

ENGL 3140
Beginning Fiction Writing
Prerequisite: None
Spring 2026
Professor: Daniel Peña
Office: AUSB 205
Daniel.Pena@unt.edu
Office Hours: By Request

"I am a woman, and I am a Latina. Those are the things that make my writing distinctive. Those are the things that give my writing power."

—Sandra Cisneros

Course Description: Principles and practices in the writing of fiction.

More Specifically:

Completion and critique will be at the heart of everything we do in this course. We'll work together to strategize on the completion and initial revision for writing projects in fiction with special emphasis on the short story though novels are more than welcome in this course. We will discuss how to find the kind of story you want to tell, how to shape the narrative, and how to call upon the elements of craft to come away with a draft, which can then be edited and revised. By furthering our understanding of narrative through analytical reading, we will make the leap in discovering how the whole history of literature can be put in service of our own fiction and how our own cultures and histories can do this for us as well. You will do writing exercises that develop specific craft skills such as characterization, plotting, and pacing while also using this knowledge to constructively discuss the work of your classmates. Toward the end of the semester, you will also learn how to go from what Anne Lamott calls "down-draft" toward "up-draft," which is to say going from getting down your ideas to fixing them up into something presentable. You will be students in a class—a class that is very reading and writing intensive—but you will, first and foremost, be writers in a workshop, a community of authors and readers willing to support each other, challenge each other, and bring each other back to the page again and again.

Course Objectives

- To demonstrate a working knowledge of the elements in the craft of fiction writing, including point of view, imagery and setting, character development, voice, narrative structure, conflict, resolution, and stakes.
- Identify the elements necessary to make a wide range of short stories successful and study a range of narrative models upon which we might build our own work.
- Develop the ability to articulate, with fairness and specific support, a peer critique of student fiction, in both written and oral form. And use what you have learned—including the

complex and unconventional choices authors make about plot, setting, point of view, etc.—in your own rough drafts.

- Learn and put into practice revision strategies for one's own work and the work of others.
- To become a more sophisticated reader of contemporary fiction, through the writing and oral presentation of literary analysis of works of professional short fiction and novels.

Required Materials:

- *Making Shapely Fiction* by Jerome Stern
- *The Penguin Book of the Modern American Short Story* edited by John Freeman (Penguin)

→ The UNT B&N Bookstore will be selling these texts from 8 am to 5 pm. They accept cash or check. They can be found at:

University Union, 1155 Union Cir, Denton, TX 76203

*You can also purchase these texts elsewhere if you find them cheaper.

- Notebook and folder reserved for this class only.

MY EXPECTATIONS/ GRADING

Class participation (10%):

- While writing might be a solitary activity, the workshop is a team effort. You get what you give. So, I simply need your best: best writing, best critiquing, best attitude, best effort. When you put yourself out there in a personal way—as you do whenever you share your work—you want and deserve true engagement and respectful feedback from everyone. Given the nature of creative writing workshops, it is inevitable that sensitive material will be brought to class and so it is essential, in maintaining the dignity of the course, to workshop the piece on its own merit—in the spirit of revision—rather than workshop the person who wrote it. Remember that each submission is a work in progress and every story is a treasure map of sorts with tiny clues and hints of what the writer is getting at but hasn't arrive at *yet*. It is our job to help the writer get there without imposing our own beliefs or judgments on the draft work or the writer themself. In this class we're all on the side of writing and we must recognize the courage and vulnerability of putting words to paper.

Fiction exercises and Workshop Submissions (40%):

- I will assign brief (1-3 page) writing exercises related to each craft element we study in class, about five total over the course of the semester (though most of these will come at the beginning of the semester to get us loose/warmed up). These exercises will develop and sharpen your skills, informing the short stories you complete throughout the semester [5 points each x 2 submissions = 10 points]
- You'll workshop one short story/novel excerpt throughout the semester. The length of these submissions will be between 5-25 pages and will be distributed to class via Canvas. [30 points]

Revision (10%):

- You will revise one short story/novel excerpt of your choice (to be turned in at the end of the semester). The first draft can be tough (and that's okay). Sometimes lightning strikes as soon as pen touches page, but most times we're finding the story as we write it— we're unraveling it like a good yarn. Sometimes the story we find is the one we set out to write but just as often we can uncover something better, something we didn't know we had at all. In the spirit of revision we will focus our energy not on refining what you've already written but allowing yourself to re-envision it entirely. This is a crucial step to finding the story that you will eventually publish. It may turn out that your story really starts where it initially ended; it may turn out that a secondary character is more interesting to you than your primary character. A true revision requires openness, bravery, curiosity, and perseverance. It can also require community; in this instance, you will incorporate feedback you received in workshop and in your classmates' written comments to come away with *your* story.

Readings for Writers (20%):

Throughout the semester each student will share and lead a craft discussion for one short story (published in the last 5 years), with each presentation to last around 20 minutes. Distribution of stories will take place via Canvas and assigned dates will be posted once workshop begins. In rare cases (and if time permits), an additional workshop may be substituted en lieu of a scheduled presentation for no more than one of these two presentations if additional feedback is needed on a longer project like a novel, etc. Please, not Webtoons/Manga/Screenplays/etc.

Critiques (20%):

- Deeply engaging with your classmates' work can be as beneficial to your writing as having your own work discussed. Think of your in-class workshop letter as a written note to the author from another author involved in the same struggle to create well-crafted stories. Constructive feedback, at its best, makes an author excited to return to their work. You will be responsible for writing two workshop letters to any author/story of your choosing. (2 critiques X 15 points each = 30 points)

IMPORTANT MISCELLANY:

Formatting:

All exercises and stories should be **double-spaced** in 12-point, easily-readable black font (Times New Roman/Calibri work fine) with **one inch margins**. Include your name and the **page number** on every page of an assignment, and include the assignment number on the first page. Make sure you **staple** anything more than one page. Please **spell-check and proofread**.

Attendance/Lateness:

EXCUSED ABSENCES

Per 06.039 "Student Attendance and Authorized Absences," A student is responsible for requesting in a reasonable time (10 business days) an **excused absence** in writing, providing satisfactory evidence to the faculty member to substantiate excused absence, and delivering the request personally to the faculty member assigned to the course for which the student will be absent.

An absence will be excused by the university for:

- a. religious holy day, including travel for that purpose;
- b. participation in an official university function;
- c. required military service, including travel for that purpose;
- d. pregnancy and parenting under Title IX; and e. when the University is officially closed.

UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

Absences that do not fall under Pregnancy and Parenting, Military Service, Religious Holy Days, and Official University Functions, will be considered **unexcused**. **You have 3 unexcused absences for the semester** which you can use for any reason.

If your absence is due to an illness or extenuating circumstance that exceeds 5 consecutive days, I ask that you please provide documentation through the Dean of Students' office. Examples include but not are limited to:

- a. temporary disability or injury;
- b. extended medical absence or hospitalization;
- c. illness of a dependent family member; or
- d. major illness or death of a loved one.

If you cannot attend a class due to

Students who miss more than 50% of all scheduled classes will receive an automatic failing grade for the course. Regarding this discipline, mastering the learning objectives, practicing them, applying them, and discussing them in-class are just as important to one's education as one's overall grade. Students who fail to show up to their education will fail to master the

learning objectives of the course.

For further guidance, please see UNT Policy 06.039

ChatGPT and other Generative AI

This workshop does not specialize in or critique fiction written in collaboration with artificial intelligence (AI). While certainly that is a burgeoning realm of study, for the purposes of this course, any work authored and/or assisted by AI will be considered not of your own creation and will subsequently be given a failing grade. While interfacing creatively with AI is certainly a nascent and exciting new endeavor in the collaboration of arts and science, to the ends of the learning objectives of this course, that work would fall outside of the realm of this pedagogy and course objectives. For grading purposes, you will be considered the sole author of your work and authorship means you take responsibility for your words and claims. As per UNT policy, use of AI technologies in your work will be considered an [violation of UNT's academic integrity policy](#) and addressed accordingly.

More info here: [06.003 Student Academic Integrity \(unt.edu\)](#)

Accommodating Students With Disabilities:

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of reasonable accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website (<http://www.unt.edu/oda>). You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.

Students can connect with the [Office of Disability Access](#) to begin the registering process (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access>).

Supporting Your Success and Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment:

Every student in this class should have the right to learn and engage within an environment of respect and courtesy from others. We will discuss our classroom's habits of engagement and I also encourage you to review UNT's student code of conduct so that we can all start with the same baseline civility understanding ([Code of Student Conduct](#)) (<https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct>)

Communication:

Our University of North Texas e-mail will be our official mode of communication. Connect with me through email (Daniel.Pena@unt.edu) and/or by attending office hours. During busy times, my inbox becomes rather full, so if you contact me and do not receive a response within 48 hours, please send a follow up email. A gentle nudge is always appreciated and I will generally only respond to e-mails between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM

Student Academic Integrity:

Policy number: 06.003

The University of North Texas promotes the integrity of learning and embraces the core values of trust and honesty. Academic integrity is based on educational principles and procedures that protect the rights of all participants in the educational process and validate the legitimacy of degrees awarded by the University. In the investigation and resolution of allegations of student academic dishonesty, the University's actions are intended to be corrective, educationally sound, fundamentally fair, and based on reliable evidence.

Academic Freedom:

UNT has a robust policy regarding academic freedom and academic responsibility. Crucially, this policy encompasses not only the rights of faculty members but also the rights “of the student to freedom in learning.” As a student in this classroom, therefore, you have the right to encounter and debate new ideas, diverse forms of knowledge, and unfamiliar or contrary points of view. According to UNT policy, “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.” At the same time, to encourage the free exchange of ideas, and to ensure that your right to learn is protected, the tone for such discussion must always be civil and respectful; hateful or discriminatory speech will not be tolerated. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-035>.

Audio/Video Recording:

Although UNT is a publicly supported institution, our classroom is not a public space. Therefore, in order to protect the intellectual property and privacy rights of both faculty and students, video and audio recordings are prohibited during class. The exception is for students who have been granted explicit approval as an ODA accommodation. For more information, please consult the full UNT policy at <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access/faculty/faculty-guide/accommodations-explained/Audio-Recording-Faculty.html>

FERPA:

The University of North Texas affords all students the rights and protections relating to their education records as provided in the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Consistent with FERPA, students will be granted access to their education record and except in limited circumstances education records will not be disclosed without a student's consent.

Emergency Notification & Procedures:

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to your UNT e-mail for contingency plans regarding this course.

Carrying of Concealed Handguns and Other Firearms on Campus:

Policy number: 04.001

The University of North Texas is committed to providing a safe environment for students, faculty, staff, and visitors, and to respecting the right of individuals who are licensed to carry a handgun where permitted by law. Individuals who are licensed to carry may do so on campus premises except in locations and at Activities prohibited by law or by this policy.

The bottom line: Your grade in this class will be determined by the effort and engagement you bring to your work, your development over the semester, and the contributions you make to our workshop community. I will do all I can to make this a creative supportive community for you and to help you feel truly excited about your work and development in this class. To that end, this is a working syllabus; it will likely be revised as we go along and I get a better sense of your needs.

Course Calendar

Spring 2026

Week 1 - Tuesday, January 13th

Lesson: Syllabus

- The Writing Process

Homework:

- Read "Snapshot," in Making Shapely Fiction, pg. 48
 - Read "Explosion" in Making Shapely Fiction, pg. 55
 - Read Lorrie Moore's "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)" (via Canvas)
 - Read "A Transparent Woman," by Hari Kunzru
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/06/a-transparent-woman>
 - Read "Atmosphere" in Making Shapely Fiction, pg. 89
-

Week 2 - Tuesday, January 20th

- In-Class Writing Exercise #1: What is something you know how to do (that you're not supposed to know how to do)?
 - Lorrie Moore Discussion
 - Seeing is Believing: Detail and Imagery
 - DeutscheWelle Documentary <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=haxkWC6MgcQ>
 - Hari Kunzru Discussion
-

Week 3 - Tuesday, January 27th

Lesson:

- Image Filtering and Atmosphere (Read "Local Color," pg. 150 in Making Shapely Fiction)

Homework:

- Read "Last Lap" (pg. 15), "Trauma" (pg. 18), and "Visitation" (pg. 37) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "The True Margaret" by Karan Mahajan
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/08/14/the-true-margaret-fiction-karan-mahajan>
 - Finish Exercise #1 (DUE: Next class via Canvas)
-

Week 4 - Tuesday, February 3rd

Lesson:

- In-Class Writing Exercise #2: The Opposite of You
- Karan Mahajan Discussion
- Direct Methods of Character Presentation ("Character," pg. 96 in Making Shapely Fiction; Story Arc)
- Voice, Prose Rhythm, and Dialogue

DUE:

- Exercise #1 via Canvas

Homework:

- Read "Opening Theory," by Sally Rooney
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/07/08/opening-theory-fiction-sally-rooney>
 - Read "Voice" (pg. 247) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "Specimen" (pg. 21) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "Tension" (pg. 237) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Finish Exercise #2 (DUE: Next class via Canvas)
-

Week 5 - Tuesday, February 10th**Lesson:**

- In-Class Writing Exercise #3: Build action by making your characters discover and decide. Make sure that what happens is action and not mere event or movement—it contains the possibility for human change.
- Narrative and Narrator
- Rooney Discussion

DUE:

- Exercise #2 via Canvas

Homework:

- Read "Narrative" and "Narrator" (pg. 160-164) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "Realism" (pg. 200) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "A French Doll" by Cynthia Ozick <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/07/31/a-french-doll-fiction-cynthia-ozick>
 - Read "Short Story" and "Showing and Telling" (pg. 216-220) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Finish Exercise #3 (DUE: Next class via Canvas)
-

Week 6 - Tuesday, February 17th**Lesson:**

- In-Class Writing Exercise #4: Place a character in a territory that has been stripped of its usual characteristics. A beach without water, a forest without trees, a skyscraper with no furniture or nothing in it. What does your character do there? What happens next?
- Showing and Telling
- Place as a Symbol
- Cynthia Ozick Discussion

DUE:

- Exercise #3 via Canvas

Homework:

- Finish Exercise #4 (DUE: Next class via Canvas)
 - Read "Workshops" (pg. 249) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "Revision" (pg. 204) in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "Resolution" pg. 204 in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read "Motif" pg. 155 in Making Shapely Fiction
 - Read Ha Seong-Nan's "The Woman Next Door" (via Canvas/Files)
-

Week 7 - Tuesday, February 24th**Lesson:**

- Revision Lesson
- Workshop Rundown

- Critique Letter
- Workshop Sign-Up Sheet
- In-Class Writing Exercise #5: Write the opening scene to a story in which any of the five senses of the body (taste, touch, sight, sound, feel) trigger back to a memory, or offer insight into a specific pattern of thought or anxiety a character is experiencing.
- Motif and Resolutions
- “The Woman Next Door” Discussion

DUE:

- Exercise #4 via Canvas

Homework:

- Finish Exercise #5 (DUE: Next class via Canvas)
 - Download and Read Workshop Pieces
 - Critique Letters
-

Week 8 - Tuesday, March 3rd

WORKSHOPS BEGIN

- P1: Presentation
- P2: Presentation
- P18: Workshop
- P17: Workshop

DUE:

- Exercise #5 via Canvas
-

Week 9 - Tuesday, March 10th

NO CLASS - Spring Break (March 9-15, 2026)

Week 10 - Tuesday, March 17th

WORKSHOPS CONTINUE

- P3: Presentation
 - P4: Presentation
 - P16: Workshop
 - P15: Workshop
-

Week 11 - Tuesday, March 24th

WORKSHOPS CONTINUE

- P5: Presentation
 - P6: Presentation
 - P14: Workshop
 - P13: Workshop
-

Week 12 - Tuesday, March 31st

WORKSHOPS CONTINUE

- P7: Presentation
- P8: Presentation

- P12: Workshop
- P11: Workshop

Week 13 - Tuesday, April 7th

WORKSHOPS CONTINUE

- P9: Presentation
- P10: Presentation
- P10: Workshop
- P9: Workshop
-

Week 14 - Tuesday, April 14th

WORKSHOPS CONTINUE

- P11: Presentation
- P12: Presentation
- P8: Workshop
- P7: Workshop

Week 15 - Tuesday, April 21st

WORKSHOPS CONTINUE

- P13: Presentation
- P14: Presentation
- P6: Workshop
- P5: Workshop

Week 16 - Tuesday, April 28th

WORKSHOPS CONTINUE

- P15: Presentation
- P16: Presentation
- P4: Workshop
- P3: Workshop

Week 17 - Tuesday, May 5th

LAST CLASS MEETING

WORKSHOPS CONCLUDE

- P17: Presentation
- P18: Presentation
- P2: Workshop
- P1: Workshop

Important Dates

DUE: Workshop Revision/Final Portfolio - May 11, 2026 via Canvas
University Grade Submission Deadline - May 11, 4 PM

"There are two ways to worry words. One is hoping for the greatest possible beauty in what is created. The other is to tell the truth."

—June Jordan