ENGL 130: Introduction to Fiction Writing

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course will help you develop the writing skills used to express, in the short story, whatever is already present in yourself. While a creative writing course may encourage you to formulate themes and help you discover what you wish to write about, it chiefly guides you in techniques other writers have found useful.

These lessons begin one-step-removed from those raw events and feelings that will form the basis of your potential stories. They can't give you experience, but they can help you learn how to shape that experience on the page. Through these lessons, you should learn to express what you feel, then change your work and intensify its effect so that readers can feel it, too.

A short story has its strongest effect when emotionally truest, when the writer shows honestly what it is like to be a human being in this world—to love, grow, hate, quarrel, learn, remember, and dream. Rooted in emotion but guided by intellect, fiction becomes durable when its truths are those many readers will recognize and re-experience, even in other countries and in later years.

The truths a writer uses may bend toward entertainment or toward literature. Successful short stories usually fall between these extremes. Often a competent story in a slick magazine and a “quality” story will differ more in tone, subtlety, and complexity than in writing essentials. Because this course is part of a university English department, it will bend toward literature. The reading texts are devoted to examples of literary stories.

REQUIRED TEXTS AND MATERIALS

See the course description for an up-to-date list of materials.
Library Services

Students enrolled in Carolina Courses Online have access to the UNC Library System. Visit Distance Education Library Services to access a wide array of online services and resources including e-reserves, online databases, online journals, online books, and live help with research and library access. Most online resources require you to log in with your Onyen and password. If you have any trouble finding the resource that you need or logging in to a resource, you can contact the library through the contact information at Distance Education Library Services. You can chat live about your problem, or send an email to request assistance.

RESOURCES

Web Links

- **Grammar Girl**: A user-friendly site that offers advice on grammar, punctuation, and word usage.
- **The Elements of Style**: online version of *Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., for many writers the primary source to consult about the rules and usage principles of composition.
- **The Norton Anthology of American Literature**: This site offers author biographies and sections on historical context for the writers you will be reading in the class.
- **Open Directory: Arts: Literature: Magazines and E-zines**: This site offers an extensive list of links to mainstream and new literary magazines on the Web. You can sample publications and find places to submit your own work.
- **North Carolina Writers’ Network**: This site offers information on statewide conferences, writing contests, and news about NC writers.
- **Poets & Writers**: This site features news, interviews with published writers, a listing of magazines accepting submissions, and grant sources for creative writers.

Supplementary Reading

- **Anthologies of modern short stories and collections of stories by individual authors**: The *O. Henry Prize Anthologies*, the *Pushcart Prize Stories*, and the *Best Short Stories* collections, issued annually, rank high on this list.
- **Literary magazines**: Also called “little magazines,” these are often available only through subscription. Most university libraries carry a good selection and some are available at bookstores. The Poets & Writers site has a link to online magazines. Browse through those you find at the library, bookstores, and online, and find publications you like.
- **Glossies**: These magazines, easily available, contain in each edition at least one story of current fiction: *The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, Harpers, and Esquire*.

COURSE STRUCTURE

The nine lessons in this course correspond to one semester’s work or three hours of college credit. In each lesson, you will be required to do the following:
• Write original, creative work. You will be asked to email written assignments to me.
• Read from one or both of your two texts.
• Write analysis pieces on aspects of stories you have read. You will email some of these to me, and post others to the Literature Discussion Forum. Keep in mind that you should analyze these stories through the eyes of a writer rather than the eyes of a literature student. Ask yourself, “What is this writer attempting to accomplish, and what techniques does the writer use to achieve her or his goals?”
• Write journal assignments. You will be required to post some of these to the Journal Forum.
• Make positive comments about the writing other students post to the forums. The key word here is positive. Do not try to tell someone else what is wrong with their work, or how to make it better. That is the instructor’s job, not yours.
• Do not post late to the Discussion forums. If you have to be late on a lesson, email to your instructor the comments you would have made on the Forums.

Occasionally, you will be asked to post a finished story to the Story Share Forum. Other students will also be posting their finished works. This is NOT a discussion board or a critiquing forum. It functions like an online magazine. I will monitor the forum, and post occasionally, but these are basically places where students can get to know each other, express their opinions, listen to others, and modify positions without feeling the need to pay close attention to what I think. I will post a final wrap-up for each lesson.

Instead of a final exam, you will be asked to submit a completed short story and an analysis piece. stead writing and hard work are essential investments. You may begin working on a story at any time. You will, however, need most of the background of the first lessons in order to complete the story. You should begin to have an idea for, if not a partial draft of, your story by Lesson 6 at the latest. I will comment on your ideas at any time on request. Once you have completed your story, you may post it on the online Story Share Forum.

You will not be able to begin the analysis piece until the last lesson of the course.

SUBMITTING WORK

Assignments are due at 8 pm Eastern Time on the last day of each lesson. However, you cannot wait until the last day to submit all your required posts to the Discussion Forum. These take the place of being in a classroom, so be sure to submit half of your posts—more if you wish—early. It is recommended that you submit your written work early, too. Do not post late to the Discussion forums. If you have to be late on a lesson, email to your instructor the comments you would have made on the Forums.

In your assignments, use proper manuscript form, not email form. For example, indent paragraphs, don’t merely skip a space between each one. Don’t use shorthands or abbreviations that you might use when “messaging.” Double-space your lines. This is a writing class, and all assignments should be submitted professionally.

Don’t delete early drafts. You will be required to look at these later to gauge your progress. An easy way to do this is to simply save your drafts as version 1, version 2, version 3, and so on. If you are using Microsoft Word, you can also use the “Track Changes” option under Tools.

Saving and naming your files: Do not save the files you submit to me as .docx files. Save them in an earlier version of Word (as .doc files) or in rich text format (.rtf files). Name your files with the course number, lesson number, and your last name (example: CCO ENGL 130-Lesson 1-Smith.doc).

Emailing your files: Please use either of the following two ways to submit your work:

1. copy and paste the entire assignment into the body of your email, or
2. submit all assignments for each lesson in a single attachment.

I’m asking for everything in a single email or single attachment rather than, say, four different emails, one for each assignment, because it’s easier to keep track of your work that way.

In the subject line of the email, enter CCO ENGL 130 Lesson # and your last name (example: CCO ENGL 130-Lesson 3-Smith). Copy yourself on the email when you email me the assignment so that you will have a record of submitting it in case there is a problem with the email delivery. UNC-Chapel Hill security policy requires that you use your UNC email address for all course-related email correspondence. Always keep a copy of your submitted assignment. You will need it not only as back-up, but as raw material for future assignments.

Pay attention to length minimums and maximums for each writing assignment. Though you may find on occasion that you can’t help running slightly over the limit, you should know that I may opt to read only to the noted maximum length of the assignment. Keep in mind that you always have your journal in which to expand.

It is important, especially at the beginning, to remember that the writing assignments are exercises; nobody expects perfect pieces. Work at them, stretch your imagination—“Lengthen the ligaments,” Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary—but then let them go and move on to your journal work.

**ON BEING CRITIQUED**

Many students begin this course apprehensive about the critiquing process. They send their writing off as if it is a fragile porcelain teapot, hoping for it to be examined and admired—or perhaps terrified that it will be scrutinized with a magnifying glass for flaws!

Better to think of your writing as raw clay, always malleable, until the moment it is “fired in the kiln,” or published. That way, should I say to you, “Well, you know, it’s a fine teapot, but wouldn’t it make a better sugar bowl?” you have left the option open to tear off the spout and turn it into another handle, if the suggestion seems appealing. After yet another look, you may decide to turn it back into a teapot, or into something else altogether.

There are very few “wrongs” in fiction writing, but there are practices that aren’t effective or are too common. Many of these are brought about by years of training in expository writing, by reading mediocre commercial fiction, or by watching too many “formula” programs on TV.

I have experience working with novice as well as published writers, and can help you develop the unique writing strengths you already possess. Remember, I am critiquing the work, not the author; the writing on the page, not what is in your head. I have the same goal as you—to help you produce a work of fiction that is publishable.

**GRADING**

Letter grades will not be given out for each lesson, so you will be encouraged to focus on the writing. Your final grade will be based on the effort you put in, as evidenced by the depth and complexity of your written analyses, and the improvement of your writing from the first lesson through the last. Lesson 9 will be your final. Feel free to look at it ahead of time so that you can prepare yourself throughout the course. Make sure to post to the Discussion Forums when asked, because you will lose points if you don’t.
ACADEMIC POLICIES

By enrolling as a student in this course, you agree to abide by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill policies related to the acceptable use of online resources. Please consult the Acceptable Use Policy on topics such as copyright, net-etiquette, and privacy protection.

As part of this course, you may be asked to participate in online discussions or other online activities that may include personal information about you or other students in the course. Please be respectful of the rights and protection of other participants under the UNC-Chapel Hill Information Security Policies when participating in online classes.

When using online resources offered by organizations not affiliated with UNC-Chapel Hill, such as Google or YouTube, please note that the terms and conditions of these companies and not the University’s Terms and Conditions apply. These third parties may offer different degrees of privacy protection and access rights to online content. You should be well aware of this when posting content to sites not managed by UNC-Chapel Hill.

When links to sites outside of the unc.edu domain are inserted in class discussions, please be mindful that clicking on sites not affiliated with UNC-Chapel Hill may pose a risk for your computer due to the possible presence of malware on such sites.

Honor Code

As a UNC student, you are expected to uphold the University’s Honor Code. All graded academic work must include the following pledge: “No unauthorized assistance has been received or given in the completion of this work.”

All work that you produce must be your own! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be tolerated in this course. If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, please contact me. Please view the Plagiarism Tutorial created by the librarians of UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke University, NC State University, and NC Central University.