutes. If you then can't stand to show me the results, file them and hand in something else.

**\*\*Picture the worst thing you can imagine happening to you, happening. Write a sketch that makes this horrible fantasy real. Feel better now?**

**\*\*That memory that you can hardly bear to look at? The one that, even now, makes you shudder, blush, and feel nauseated? Pretend it happened to somebody else, and write about it. Don't force it: if it won't come, turn to something else.**

**\*\*In the third person, write a detailed sketch describing yourself engaged in some characteristic activity, perhaps a sport or hobby at which you are proficient. **Keep to the third person**, but get us into the character's point of view, letting us know what "he" or "she" thinks and sees as well as what he is doing.**

**\*\*Practice the art of the flashback by creating 2-6 of them, in either the first or third person. For each flashback, write the end of one paragraph in which some action or thought is completed; then the beginning of a new paragraph which clearly takes us back to an earlier point in time (something that, in a story, is ordinarily done for a very definite reason: to give us needed background to what we have seen already). Try to avoid having your character "drift off," "think back," "suddenly recall," etc., a gimmick that tends to be clumsy and a bit trite. When the moment is right, a story can usually backtrack quite gracefully on its own, without the assistance of an unlikely sudden daydream on the character's part.**

**\*\*Write one of the following letters: a dumped boyfriend tries to explain the bullying or boorish actions for which he has been dumped; a daughter tries to tell her parents why she has run away and is not yet ready to return; or anything in which the speaker anticipates a hostile response, but feels the need to explain in detail what happened.**

**\*\*Depict a powerful but hopeless "crush," i.e. romantic fixation. Start by describing the person desired, giving significant physical detail.**

**\*\*Choose a character in your life towards whom you feel some degree of conflicting emotions. Portray that character, starting with a physical description.**

**\*\*Write the beginning of a story that has one of the following titles: "I Was Raped by Aliens," "What Mother Didn't Tell Me," "Home Cooking," "How To Lose Your Virginity," "A Dog for All Seasons," "Peach Melba," "The Cool Kids," "Best Friend."**

**\*\*Write a sample dialogue, including at least three characters, in which you try to practice all the different forms of punctuating and tagging dialogue: tag first, tag last, tag in the middle, tag straight, tag inverted, no tag – and use the comma, the period, the dash, the question mark, and the exclamation point, all correctly. Refer to a published story for guidance, and perhaps to a grammar handbook. This one will be a perfect pain while you're doing it, but you will always be glad you did. Most student writers are woefully deficient in**

	<p>the basic mechanics of dialogue, and you won't be.</p> <p><b>**Write a dialogue of 2-4 pages, observing the following guidelines:</b>  a) Think of this as a fragment of a much larger story, so that you can focus intensely; b) Remember that dialogue in fiction is <b>enormously selective and brief</b> compared to the long, meandering conversations we have in real life; c) Start by clearly envisioning the scene and the speakers; d) Support the dialogue with appropriate visualization as needed (don't let the characters fade out to mere voices); e) Incorporate indirect dialogue or summary along with the direct dialogue, as a way of deemphasizing the trivial and reemphasizing that more gets said than the reader directly hears.</p> <p><b>**Write the beginning of a <b>parody</b> of one of the stories we have read or will read this semester.</b></p> <p><b>**Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible <b>without</b> ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke it. Concentrate instead on capturing the way powerful feeling shapes the perceptions of the physical milieu, and on the way specific memories and odd thoughts go whirling through the mind at such moments. The point is not so much to make the reader "guess" the feeling as to "show rather than tell."</b></p>
<b>2. Narrative Expansion.</b>	<p>Render the same event or sequence of events in A) a sentence; B) a paragraph; C) a sketch of one and a half to two pages. Purpose: to practice control of narrative time; to learn the importance of scenes while experiencing the perplexing truth that almost anything is a scene if you render it that way.</p>
<b>3. Point of View Experiment.</b>	<p><b>In the third person, limited omniscient:</b></p> <p>Render the same small event or scene or character from the perspective of three or four separate characters. About 2-4 pages total, single spaced. Pointers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be <b>SURE</b> to read Burroway's discussion of point of view in Chapters 7 &amp; 8 <b>BEFORE</b> doing this exercise.</li> <li>• Remember to write in third person, not first.</li> <li>• Nevertheless, the diction in each passage should suggest the inner speech of that character. Good third person narration feels "overheard." The chief challenge in 3rd-person subjective point of view is finding the right mixture of character-language and author-language.</li> <li>• In each passage, restrict yourself all but completely to the perceptions and thoughts of that character. Avoid "authorial intrusions."</li> <li>• Use the character's name sparingly—ordinarily just to signal the transition into or out of the character's point of view. Likewise, phrases such as "Jean felt," "John thought," "reflected Bob," and so on should be kept to a minimum. If the point of view and language are being handled skillfully,</li> </ul>

	<p>we don't need these constant reminders of whose eyes we are looking through.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sentence fragments and clipped free-associations from one incomplete thought to another can help convey the sensation of being "in the head" of a character; the challenge is to preserve overall coherence at the same time.</li> <li>• You may want one of these passages to consist largely of reverie; but for the most part, concentrate on capturing, not the character's "inner thoughts," but the external world as it appears to that character. Overly subjective writing is <b>DULL</b>.</li> <li>• Try <b>NOT</b> to make any of the fragments a complete anecdote. Imagine each as part of some larger whole. In most cases you will be better able to concentrate on point of view if you <b>don't</b> get busy finishing or developing the story.</li> <li>• One or more of your characters may be an "unreliable viewpoint." In fact, point of view characters in third person fiction are nearly always at least a little unreliable.</li> <li>• Remember that our emotions and beliefs color our perceptions, and try to capture this effect in your sketches. A park bench seen by a homeless wanderer is a very different thing than the same bench seen by a happy tourist, an infant, a cocker spaniel, a convalescing rape victim, etc. Well controlled third-person subjective writing captures and dwells on these differences. It shows who and what the character is <b>BY FOCUSING ON THE DEFINING QUALITIES OF THAT PERSON'S WORLD</b> — not by direct reverie or stream of consciousness, which are generally easier to write but less effective.</li> <li>• You may use different tenses for the different fragments, and you may want to have the characters recall or perceive the same event (or place, person, etc.) from different temporal distances.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Write-up of group exercise.</b></p>	<p><b>OPTION A:</b> In a report of about 3 pages, double spaced, tell: a) What story you recommended to your group, and why; b) Which of the stories from other groups you like best, and why; c) What <b>distinguishes and defines</b> your own taste in fiction — what sort of story it is that you like best as a rule. Try to be as vivid and concrete as possible, bringing in examples of stories beyond those we have read if this will be helpful.</p> <p><b>OPTION B:</b> Write a <b>parody</b>, 3-4 pages long (double-spaced), of any of the four stories chosen by the groups (Titles TBA). A parody is a spoof, an exaggeration, a comic version that mocks the original by mimicking it. (But often the mockery is basically affectionate.)</p>

### Group Project — Special Directions

**\*\*** In week 8, everyone in class will be more or less randomly assigned to a study group. The groups will arrange to meet out of

class, if necessary.

**\*\* Each member of each group is to nominate a story to be read by the class as a whole. Provide copies for each member of the group, or refer your group to page numbers in any of our four anthologies. Choose stories that are NOT already included in the assigned readings (see syllabus).**

**\*\* Everyone in the group must read all the nominated stories – carefully – by **Tuesday, October 23**. On that day the four groups will meet during the normal class period. The purpose of the meeting will be to 1) choose **one** story, out of the four or five nominated, as the group's favorite to be presented to the class as a whole; 2) plan your presentation to the class.**

**\*\* Each group must provide copies of its elected story for the class as a whole – 21 copies, minus 4 or 5 since you will already have made copies for your group discussions. The exception will be stories from any of our anthologies – for these, you merely need to give us the page numbers. Copies of stories – or page references – are due on **Thursday, October 25**. **Groups 1 & 2 will present their stories on Tuesday, October 30; Groups 3 & 4, on Thursday, November 1.****

**\*\* Presentations should begin with each member of the group stating what story he or she nominated and why. Give a brief, vivid summary and some discussion; expand our knowledge of stories we want to get to; share your enthusiasm for this author and work.**

**\*\* Beyond that, the nature of the presentation will depend on the chosen story and your group's preferences. Remember that the class has read your story, and pitch your presentation accordingly: summary is unnecessary, and detailed discussion of scenes or passages is quite kosher. In most cases you should explain your group's reasons for choosing this tale, explaining what you find admirable, why you think this is good work, what makes this story special. Then go on to explore the story with us, commenting on character, plot, theme, style, and any particular details of craft you find noteworthy. Remember that we are all writers, interested in picking up knowledge of the craft; ask yourself what we can learn about writing from this particular story.**

Some other questions you might want to pursue:

- What is the main conflict?
- Is the conflict convincingly resolved?
- What kind of person is the main character, and how do we see this? Is the character of the protagonist consistent with the action taken? Does the conflict grow convincingly out of the pattern of the character's life, or does it feel imposed?
- How is the style of the story appropriate to the content? What instances of "showing not telling" and "putting us there" do you find especially compelling?
- What is the point of view of the story, and how is this controlled?
- What do you know about the author, and does this information enrich the story in any way, or teach us anything about the creative process?

\*\*These are suggestions only, to get you started: do not feel limited to this list, and avoid proceeding through it as if it were a checklist: try instead to give your discussion inner logic and organic unity. All members of your group should participate in your presentation. If you feel like getting theatrical— e.g., staging a debate, *Crossfire* style — go right ahead, but remember that your underlying purpose, still, is to show critical appreciation for the story chosen.

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