Critical info:

Course: CRWR 210A, Section 2: “Intro to Fiction” Workshop  
Classroom: Liberal Arts (LA) 303  
Meetings: Tuesday & Thursday 12:30-1:50pm

Instructor:

Name: Dwight Curtis  
Email: dwight.curtis@umontana.edu  
Office Hrs.: Tu & Th 11:00am-12:20pm @ Corbin 254 (right before class)

Course Description
Welcome to this fiction workshop—perhaps it’s your first. We’ll go over what a “workshop” is and how it works, and what you’ll be expected to do as a writer and as a peer workshoper. We’re going to warm up with a few classes worth of exercises, discussions, and outside readings, and then we’ll get right into our first round of workshop stories. Roughly speaking, our coursework can be broken up into four categories…

1) **Original fiction.** Over the course of the term, each of you will produce two original short stories (one 5-7pp double-spaced, one 8-12pp). You will be responsible for submitting these stories to me by email on your predetermined due dates, and I will distribute your stories to your classmates prior to your workshop.

2) **Peer workshops.** You will be responsible for reading and providing feedback on your peers’ stories. This feedback will consist of a marked-up hard copy of the story along with a letter to the author in which you discuss your responses to specific aspects of the story. Your feedback should be thoughtful and constructive. I will hand out workshop guidelines separately. We’ll workshop 3-4 stories per week.

3) **Writing exercises.** In addition to your two workshop stories, we’re going to do a lot of free writes and targeted writing exercises, both in class and at home. These will be fun.

4) **Outside reading.** In addition to our own stories, we will read short stories, excerpts, and essays by outside authors to inform our discussions, to practice being good readers and discuss-ers, and to help develop our “toolbelts” of writing tricks and techniques

Final Project
Your final project will comprise meaningful revisions of your two workshop stories along with a portfolio of your free-writes and exercises. We’ll talk about this later. Don’t stress out about it.
**Spiel on the Philosophy of Workshopping**

The main “unit of learning” in this course will be the peer workshop, and it is therefore maximally important that you approach each classmate’s writing and workshop with respect, thoughtfulness, and diligence. Do not rush through these or your feedback will not be helpful. Provide each of your classmates with the courtesy and care that you would expect from them. This is the golden rule of workshop. We are each making ourselves vulnerable in this process, and that vulnerability demands our collective respect.

**Rough Weekly Plan**
(See “Workshop Guidelines & Expectations,” attached.)

**Course Materials**
Each day in class you should bring a notebook and a pen or pencil. You should also bring a binder or folder to store handouts, free-writes, and peer feedback. I would like you to keep all of our course materials together and I expect you to be able to access them at any time. Don’t throw anything away—you’ll need this stuff when you assemble your final portfolio.

I also want you to get a pocket-sized notebook—something you can keep with you all the time.

I’ll explain why in class. Get used to carrying it around. (You’ll need a pen, too.)

Lastly: although there are no required texts for this class, I will ask you to do a lot of printing. You can do this at the library for a small fee. It is extremely important that you bring in hard copies of all readings and all workshop stories. (Your peer feedback letters should always be typed.)

**Grading**
I will not be grading you on the “quality” of your fiction. That’s complicated for me and it isn’t very useful for you. Instead, I will grade you on your diligence with these assignments (do you complete them thoroughly and on time?), your participation in discussions and in workshop, the thoughtfulness of your peer critiques, and your final revision and portfolio. We’ll talk more about grading as the course goes on, and I’ll try to be as clear as possible about what I’m looking for with each aspect of our coursework.

**Class Expectations and Policies**
The following expectations and policies are designed to foster a respectful and productive classroom environment. Our class periods will be most rewarding if they’re treated with respect and even a degree of sanctity.

**Class Preparation**
You should arrive at class having completed your readings and assignments honestly and to the best of your abilities. You should be on time and awake.

**Class Participation**
We all share equally in the responsibility for this workshop. I expect every member of this class to participate in our discussions, whether they are about outside authors or peer stories. When someone is speaking, give him or her your attention by making eye contact or by taking notes. Listen and respond actively to other students’ comments. Do not distract yourself or others.

**Cell Phones**
Don’t make this an issue. I will transform from a kind and openhearted teacher into a monster at the first sight of a cell phone.
Laptops/Tablets
You will not need a computer during class. By that I mean, don’t even take it out of your bag. This is an analog operation. That said, we are going to do a lot of handwriting, and if you have special accommodations regarding typing versus handwriting please let me know.

Late Work and Extensions
Because of the nature of the workshop format, our due dates this term—for your own stories and for your peer feedback—are strict. You need to make sure that your stories are complete and that you email them to me ahead of time so that I can distribute them to the class, and you need to bring marked-up stories and feedback letters to class on the days that they’re due. This is critical to the success of this course.

That said, if something comes up well ahead of time that means you’ll have trouble getting your workshop story in by the due date, please let me know as early as possible so that we can look at the calendar and potentially shuffle your workshop with another student’s.

For our other assignments (including readings as well as our take-home writing exercises), I’ll announce due dates in class and by email. If you anticipate that you won’t be able to complete one of these assignments on time, please reach out to me as quickly as possible. Just as it is your responsibility to meet deadlines, it is your responsibility to anticipate and communicate your inability to meet a deadline. I will always be respectful and sensitive to circumstances that may prevent you from completing an assignment on time as long as you act honestly and responsibly. If you submit an assignment after deadline without having received an extension, your grade will suffer.

Extra Help and Outside Meetings
Please come visit me at my office hours. I’m always glad to talk, and will do my best to impart wisdom about writing, reading, literature, and life. If you can’t make my office hours and have something you want to discuss, reach out to me by email.

Research, Secondary Sources, and Academic Honesty
This premise of this course is that you’ll be creating original fiction. I will provide you with the resources to do successful work for this class. Copying work from another source or using outside sources (including the work of other students) without properly acknowledging them is academic dishonesty and will have serious repercussions.

That said, as you write fiction, you may discover that you need to research certain topics to lend background information or verisimilitude to your writing: for instance, if you’re writing a story about a grizzled ex-con working on an oil rig in Alaska, you may want to figure out some things about life on an oil rig in Alaska. That is fine and all writers do it. Do it honestly and transparently, don’t steal or misrepresent, and please, if this is confusing, if you have a weird feeling, or if you have any questions about how to differentiate between honesty and dishonesty in the process of writing fiction, just talk to me.

Finally, have fun. This is a beautiful thing we’re doing. Don’t be afraid of “writing badly”—give yourself time and space to do this work, write honestly and inventively, read closely and think critically about our outside sources (and learn from these skilled authors), listen to your classmates in workshop, and enjoy this really cool thing we’re going to do.
Workshop Guidelines & Expectations

We will aim to workshop 3-4 stories a week. If you are getting workshoped on a Tuesday, you must email me your story by Friday night. If you are getting workshoped on a Thursday, get me the story by Sunday night. Once I have the stories I will email them out to the class. For the rest of you…

Before Class

Print the story! This is a requirement. Then, read the manuscript at least twice. Start by reading it once all the way through without a pen—on this read, you’re just enjoying the story. Then read it a second time with a pen and a critical eye, marking up the text with your notes and comments. After you’ve marked up the story, you should write a ~300 word letter to the author, which you’ll *print out* any bring to class along with the marked-up hard copy of the story to class. At the end of the workshop you’ll hand these letters and stories in to me and I’ll distribute them to the author. In your letter, I’d like you to focus on the following things:

1) **Overall reading experience.** What did you particularly enjoy? Tell the author about your overall experience reading this piece.
2) **Plot & Structure.** Does it make sense? Is it satisfying? Is it convincing and dramatically interesting? Will the premise sustain an intelligent reader? Is the pacing of the narrative appropriate? Is this form of the story the most effective way to tell it?
3) **Narrative.** From whose/what perspective is the story told? Is that narrative effective? Does the language “belong” to that narrator?
4) **Character.** Are the characters sufficiently developed? Are they compelling and convincing? Do they behave believably, in psychologically realistic ways?
5) **Language & Voice.** What did you think about the language and voice? Is the prose clear, meaningful, and beautiful? Is it overwritten or underwritten? Is the dialogue convincing, revealing, and true to character?

Try to respond to the work on its own terms. For each of these focal points, consider what works well and what can be improved (and how).

In Class

The author may not speak during the workshop. (He or she will have a chance to respond at the end.) This will keep you from trying to “defend” or “explain” your story to your readers. If the class is confused or “wrong” about something, you ought to clear it up in the story, not in the workshop. Your readers’ confusions or misinterpretations will point you to these places you need to clarify.

First, we will go around the room and everyone will say something they particularly liked about the story. It can be a plot point, a certain detail, a line of dialogue, a larger theme—whatever caught your eye. Then, we’ll move into a general discussion of the story, focusing on the points I’ve itemized above: overall experience, plot/structure, narrative, character, and language/voice.

Remember:

1. Frame your criticism in a supportive and constructive manner. If you do not like a story, do not attack it viciously or direct your criticism in a personal way. Be helpful. Say what, specifically, didn’t work for you, and offer suggestions for how to address this.
2. By the same token, do not be falsely kind. Insincere praise can be as damaging as mean-spirited criticism.
3. We’re all working together in this class. The more thoughtfully you workshop your peers, the more thoughtfully they’ll workshop you. I care deeply about this, and so should you. We will improve as a group, and we will practice the skills of workshopping just as we practice the skills of reading and writing.