

ENGL 4100: Advanced Fiction Writing

Prerequisite(s): ENGL 3140 or consent of department.

Spring 2025

Professor: Daniel Peña

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Office Hours: By Request

Course Description:

Advanced study and practice of fiction writing in a workshop setting.

More Specifically:

Workshop, Revision (or “re-envisioning”), and publication will be at the core of everything we’ll do in this course. To this end, this is a workshop-style course built on the Socratic method, not a lecture-driven course. Please be advised.

Informing all of this will be craft. Without our study of craft in close reading and application of technique, the business side of writing is moot. Simply put: the money is in the rewrite, which is the big secret. You get as many tries as you need, but once you send it out it has to shine. And it will shine if you put in the work! We’ll work together in a workshop setting to strategize on the completion, revision, and submission of extended writing projects in fiction though other forms of creative writing (graphic novels, say) are also welcome in this course. We will discuss how to find the kind of narrative you want to tell, how to shape it, and how to call upon the elements of craft to come away with the best possible version of your piece. By furthering our understanding of craft through analytical reading, we will make the leap in discovering how the whole history of literature can be put in service of our own writing and how our own cultures and histories can do this for us as well. 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 proficiency in 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 in preparation for submission.
- 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

- *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway
- *The Swimmers: A Novel* by Julie Otsuka

→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 Circle, Denton, TX 76203

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

- Notebook and folder reserved for this class only.
- Printing costs associated with this course
 - You'll be responsible for printing around ~400 pages this semester. Failure to print out short stories will result in a lower grade. More on this below.

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. In this class we're all on the side of writing and we must recognize the courage and vulnerability of putting words to paper. Treat yourself and your peers with respect.

Fiction Exercises and Workshop (30%):

- You will turn in 3 full short story/novel excerpt drafts originating from daily in-class writing assignments. Daily writing exercises will correspond with craft elements we study. While most days we will do an in-class writing exercise (and you are welcome to build upon each or all of them), the three you ultimately turn in will each be a minimum of 5 pages in length and will be any three exercises of your choosing. [15 points]
- You'll workshop one short story/novel excerpt throughout the semester. The drafts (between 10-30 pages) will be distributed to class via Canvas. [15 points]

Readings for Writers (30%):

- 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.

Written Critiques (10%):

- Deeply engaging with your classmates' work can be as beneficial to your writing as having your own work discussed. Think of your workshop letter as a 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. More on this toward the middle of the semester, once we start workshoping stories. These will be graded on a check plus/minus system. Critiques should be respectful and constructive. While you will certainly give everyone verbal feedback in class during workshop, **you will be graded on written critique letters to any two [2] writers of your choosing upon reading their submission for workshop. Letters should be made available to each writer and also turned into me via Canvas.**

Revision (20%):

- You will be responsible for taking workshop feedback and coming up with a workshop revision for your submission. More info on this, including due dates and parameters, once we get to workshop.

IMPORTANT MISCELLANY:

Low Tech Classroom: Given the nature of the workshop model, this class will be incredibly low-tech. We'll rely on the printed page or book in front of us and ourselves. Pens, pencils, and paper notebooks are welcome. Laptops and cellphones will be shut off at the beginning of class and put away. This is to not only minimize distractions for yourself and others but to practice intentional presence in a workshop setting, at the page, and in-class during critique. Will it be boring? Yes. But will failure to comply also result in a failing grade for the course? Also yes. But will your writing get better because of it? Yes yes yes.

At times, we will of course use technology as it facilitates our needs in-class (bringing up stories from the New Yorker on a projector, for instance). But 90% of the time it'll just be us.

To underscore the importance of printing in this course, it will be the lifeblood of your grade. Failure to print material and bring it to class will result in a failing grade for the course.

Attendance/Lateness:

You will be allowed 5 absences of any kind (illness, school-related, military, etc.) throughout the semester. Each subsequent absence will drop you a half-letter grade for the course.

Research has shown that students who attend class are more likely to be successful. You should attend every class unless you have a university excused absence such as active military service, a religious holy day, or an official university function as stated in the [Student Attendance and Authorized Absences Policy \(PDF\)](https://policy.unt.edu/sites/default/files/06.039_StudAttnandAuthAbsence.Pub2_.19.pdf) (https://policy.unt.edu/sites/default/files/06.039_StudAttnandAuthAbsence.Pub2_.19.pdf). If you cannot attend a class due to an emergency, please let me know. Your safety and well-being are important to me.

For further guidance, please see UNT Policy 06.039

Nature of Work

Please only turn in work generated in this course during this semester. Work recycled from previous courses (even if in another draft stage) will be given a failing grade. To this end, please no work from highschool/middleschool/previous lives/etc.

ChatGPT and other Generative AI

Given the creative nature of this course, any work generated with ChatGPT/AI will be considered plagiarism and will result in a failing overall grade for the course. To these ends:

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.

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 Canvas for contingency plans for covering course materials.

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.

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. Please **spell- check and proofread**.

The bottom line: Your grade in Otthis 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.

CALENDAR

Week 1

Tuesday, January 14th

Lesson:

Syllabus

Homework:

Get your books!

Read “Status in Flux” by Weike Wang

[<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/06/26/status-in-flux-fiction-weike-wang>]

Read “Plot and Structure” in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*

Thursday, January 16th

Lesson:

Plot & Structure

Discussion of “Status in Flux” by Weike Wang

In-Class Exercise: *Write a story which begins with a moment that changes our protagonist’s life forever.*

Homework:

Read “The Plaza” by Rebecca Makkai

[<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/05/08/the-plaza-fiction-rebecca-makkai>]

Read “Show & Tell” in *Self-editing for Fiction Writers* by Dave King and Renni Browne

Optional: Finish today’s in-class exercise.

→ Please see “*Fiction Exercises and Workshop*” portion of the Syllabus.

Week 2

Tuesday, January 21st

Lesson:

Showing & Telling

Discussion of “The Plaza” by Rebecca Makkai

In-Class Writing Exercise: *Write a passage in which a character enters a place and experiences the scene primarily through their sense of smell.*

Homework:

Read “Ina” by Otessa Moshfegh [<https://harpers.org/archive/2022/06/ina-otessa-moshfegh-lapvona/>]

Read “Characterization and Exposition” in *Self-editing for Fiction Writers* by Dave King and Renni Browne

(*Optional: Read “Building Character: Characterization Part I” in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*)

Optional: Finish today’s in-class exercise (for potential submission).

→ Please see “*Fiction Exercises and Workshop*” portion of the Syllabus.

Thursday, January 23rd

Lesson:

Characterization and Exposition

Discussion of “Ina” by Otessa Moshfegh

In-Class Writing Exercise: *Two characters have an escalating disagreement. One of them says exactly and fully what they mean. The other is unable or unwilling to speak freely. Give us the thoughts of the second character so that we understand their non-response/hesitancy to speak freely.*

Homework:

Read “Last Time We Spoke” by Lydia Conklin

[<https://yalereview.org/article/lydi-conklin-last-time-we-spoke>]

Read “Interior Monologue” in *Self-editing for Fiction Writers* by Dave King and Renni Browne

Optional: Finish today’s in-class exercise

→ Please see “*Fiction Exercises and Workshop*” portion of the Syllabus.

Week 3

Tuesday, January 28th

Lesson:

Interior Monologue

Discussion of “Last Time We Spoke” by Lydia Conklin

In-Class Exercise: *Drop us into the first scenes of a novel or short story by practicing transitioning from a third person omniscient narrator to a first person interior monologue of our protagonist while using the mechanics of either thinker attribution or italics.*

Homework:

Read “Winner” by Ling Ma [<https://yalereview.org/article/ling-ma-winner-short-story>]

Read “Sophistication” in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*

Thursday, January 30th

Lesson:

In-Line Sophistication

as/-ing constructions

Discussion of “Winner” by Ling Ma

In-Class Exercise: *Free Write*

Homework:

Read “Characterization Part II” in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (pg. 75)

Read “The True Margaret” By Karan Mahajan

[<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/08/14/the-true-margaret-fiction-karan-mahajan>]

Week 4

Tuesday, February 4th

Lesson:

Characterization Part II:

Indirect Methods of Character Presentation

-Authorial Interpretation

-Interpretation by another character

Discussion of “The True Margaret” by Karan Mahajan

In-Class Exercise: *What is something you know how to do (that you’re not supposed to know how to do?)*

Homework:

Read “Foreigner” by Cristina Rivera Garza [<https://yalereview.org/article/cristina-rivera-garza-foreigner>]

Read “Comparison” in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*

Thursday, February 6th

Lesson:

Comparison:

Metaphor and Simile

Allegory/Symbol/the Objective Correlative

Discussion of “Foreigner” by Cristina Rivera Garza

In-Class Exercise: *Compare a major thing or phenomenon to something smaller or more mundane.*

Homework:

Read “Proportion” in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*

Read “Ming” by Han Ong

[<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/01/20/ming-fiction-han-ong>]

Begin Julie Otsuka’s *The Swimmers: A Novel*

Week 5

Tuesday, February 11th

Lesson:

Proportion

Discussion of “Ming” by Han Ong

In-Class Exercise: *Who is the opposite of you?*

Homework:

Prepare your pieces for workshop

Finish *The Swimmers* by Julie Otsuka

Thursday, February 13th

Lesson:

Workshop Instructions

→ Workshop Letter

Discussion of *The Swimmers* by Julie Otsuka

Homework:

Read Workshop Submissions

Workshop Letters

Week 6 [WORKSHOPS]

Tuesday, February 18th

P1: Presentation

DUE: 3 Exercises

Thursday, February 20th

P2: Presentation

Week 7

Tuesday, February 25th

P1: Workshop
P19: Presentation

Thursday, February 27th

P2: Workshop
P18: Presentation

Week 8

Tuesday, March 4th

P3: Workshop
P17: Presentation

Thursday, March 6th

P4
P16: Presentation

Week 9

SPRING BREAK

Week 10

Tuesday, March 18th

P5: Workshop
15: Presentation

Thursday, March 20th

P6: Workshop
P14: Presentation

Week 11

Tuesday, March 25th

P7: Workshop
P13: Presentation

Thursday, March 27th

P8: Workshop
P12: Presentation

Week 12

Tuesday, April 1st

P9: Workshop
P11: Presentation

Thursday, April 3rd

P10: Workshop
P9: Presentation

Week 13

Tuesday, April 8th

P11: Workshop
P10: Presentation

Thursday, April 10th

P12: Workshop
P8: Presentation

Week 14

Tuesday, April 15th

P13: Workshop
P7: Presentation

Thursday, April 17th

P14: Workshop
P6: Presentation

Week 15

Tuesday, April 22nd

P15: Workshop
P5: Presentation

Thursday, April 24th

P16: Workshop
P4: Presentation

Week 16 [LAST WEEK OF CLASS]

Tuesday, April 29th

P17: Workshop
P3: Presentation

Thursday, May 1st

P18: Workshop
P19: Workshop

→→→DUE: Workshop Revision 5/9/2025 via Canvas

“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