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ENG 2007-001: Creative Writing: Fiction

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2007-001

SYLLABUS
English 2007, Section 001, Fall 2008
Creative Writing: Fiction
MWF 11:00 to 11:50pm, 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 term papers, essays, etc.), many people would probably say that in creative writing, there are no rules—you can write any way you want. Well, OK, that sounds good—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 or changing it.” Writing any way you want suggests that there are many ways to write; as such, 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 that 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 assign other stories not available in this anthology; in these instances copies will be provided in class.

Assignments

Story #1	Due Friday, September 12	15%
Story #2	Due Monday, October 20	15%
Story #3	Due Friday, December 12	15%
Portfolio	Due Friday, December 12	25%
Workshopping	As scheduled	25%
Reading quizzes	After each assigned reading	5%

Stories: You will write three original stories for this class. “Original” means that you will be the sole author, but it also means that you cannot use stories that you have already written before the start of the class (and *definitely* not ones that you’ve used for other classes—no, I probably won’t have any way of knowing you did this, but come on, this is a *creative* writing class, and recycling a story from another class isn’t the least bit creative).

Stories must 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*, or they won’t be accepted.

Each story must be *at least 4 full pages, with a suggested maximum of 10 pages*. I say “suggested” because there really is no upper limit, so don’t feel that you have to kill off all your characters on page 10 because you’re afraid of getting penalized for going over the limit. Note, however, that your classmates will be reading and critiquing your work, and longer stories tend not to be read thoroughly, so think twice before handing us 30 pages to show off how much you can write (plus you’ll have to make copies of those 30 pages for everybody—more on this later). Moreover, more is not necessarily better, so don’t assume that a 10-page story means an automatic “A.” A beautifully written 5-page story in which the author clearly invested much time, thought, and effort will likely be more gratifying to the reader than a 15-page story that seems like it was written all in one sitting without any revising, editing, or proofreading.

Portfolio: Your portfolio consists of different writing exercises that you will begin in class and finish at home. 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 (very important). In class you will hand-write your work; at home when you finish working on the exercise to your satisfaction, you can type and print your work if you prefer (though this is not required).

During our second round of workshopping (explained in detail below), because we will only workshop one story per class, we will reserve about 15-20 minutes at the end of each of these classes for a writing exercise—one that each of *you* will come up with. The exercise you come up with will be part of your workshopping grade (and we’ll vote for the exercise students find the most helpful!). I will provide more details on this when we get closer to the second round of workshopping.

At the end of the semester, I will collect and grade your portfolios. The main grading criteria are how many exercises you have done, and whether sufficient effort has been put into them—but *not* the “quality” of the writing. These exercises reflect *experiments* in writing, and as such I’m not expecting complete, polished works that are ready to be sent to *The New Yorker*. Students sometimes get very worried about the portfolio and ask, “Is this what you wanted? Did I do this right?” Those questions are irrelevant when it comes to these exercises, because in this particular stage of writing, trying is succeeding. (In later stages of writing, of course, that’s not the case, because you won’t just be experimenting but also polishing your work—as is true with *any* kind of writing.)

While I don’t set any parameters as far as how much you should write for each exercise, common sense should tell you (and me) if you have put in sufficient effort. 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, cooking, science, or anything else takes time and thought.

Workshopping: Two of your three stories will be workshopped in class. What this means is when you hand in the first two stories on their respective due dates, *you need to hand in not just one copy but enough copies for every member of the class* (I’ll provide a final count when it becomes set). We will then set up a schedule for when each story will be workshopped (two per class during the first round, one per class during the second round).

What this also means 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 make copies. In the past some students have gotten a little careless about this and have assumed that I could make the copies for them, or that they could hand in one copy at the deadline but make the others later, or that they could e-mail the story so that everyone else would have to print their own copy. Sorry, no: this is *not* a difficult requirement to fulfill, and it is absolutely necessary to the workshop. Bring all required copies on the due date, or your grade on that assignment will be dropped one full grade (that is, from A to B, A- to B-, etc.). This may sound harsh, but it's standard procedure for creative writing workshops.

On the day a given story is workshopped, the class will have read the story and will discuss various aspects of its craft, providing specific and constructive critiques. For each story to be workshopped, each of you must come to class with ***a half to full page (typed and double-spaced) of clear, specific, constructive comments*** (I will provide a detailed guide); you may also write comments in the story margins to point out specific areas of note. I will collect these critiques on the day the story is workshopped, read them, and then return them to the author of the workshopped story the following class. In other words, these are not anonymous critiques: I see them, and the person who wrote the story sees them, and they are part of your grade.

Critiques will not be graded but will be given ***full credit (if work is satisfactory), half credit (if work could be more substantial, or if it is late by one class period), or no credit (if work is late by more than one class period, or if it is poorly written or insubstantial)***.

The workshop is a hugely important part of this class simply because writing consists of more than just sitting in a room by yourself typing out your thoughts. We write out of a need to connect to other people, and a creative writing workshop can allow the writer to connect at many different points in the writing process, not just the end. As such, don't just write the same bland comments on every critique, and don't think that workshops are classes in which you don't have to do anything. It is in everyone's best interest to take workshops seriously, not just because they account for 25% of your grade (in terms of both your written comments and your discussion in class), but because your contributions to a lively and insightful discussion are necessary to make the class interesting and effective. If you don't like speaking in class, write thoughtful, detailed comments; if you feel comfortable contributing, then please do so, and try to encourage others to contribute as well. It's a cliché, but one worth repeating: the class is only as good as *you* make it (and in the past, it has been *great*—mainly because of students' efforts).

Reading quizzes: That one got your attention, didn't it. Don't worry: this is a *really* easy 5% of your grade—if you do the reading. 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 one or two questions) based on that 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 analysis and they won't be trick questions. (Note that I do not give make-ups on reading quizzes.)

The point, if you haven't figured it out already, is to ensure that you ***do the reading***. These texts are a crucial part of this class. Ask any writer you admire, *any* writer, for advice on writing, and

I guarantee that one of the first things they'll tell you is to read, read, read. Many students groan at the idea of having to do "serious reading" for a creative writing class, but as I've said, 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 formal 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. I cannot and will not give you a synopsis of what you "missed" when you were absent, not because I'm too lazy to do so, but simply because it's *not possible*.

Moreover, 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. Notes do not change anything, and I never want or need to see them.

I don't say all of 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: A lot of times in introductory creative writing classes, there will be a few students who believe that effort is the sole requirement for getting an "A." They claim that it's impossible to grade "creativity," and as long as you've tried, you've succeeded.

Well, OK, but the point of this class isn't just to "be creative." A grade in a class, any class, is a measure of how well a student has met the learning objectives. And as discussed at the beginning of this syllabus, the main learning objective of this class is to explore different ways of writing. If all of your writing is exactly the same from the beginning of the semester to the end—that is, if you always write about the same subjects, or write every story in the same style or structure—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 in your acceptance speech); I'm looking for signs that you are experimenting with writing.

Moreover, often what we perceive as being “bad” about a piece of creative writing reflects one of two things: either the writer attempted to reach a certain goal but was unable to achieve that goal (for example, the writer wanted us to sympathize with the main character but created the character in such a one-dimensional way, with little use of different writing techniques, that the reader simply cannot do so), or the writer was successful in achieving his/her goals but didn’t really accomplish anything by doing so (for example, the writer wanted to tell a story whose “moral” is that you should live each day to the fullest; this is a lovely sentiment but one that is so incredibly clichéd and meaningless—does anyone really try to live each day to the emptiest?—that the writer need not have bothered to express it). Keep this in mind when it comes time to consider “creativity” in your writing.

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.) Moreover, we are on a *very* tight schedule, so there is simply no room for flexible deadlines.

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.

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 some creativity with elements of craft, but perhaps needed more time and attention or might have tried something different in terms of subject, theme, technique, etc.
- “C” range: Story fulfills the basic requirements but shows little sign that the writer was experimenting with craft or trying for originality or depth; it may also have numerous technical errors.
- “D” or “F”: Story doesn’t fulfill many or any of the basic requirements.

Other aspects of grading to note: I don't provide "extra credit." I don't allow "make-up" assignments. I don't allow late assignments other than as described above. 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.

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 (Important)

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! At the same time, do ask any questions that you may have, and use common sense. I can't write everything into a syllabus, or it would be even longer than it already is. Nobody wants that.

Last Item

Now I suppose you are all terrified and have no desire ever to write creatively 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.