Course Description

What is fiction, exactly? How do we read it, and how do we write it? And, ultimately, why? What does fiction give us? Of course, it gives us many things—things we’re seeking and things we’re not. It gives us truth, understanding, rupture, connection. It’s a home, it’s an escape. It might provide something foreign or something familiar. It can push us inward or force us outward, make us look backward or move us forward. It can leave us inspired, at ease, unsettled, or just a little more alive.

Over the course of the semester, we will look at what fiction is, what it does for us, and how to create it. We will read and write short fiction, learn key techniques, and discuss the fundamental tools of storytelling. And we will explore, excavate, and extract the stuff of real life in order to produce compelling, honest prose.

During the first half of the semester, we’ll study the craft of fiction; every week, we’ll read short stories and craft essays with a focus on a specific element of creative writing. We will also write (and read aloud) practice pieces, free writes, and creative exercises. During the second half of the semester, we’ll participate in a creative writing workshop. In workshop, each of you will bring in one story you have written this semester, and your peers and I will provide you with specific, constructive feedback. You will then revise it for your final portfolio, which will comprise your story drafts, practice pieces, and reflections. I’ve provided more information on all these components below.

Course Outcomes

By the end of the course, you will have practiced writing, reading, and talking about fiction. Specifically, the class will allow you to do the following:

- Acquire foundational skills in reading, discussing, and writing short fiction
- Demonstrate an understanding of the terminology and concepts that apply to fiction
- Practice the art of writing and revising short fiction
- Learn to critique the quality of one’s own work and that of peers

Course Texts and Reading Requirements

Our readings will take us across decades, geographies, and cultures. They will span places and people, touch the private and the public. In our readings, we will celebrate demographic, experiential, and stylistic diversity. Because of this, there is no one book for this class. Instead, I will upload the readings for each week to Moodle (see Weekly Schedule). Computers, tablets, and phones are not allowed in class (see Technology section below), so it’s imperative that you print off the readings. Think of printing as the cost of your books for this class. With this system, you can print off the readings all at once—either at the beginning of the semester, each week, or whenever you choose. You will also need paper in class that you can tear out or take out, so plan on buying a spiral notebook or notebook with loose leaf lined paper.
You’re all adults, and you’ve chosen to be here. I expect that you will read. And having the hard copies will help you do a close and careful reading of the texts, which is a very important skill in college. You must annotate your readings – be sure to write comments, questions, and ideas in the margins. You will also likely want to make additional notes on your readings when we discuss them in class. Occasionally, I may ask to see your hard copies to check that they’ve been annotated. And just think – by the end of the semester, you’ll have an anthology of curated fiction, with your notes, to return to whenever you want.

Class Expectations and Policies

Types of Writing:
In this class, we are writing fiction. This means we’re not writing creative nonfiction pieces, such as memoirs, personal essays, or journalistic pieces. Naturally, our stories may be based in real places and on the real experiences of real people. If this is the case for you, do not use people’s real names, and be tactful with how you fabricate or embellish experiences. Also, we will be focusing on literary fiction in this class. This means we will not be reading or writing genre or speculative fiction, such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, young adult, romance, etc. This is not because we shouldn’t study these forms of fiction; it’s only because this is an introductory class, and we must create parameters. Of course, your writing may incorporate surreal, experimental, or abstract elements, but please do not bring in genre fiction.

Our Approach to Analysis:
In this class, we are examining how stories work and why they work. We are not deciding whether we like or dislike a story. In fact, focusing on craft doesn’t require that you like a story at all. In this course, you will not be passing judgment on stories – whether written by an established author or one of your peers – based on your initial sentiments or stylistic preferences. You will be looking at the techniques the writer employs, the methods of storytelling, and the way the work does what it does.

Classroom Community:
Writing is a profoundly vulnerable activity. It can be extremely difficult to share what you’ve written. It is imperative that we create an inclusive, supportive, and nonjudgmental atmosphere in this classroom. By being here, we are all agreeing to treat everyone with respect and sensitivity. Commentary, in writing or in person, that disparages, marginalizes, or insults someone else or their writing will not be tolerated.

Late Work:
Late assignments will not be accepted unless you have an excused absence on the day that assignment is due.

Technology:
Laptops and tablets are not allowed in class except in cases of documented necessity. Cell phones should be silenced and put away except in cases of documented necessity, emergency, or specific in-class work. If you have an emergency, please leave the room to use your phone, EVEN if you’re only texting.

Course Requirements and Assignments

Over the course of the semester, you will be writing and reading in many different capacities. You will be required to produce, pass in, and sometimes read aloud the following assignments. All things that are typed can, and should, be printed on both sides of the paper – save trees where you can!

Practice Pieces:
During the first half of the semester, you will pass in a “practice piece” every Thursday. Each practice piece must be typed, 12-point font, double spaced, stapled when appropriate, and between 500 and 700 words
long. The theme and structure of these practice pieces will vary by week; they might be imitations or structural analyses, craft-oriented vignettes, or short narratives that apply the skills we’re learning. Check the weekly schedule for more information about each week’s practice piece.

**Points of Interest:**
During the first half of the semester, you will pass in a “points of interest” notecard or piece of paper every Tuesday. The points of interest can be handwritten or typed, stapled if appropriate, and must include at least three thoughtful questions, ideas, connections, or observations you had while reading the stories and essays for that week. They do not need to be long – one to two sentences for each item is fine – but they should be insightful and specific. You can discuss themes, the techniques of craft, writers’ decisions, etc. See where things tie together or diverge. As I mentioned above, I do not want to hear why you liked or didn’t like a text. Go deeper than that. The points of interest should make it clear to me that you’re reading closely and thinking critically about the texts, and should be things you want to discuss in class.

**Author Introduction:**
Throughout the semester, we will be reading work by new and familiar writers. Every week, someone will provide a very brief (no more than 1-2 minutes) introduction of one of the authors that we’re reading for that week. Be sure to mention biographical info (dates, places, people, etc.), any relevant professional or personal history, and ideally a bit about their writing. This is an informal introduction – you’re welcome to use resources like Wikipedia to find information. The idea is to provide the class with basic background and context as we discuss the writer’s work. On the day you’re assigned, you’ll read it to the class and pass it in. It can be typed or handwritten.

**Workshop Story:**
In the second half of the semester, we’ll participate in a writing workshop. You will sign up for a day to bring in one story that your peers and I will read and critique. This story should be literary fiction. It should be typed, double spaced, 12-point font, stapled, and 15 to 20 pages long. You will print out a copy of your story for each of your peers and me a week ahead of time, with your name, the title, and your workshop number (1 through 6 – we will talk more about this) typed at the top. It can be a first draft, but it should be clean. Proofread. More on workshop in Workshop Guidelines.

**Story Analysis:**
Along with your workshop story, you will pass in an analysis of your short story. This analysis is relatively informal, but it should discuss how and why you incorporated at least two techniques of craft that we’ve studied this semester while writing your story. You might want to address questions like these: What literary tools, elements, or craft techniques did you focus on? Why did you decide to use or not use a specific element – for instance, a certain POV, a certain plot structure, lots of dialogue or none of it? What purpose, mood, or situation were you trying to achieve with these elements? What worked and what didn’t? What readings or exercises inspired these choices? There are different ways to approach this assignment, but I should be able to tell that you deliberately considered craft while writing your story. This should be typed, 12-point font, at least two pages long, stapled, and double spaced. You will pass it in to me with your story.

**Workshop Critiques:**
None of us will become better writers without asking other writers to read our work. In workshop, you will read and critique several of your peers’ stories. For each of your peer’s stories, you will write up a thoughtful, constructive, and nuanced 250-word response to your peer’s work. You can also provide feedback on the manuscript itself by writing comments and questions in the margins, although I want the typed feedback to be your focus. Always be kind, but give your peers real, hearty critiques; give them the meaningful and productive feedback you’d like to receive in your own workshop. You’ll address what’s working in a piece and what needs working on. If you need help structuring the responses, try dedicating the
first third or quarter to things you thought were successful. Then, dedicate the last two-thirds or three-quarters to things that confused you, questions you had, stuff you thought could be made stronger, clearer, more robust. Remember: don’t be prescriptive. Don’t tell the writer how you think they should write their story. Instead, offer them food for thought as they begin to revise. This must be typed, 12-point font, and stapled if needed. You will print out two copies of this, one for me and one for your peer, and bring them in to class.

**Writing Reflection:**
This is your chance to reflect on yourself and your work as a writer – to examine themes, patterns, anchors, and ideas appearing in your work that you find compelling and indicative of where you want to go next as a writer. Instead of seeing your portfolio as a file of disparate pieces, you can use this reflection to assess your portfolio as a body of work that represents the writer you’re becoming. To that end, I’d like you to discuss the following in your reflection: Considering the pieces in your portfolio, how would you describe your development over the semester? What strengths do you see? What things do you want to improve on? How has your writing changed? What risks did you take? What has surprised you in your writing? What are your thoughts for the writing ahead – creative, academic, everyday, or otherwise? What models, tools, or techniques are you interested in pursuing or continuing to pursue? What do you want to write about most, and how do you see yourself pursuing this? You don’t need to answer every question, but you’re welcome to. This should at least 2 full pages long, 12-point font, double spaced, and stapled. You will pass this in with your Final Portfolio.

**Revised Story:**
You will revise your workshop story for your final portfolio. It should be clear to me that you wrestled with the revision process and made substantive changes to your work. It should be 12-point font, double spaced, and stapled.

**Final Portfolio:**
The final portfolio will comprise the following: four practice pieces of your choosing (not revised), your original workshop story, your revised workshop story, your story analysis (not revised), and your writing reflection.

**Workshop Guidelines**

**Etiquette:**
When we share our writing in workshop, we are putting ourselves out there. We are at our most vulnerable. So, when giving feedback to your peers, it’s essential that you be considerate, polite, and respectful. Be an active listener, and don’t bulldoze. Ultimately, just remember the Golden Rule: treat others the way you wish to be treated.

**Structure:**
When we enter the workshop phase of the course, I will split the class into two workshop groups. The group you are part of will be your workshop for the remainder of the course. Every class, you will discuss the stories that day with your group – you will analyze how the writing in front of you could benefit from different revisions. Specifically, you will each say what you think the story is about, one thing you thought worked well, and one thing that confused or jarred you. After that, the floor will be open for additional thoughts and ideas. The writer will be present in the group but will not weigh in until the end. You will likely use your written workshop critique to discuss the story, and you will provide specific, thoughtful, and respectful verbal feedback.
Days:
At the beginning of the semester, I will circulate a sign-up sheet so you can pick when you will be workshopped. You'll print out a copy of your story for me and every member of your group, and you'll pass it out a week before you will be workshopped. It's important to give your peers enough time to read and critique your story. We will discuss this more as we approach the workshop phase of the course.

Participation

Participation looks different for everyone. Based on personality type and class dynamics, you may feel very comfortable or not so comfortable speaking up. But this class is all about stretching beyond your comfort zone. You have to get comfortable being an active participant – whether you're reading your own writing, listening to your peers, or discussing ideas. Therefore, it is critical that you 1) prepare for class, 2) listen attentively, and 3) actively contribute. You have to be present, take risks, and engage fully in this course. Just being here will not suffice.

In college, it is essential that you navigate speaking and listening in both large and small groups. And it's important to me, and to the class as a whole, that each of us contributes. Participation will take many forms – from preparing for class to contributing to discussion to reading your work aloud – and it counts as 30% of your grade in this class.

Attendance

Workshop can’t operate without people. Writing can’t happen without an audience. Community can’t be created without consistency. So, come to class. After three unexcused absences, your final grade will begin to drop by a letter grade with each subsequent missed class. With this timeline, six unexcused absences will result in a failing grade. If you miss class, it is up to you to make up missed assignments and figure out what we discussed.

Grading

Preparation for class, quality of participation, and attendance: 30%
Practice pieces, workshop critiques, and other small assignments: 30%
Final portfolio: 40%

Your final portfolio grade will depend on many things, including the depth of your revision and the thoughtfulness of your reflection. Letter grades play a role only in this part of the course. Before this, I will rely on comments and a check system to give you a sense of your progress in the class. A check signifies solid progress towards writing goals, a check minus indicates need for significant further work on a piece of writing, and a U stands for unsatisfactory work. Feel free to come chat with me at any point about your grade in the class.

Your final grade will be as follows:

- **A** = 92-100%
- **A-** = 90-91.9%
- **A+** = 87-89.9%
- **B** = 82-86.9%
- **B-** = 80-81.9%
- **B+** = 77-79.9%
- **C** = 72-76.9%
- **C-** = 70-71.9%
- **C+** = 67-69.9%
- **D** = 60-69.9%
- **F** = 0-59.9%
Academic Conduct and Plagiarism Policy

You must abide by the rules for academic conduct described in the Student Conduct Code. According to the University of Montana Student Conduct Code, plagiarism is “representing another person's words, ideas, data, or materials as one's own. Consequences include failing an assignment, failing a course, or even expulsion.” Academic honesty is highly valued in the University of Montana community, and acts of plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students should review the Conduct Code so that they understand their rights in academic disciplinary situations. The Conduct Code can be found on the Dean of Students website. If you have any questions about when and how to avoid academic dishonesty, particularly plagiarism, please review the Conduct Code and speak with me.

Students With Disabilities

Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please speak with me privately after class or in my office. Please be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.