

ENG 185 Writing and Analyzing Short Fiction
(Guide to Major Assignment Sequence)

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

This course is designed to teach students how to understand and apply basic tools of fiction writing and critical reading. Throughout the course, we will focus our attention equally on writing and close-reading skills. This course is meant to have some overlap into the same learning techniques as a first-year composition class, in order to illustrate how these techniques can serve to make the student a better writer and a better reader of literary fiction. We will also be using journals in class for free-writing assignments and brainstorming exercises. While the journals themselves will not be graded, failure to bring your journal with you to every class will result in a low class participation grade.

COURSE OUTLINE:Texts Key

WF = *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, 8th ed. Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French and Ned Stuckey-French. Boston: Longman, 2011. ISBN 978-0-20-575034-4

DT = *Doubletakes: Pairs of Contemporary Short Stories*. T. Coraghessan Boyle. Boston: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004. ISBN 978-0-15-506081-4

Abbreviations Key

A# = Assignment 1, 2, 3, etc.

Date	Class Discussion	Homework Due
Week 1 T	Introduction – Syllabus, “successful” journals, in-class freewriting assignment	
TH	Getting Started, Reading as Writers, Workshop Philosophy, labyrinthine sentences, know your homonyms!	WF Chp. 1 - “Whatever Works”
Week 2 T	Showing and Telling, comparison, active voice, using all five senses in your writing	WF Chp. 2 – Seeing is Believing pp. 21-42, labyrinthine sentence due
TH	Showing and telling, journal exercises, Dybek, “We Didn’t”	WF Dybek, “We Didn’t” pp. 42-51
Week 3 T	Tone and Theme, story elements, POV, reading as writers	WF Chaon, “Big Me” pp.51-67 / A1 due

TH	“The Cavemen in the Hedges,” tone, character	DT – Richter, pp.574-588
Week 4 T	Analysis and close-reading, summary & response models, writing objectively	Summary & response handouts
TH	Group summary & response workshop	A2 draft
Week 5 T	Character I, POV, credibility, authority, dialogue	WF Chp. 3 – Building Character pp. 73-89/A2 due
TH	“Secretary,” scene, emotion, voice	DT - Gaitskill, pp. 300-312
Week 6 T	Character II, paradox, purpose, complexity	WF Chp. 4 – pp. 116-138
TH	Journal exercises – What does your character want?	WF – O’Connor, pp. 286-298
Week 7 T	Harmony and conflict	WF Chp. 5/A3 due
TH	“The Rememberer,” “Good Country People,” critical reading	DT – Bender, pp. 38-40, O’Connor, pp. 526-543
Week 8 T	Voice, distance, interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness	WF – Chp. 8 pp. 300-316, A4 due (conflict)
TH	“The Brother,” voice in writing, exercises in writing summary and response	DT – Coover, pp. 184-188,
Week 9 T	Exercises in Nonfiction	WF Chp 6 – Fictional Time pp. 208-222, A3 due
TH	Fictional time, summary, scene, flashback, slo-mo, peer workshop philosophy	DT - Wolff, pp. 650-654, WF - Gould, pp.244-245
Week 10 T	Peer workshop (small groups)	
TH	Midterm Conferences	A5 due – Nonfiction piece
Week 11	Spring Break ☺	No Classes ☺
Week 12 T	Start thinking about Magnum Opus, character exercises: 20 questions, brainstorming plot, freewriting exercises	WF - Chp. 7
TH	Magnum Opus workshop	Students (4): _____
Week 13 T	“Re-vision,” “Worry It and Walk Away,” criticism	WF Chp. 9 pp. 340-356
TH	Magnum Opus workshop	Students (4): _____

Week 14 T	Discussion of “Keith,” Revision	WF Chp. 9 pp. 357-393
TH	Magnum Opus workshop	Students (4): _____ _____
Week 15 T	REVISION! reviewing the difference between revising and proofreading	
TH	Magnum Opus workshop	Students (4): _____ _____
Week 16 T	Meta-Writing, Reflection on classwork and Magnum Opus	A7 Magnum Opus due *** , Meta-writing – bring SEE draft to class
TH	Publication options, sales pitches, Final exam session (SEE final draft)	A8 (SEE final draft) due

OVERVIEW:

Week 1: Introduction to course, Syllabus overview
 Week 2: Showing and Telling** (see Tim’s syllabus, 3 pages)
 Week 3: Tone and Theme
 Week 4: Analyzing the Short Story (Summary & Response)**
 Week 5: Character**
 Week 6: Dialogue
 Week 7: Conflict**
 Week 8: Voice
 Week 9: The Memory – Exercises in Nonfiction**
 Week 10: Peer Workshop + Conferences
 Week 11: Spring break
 Week 12-15: Magnum Opus work**
 Week 16: Self Evaluation**

** Denotes weeks involving major semester assignments

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS:

Week 2: Showing and Telling

Major Assignment #1: The “Personal” Essay

Show, don't tell 2-3 pages about an incident from your life (it can be fictionalized as much as you like, but try to focus on what is real) that strikes you as intense, unusual, dangerous, a turning point, or otherwise meaningful. Your essay should include dialogue, action, and detail that **appeal to all five senses: touch, sight, taste, smell, and sound**. Think of Dybek's story and how he was able to SHOW what happened instead of trying to explain everything. Also keep in mind that this does NOT have to be a unified story, so don't try to "wrap things up" at the end.

Week 5: Character

Major Assignment #3: "20 Questions" (Or More)

The best stories are the ones where the writer truly inhabits their characters. This exercise is designed to help you create your main character(s) in a way that will allow you to truly bring them alive on the page. Knowing their history, their likes and dislikes, their relationships with others will help you establish their voice within the piece.

Create a vivid character—someone you would enjoy writing about—by answering these 20 questions about him/her. Flesh out your answers as much as possible. Keep in mind that we won't necessarily find out all of this information once you write a story about this person. Some of these questions may seem ridiculous at first, but the more intricate background knowledge you have about this person, the more real they will seem on the page.

After you have answered all the questions, write a paragraph as if you were introducing your character to a friend. You may format this however you like (dialogue, personals ad in the newspaper, etc.), but you must include what you consider the most vital and unique traits of your character in doing so.

Note: Feel free to add your own questions to the list and answer those as well. This assignment will provide a foundation for our future assignments on dialogue and conflict, as well as get you thinking about your magnum opus.

1. Is your character an only child?
2. How old is he/she?
3. What is your character allergic to?
4. Is your character a carnivore, vegetarian, or vegan?
5. What is your character's vocation?
6. Is your character married?
7. What is your character's favorite memory?
8. How many good friends does your character have?
9. Does your character have any enemies?
10. What kind of hobbies does your character have?

11. What was the biggest lie your character ever told?
12. What kind of secrets is your character keeping?
13. Does your character believe in aliens?
14. If your character was at the zoo and found out that a giant gorilla got out of its cage, how would he/she respond?
15. If your character witnessed a murder, how would he/she respond?
16. If your character could travel anywhere (on earth or in space), where would they go and why?
17. Does your character prefer cake or pie?
18. Has your character ever cheated (on a test, on a spouse/significant other, in any kind of situation)?
19. Does your character believe in God?
20. What does your character prefer as a main mode of transportation? Car? Unicycle? Hovercraft?

Week 7: Conflict

Major Assignment #4: Creating Friction in Fiction

“It is often the case that such scenes, even in the imagination, are uncomfortable places to be. However, your job as a writer is to recognize the need for such a scene and to try to overcome your squeamishness about going there.”

– Burroway, *Writing Fiction* p. 217

After all of our discussions about conflict in each story we’ve read this semester, you should be quite familiar with how tension drives a story along. Now it’s time to create your own. Often, our own lives are filled with rich source material for writing about conflict. For example: have you ever been cheated on, lied to, fired from a job, bullied, verbally or physically attacked, manipulated, or done any of these things to someone else? Did you ever feel it was necessary to lie or not tell the whole truth in order to protect someone, and did it change your relationship to them without their even knowing it?

In your journal, brainstorm at least 10 different conflicts that a person, two people, or a group of people could struggle with. Choose your favorite of these ten, and **write a 1-3 page scene that shows this conflict. (Remember to SHOW, NOT TELL.)** If you have trouble figuring out where to start, do some free-writing exercises in your journal first. Put two people in a room. What are they arguing about?

You may choose to write the scene entirely of dialogue between two (or more) people, or it may turn into 1-3 pages of description. Don’t over-think it, just let yourself go and have fun with it.

Week 9: The Memory – Creative Nonfiction

Major Assignment #5: An Exercise in Nonfiction

“A story isn’t about a moment in time, a story is about *the* moment in time.”
– W.D. Wetherell

As you have seen throughout the assignments in this course thus far, fiction can be, and indeed often is, based on things that happen in real life. Many of the writing techniques we’ve studied can be applied to writing nonfiction as well. Though you don’t have to *create* the characters, scene, or conflict in nonfiction, you can still be *creative*. Think back to the personal essay you probably had to write for an ENG 110 or 112 class. While this assignment will be similar, I want you to use the skills you’ve learned so far about showing vs. telling and creating your own authorial voice. This is a two-part assignment in which you will first “tell a (true) story,” and then interpret that story using critical skills learned from our *Writing Fiction* textbook.

Memory works in mysterious ways. Often our most vivid memories are tied to extreme emotions – elation, sadness, embarrassment, fear. Memory is a wonderful and rich source for invention in writing. Write a 2-4 page scene in first-person POV about a time in your life that you remember vividly. This memory should contain interaction between you and at least one other person. (Don’t be afraid to write dialogue, even if you don’t remember the conversation *verbatim*.) A successful essay will: 1) establish your unique writing voice 2) contain strong descriptions and vivid characters 3) show an overall “arc” of scene 4) show, not tell, how the incident is meaningful to you as the author.

Part two of this assignment is to write a one-page interpretation of your scene in regard to the relationship between fiction and nonfiction. Using our textbook, *Writing Fiction*, explain what, if any, advice of Burroway’s was helpful for you as you wrote your nonfiction essay. **Remember to quote and cite your sources.**

Week 4: Analyzing the Story

Major Assignment #2: Summary & Response Essay

This assignment is structured as more of an academic essay. Unlike many of our other assignments, you will be using an objective voice for most of the essay. This is essentially a two-part essay; the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of your essay should examine and summarize the short story in terms of **one** of the following aspects: **conflict, plot, theme, language, and character**; the second part of your essay will be your own response to **what you learned from the**

author about employing writing techniques in terms of the aspect you are analyzing (conflict, plot, etc).

Analyze one of the following short stories: T.C. Boyle’s “Greasy Lake” OR Raymond Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing” (both can be found in our *Doubletakes* book).

Similar to examining an academic essay or article, the most successful essays will examine not only the main themes within the story, but also *how* the author is presenting his ideas. Be sure to examine the piece both at the sentence-level **and** as a whole. Aspects to consider include: structure, organization, syntax, diction, and figurative language. Make sure you read the story **at least twice, as well as annotate the text** (if you are renting the textbook, take notes on a separate sheet of paper). Then write an 800-word summary and response.

Weeks 12-15: The Final Leg

Major Assignment #6: Your “Magnum Opus”

Write a short story that is at least 8 and no more than 15 pages, in which you employ the writing components that we’ve studied this semester. You will sign up for a workshop sometime between week 12 and week 15 of the semester, and hand in a final revision **by April 25th**.

This story can be fiction OR creative nonfiction. Whichever you choose, your story will need a well-devised plot, vivid characters, and a major conflict. We will start working on outlines for the story arc of your magnum opus upon returning from spring break.

Final Assignment

Major Assignment #7: Self Evaluation Essay (SEE)

Write a 2-4 page self-evaluation essay that makes one of the following claims and supports it with cited evidence that is quoted, paraphrased, and/or summarized from our Course Objectives in the syllabus, as well as the assignments you’ve done this semester:

- My final portfolio merits a high pass because I have met ENG 185 goals exceptionally well.
- My final portfolio merits a pass because I have met ENG 185 goals well.
- My final portfolio merits a low pass because I have met ENG 185 goals.
- My final portfolio merits a fail because I have not met English 185 goals.

Look at the ENG 185 goals and objectives on your syllabus and ask yourself how well you have met each goal. Find evidence of having met these goals and objectives in the work you have done in the class this semester. You will need to discuss and cite this evidence in your essay. How does the work you've produced for this class meet the criteria for a high pass, pass, low pass, or fail?

There is no single way to write a thoughtful self-evaluation. A persuasive self-evaluation selects and presents the most important evidence and results of your learning process. Remember, a persuasive self-reflection cites **specific examples** of your work. Give time and thought to what you write and take care in how you write it. A careless, simplistic, self-evaluation that fails to cite its evidence will not persuade your audience: it will earn you a poor grade for this assignment, even if you have produced good writing in the course. If you have struggled in the course, the Self-Evaluation is a final opportunity for you to demonstrate your ability to make and support a claim. If you have done well in the course, the Self-Evaluation is an opportunity to call attention to this hard work in ways unguided readers might not fully see and appreciate.

Answering the following questions will help you develop your main claim and your supporting evidence in your self-evaluation essay. HOWEVER, PLEASE NOTE: Your revised and polished SEE should not simply answer these questions in order.

- What assignment was the easiest for you? Why? What does this suggest about you?
- In what ways has your writing improved while you have been in this class? What kinds of instruction or activities have helped in this improvement? Show and explain.
- What was the most challenging assignment for you? Why? How did you deal with the challenges? What was the outcome?
- Of what piece of writing are you proudest? Why?
- What assignment did you learn the most from this semester? What did you learn? Why do you value this learning?
- What do you still need to work on as a reader, writer, and thinker? Why do you think so?
- Did you do more or less than was expected by the instructor? Than your classmates? Why/why not?
- What is the relationship between the reading, writing, and thinking you practiced in this course and the reading, writing, thinking you need to do in your major field of study? Is there evidence in your work this semester of your understanding of those relationships?
- What did you expect to learn? What did you actually learn? More or less? Why?