

Introduction to Fiction Writing

Instructor: Sarah Nicole Donaldson
Email: sanidonaldson@gmail.com

Course Description: This six-week introductory course will cover the five major elements of fiction writing—character, plot, setting, theme, and style. Students will be asked to critically engage with the course materials through written assignments and participation in the online forums. For the final project, students will submit a short story and critique each other’s stories during our virtual “writer’s workshop.”

Learning Objectives: Students will develop and hone their fiction writing skills through prompted writing exercises, produce a short story, and develop critique skills through a writer’s workshop.

Recommended Text:

→ Strunk, William, Jr., and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed., Pearson, 2000.

All required readings will be provided by the instructor.

Grading:

Participation—30 points

Each forum post is worth up to 6 pts. Each response is worth up to 2 pts.

Weekly Assignments—25 points

Each assignment is worth up to 5 pts.

Final Project—45 points

Your short story accounts for 30 pts of your total grade. Your participation in the writer’s workshop is worth up to 15 pts (5 pts per critique).

(Total—100 points, or 100%)

To receive a passing grade, you must submit all assignments and post in at least three of the five forums. Additional forum posts are worth up to 2 points of extra credit.

Assignments must be typed in double-spaced, 12-pt Times New Roman font with 1-inch margins all around the document. In addition, assignments must be appropriately titled and contain a header listing the student’s first and last names, instructor’s name, course title, and due date. Please email assignments to sanidonaldson@gmail.com. Late assignments (with the exception of the final project) are accepted up to a week from their original due date, and will be docked 2 points.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism, or misrepresenting the work of others as your own, may result in failure of that assignment.

Course Calendar

Week 1 (Mar. 18-24): Character

Lecture Video #1: Authenticity in the Fictional Character

Readings:

→ Corbett, David. “The Tempest Within: The Character’s Psychological Nature.” *The Art of Character: Creating Memorable Characters for Fiction, Film, and TV*. Penguin, 2013, pp. 141-165.

→ Salinger, J. D. “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor.” *Nine Stories*. Little, 1953, pp. 87-114.

Handout: “Character Sketch”

Forum Prompt: Your character is single and ready to mingle! Draft an online dating profile for your character. List their interests, hobbies, physical attributes, career and educational goals, volunteer activities, and whatever else you think might interest a prospective date. Reply to two of your classmates’ dating profiles in the voice of your character. Due: Mar. 21

Assignment: Your character just came home from a date. From the point-of-view of your character, write a dairy entry reflecting upon their experience. Include all the juicy and/or cringe-worthy details! 1-2 double-spaced pages. Due: Mar. 24

Week 2 (Mar. 25-31): Plot

Lecture Video #2: Beyond the Beginning, Middle, and End

Readings:

→ Snyder, Blake. “Let’s Beat It Out!” *Save the Cat!: The Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need*. Michael Wiese, 2005, 67-90.

→ Jackson, Shirley. “The Lottery.” *The Lottery and Other Stories*. Farrar, 2005, pp. 291-302.

Forum Prompt: Your character is planning a weeklong vacation to the destination of their dreams. But once they arrive at their destination, it’s one mishap after another! From the point-of-view of your character, write a postcard to a friend describing the events of the week. Reply to two of your classmates’ stories from the point-of-view of the recipient. Due: Mar. 28

Assignment: On their return flight, your character’s plane crash-lands on a deserted island. Your character is the lone survivor. Using only their wits and objects they can salvage from the wreckage, how do they survive their first week on the island? 2-3 double-spaced pages. Due: Mar. 31

Week 3 (Apr. 1-7): Setting

□ Lecture Video #3: Smelling the Roses

□ Readings:

→ McClanahan, Rebecca. "The Story Takes Its Place: Descriptions of Setting." *Word Painting: The Fine Art of Writing Descriptively*. Revised ed., Writer's Digest, 2014, pp. 188-211.

→ Jin, Ha. "Alive." *The Bridegroom: Stories*. Pantheon, 2000, pp. 17-42.

□ Forum Prompt: Your character builds a time machine. When the control system malfunctions, they land in a completely random time period and place. Luckily the radio system still works! Your character radios for help, and they're asked to describe their surroundings so someone can locate them. What do they say? Reply to two of your classmates' stories guessing where their character is stranded. Due: Apr. 4

□ Assignment: After their time machine is repaired, your character stops to pick up a hitchhiker from the past. When the hitchhiker arrives at the present, they're totally confused. The hitchhiker asks your character many questions about the "futuristic" objects they find in your character's home. Which objects fascinate the hitchhiker, and how does your character describe the functions of these objects? 1-2 double-spaced pages. Due: Apr. 7

Week 4 (Mar. 8-14): Theme

□ Lecture Video #4: What is the Meaning of Life? (and Other Hard Questions)

□ Readings:

→ Maass, Donald. "The Reader's Emotional Journey." *The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface*. Writer's Digest, 2016, pp. 131-175.

→ Power, Susan. "First Fruits." *Roofwalker*. Milkweed, 2002, pp. 111-137.

□ Forum Prompt: Fairy tales often serve as cautionary tales. But what's the villain's perspective in all this? Write a letter of complaint from the point-of-view of the villain in your favorite fairy tale. Addressing the letter to the author of the fairy tale, how does the villain explain to them why the ending was unfair? Reply to two of your classmates' stories letters pretending to be the author. Due: Apr. 11

□ Assignment: Rewrite your favorite fairy tale from the point-of-view of the villain. Feel free to rework the plot of the original tale. 2-3 double-spaced pages. Due: Apr. 14

Week 5 (Apr. 15-21): Style

Lecture Video #5: ur words on fleek

Readings:

→ Strunk, William, Jr., and E. B. White. “An Approach to Style.” *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed., Pearson, 2000, pp. 66-85.

→ Cisneros, Sandra. “Born Bad.” *The House on Mango Street*. Random, 1991, pp. 58-61.

Handout: “Literary Devices”

Forum Prompt: In the narrative style of your favorite author, describe a day in the life of your character. Reply to two of your classmates’ stories with a specific genre you’d like them to adopt for this week’s assignment. Due: Apr. 18

Assignment: Genre switch! Choose one of the genres offered to you via the comments of your forum post (or, if you are not participating in the forum this week, choose a genre markedly different from your own), and rewrite your story using the conventions of that genre. 1-3 double-spaced pages. Due: Apr. 21

Week 6 (Apr. 22-28): Writer’s Workshop

Reading:

→ Interview with Robert Eversmann

Writer’s Workshop: Upload your story in the forum. Via the comments section, critique three of your classmates’ stories. Remember your workshop etiquette! Due: Apr. 28 (See “Workshop Instructions” handout.)

FINAL PROJECT DUE APR. 25! (See “Final Project Instructions” handout.)