

ENGL 3140: Beginning Fiction Writing

Spring '25 / Lang 315 / Mon & Wed 9:30-10:50 am



Instructor: Hector Dominguez

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Office / Hours: GAB 515, Mon & Wed 11:00-11:30, or by appt.

Required Materials: Writing notebook, writing utensil, UNT email account, and access to Canvas

Required Texts: Michael Noll, *The Writer's Guide to the Craft of Fiction* (ISBN: 9780998518411); Louise Erdrich, *The Mighty Red* (ISBN: 9780063277052); Course Reader (provided on first week of semester)

Optional Texts: Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (ISBN: 978080212494); Haruki Murakami, *Manga Stories I* (ISBN: 9784805317648)

Course Description & Goals

Welcome to Beginning Fiction Writing! This introductory course is partly a study of the art of fiction where we'll read representative works of literary character-centered fiction, familiarizing ourselves with its basic components, and analyzing the ways its craft produces compelling narratives. It is also a writing course (hence "Fiction Writing") where we'll be writing daily in class, from honing our creative instincts with generative prompts to practicing technique via craft exercises so that we can shape and transform our writing into the building blocks that comprise stories. In the second half of the course, we'll share and workshop our stories by applying our knowledge of fiction to critique our work as peers, ultimately so that we can revise them into polished fiction.

Words of caution: I am aware of the associations "creative writing" is attributed in college—*blow-off class* and *easy elective* come to mind. Perhaps because writing is subjective and seen as lacking the "rigor" and objectivity of the sciences, or simply because it is entertaining to consume, whatever reasons folks might have in ascribing easy or facile to creative writing, I want to dispel any notion that this course will require little effort.

What can you expect from this course? At the high end, approximately 100 pages of reading per week. Since we are studying craft in literary fiction, readings may not be as breezy and cozy as a whodunit by the fireplace, or a fantasy saga on the beach. Any serious writer seeking to improve their craft needs to read widely and frequently—we're practicing that mantra. Since this course thrives off a small classroom environment, everyone is expected to speak and share their insight daily—reason why participation accounts for 20% of your grade. Finally, we will be workshopping our writing, so expect eighteen pairs of eyes to scrutinize and critique your characters, craft decisions, and word choices. And yet, if we acknowledge this course requires time, dedication, and a little nerve, I believe it can serve as a creative outlet and writing community we can turn to during the semester.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify basic elements and techniques in the craft of literary fiction.
- Discern how craft elements contribute to thematic meaning and emotional resonance.
- Practice and implement craft into their own writing via exercises and story-length work.
- Apply knowledge of craft by providing written and oral feedback in a workshop model.
- Revise their work by evaluating peer feedback and a drafting process.
- Articulate their revision process and an artistic vision of their fiction.

Policies and Expectations

Participation: Expect a collaborative environment where we share ideas and voice opinions. Effective participation involves reading and completing assigned work before class, but I also encourage you to ask questions and share your thoughts. During workshop cycles, students are expected to speak for each story's workshop. Non-engagement and unpreparedness (i.e. coming to class without texts, notes, or writing utensils) will result in point deductions.

Attendance: Four absences are allowed; this allowance accounts for excused and unexcused absences (That way you needn't present doctor's notes or reveal other deeply personal details to me). For this reason, I encourage you "budget" your absences in case of any unforeseen illnesses or emergencies. On the fifth absence, your final grade will be reduced by one letter grade. Six absences will result in automatic failure of the course. *By registering for this course, you are committing to its time slot for fifteen weeks; please be certain not to take up other engagements that conflict with your regular attendance.* If you foresee being absent on your workshop day, inform me ASAP, to determine if an alternate date can be arranged.

Tardiness: Arriving more than five minutes late or leaving class early will be counted as an absence. If you must leave early, please inform me (in person or via email) before the start of class.

Electronics and Distractions: Cell phones, headphones, or AirPods must be put away during class. Laptops and tablets may be used, but only if an activity requires them. *Do not use class time to work*

on assignments from other classes! Failure to observe this policy will result in being marked absent and losing participation points for the day.

Late Work/Make-up Work/Extensions: Late work is not accepted, and make-up work cannot be assigned. Due to tight scheduling, workshop pieces and final portfolios must be submitted promptly. Extensions may be granted under emergencies, but please communicate ASAP.

Respect and Courtesy: Many aspects of fiction are subjective so students must be respectful toward their peers' opinions and work. It is okay to disagree (in fact, productive!) but we must be courteous. On workshop days, please respect the time set aside for writers and give their work your full attention.

Communication: Check Canvas and your student email regularly. When emailing me, include "ENGL 3140" in your subject line so I can prioritize it. For privacy concerns, I'll only respond to UNT email accounts. As a professional courtesy, please include proper greetings and sign-offs.

Office Hours: I have set time aside each week to meet with you. Feel free to make an appointment to discuss your work with me at any point in the semester—I enjoy talking about fiction, stories, and especially writing! If my office hours don't work for you, please reach out so we can set up an alternate time. I especially encourage you to schedule a meeting after your workshop.

Course Content: Texts/student work may engage with sensitive topics and traumatic experiences. Class content does not indicate a specific position of the school, department, or instructor. Reach out if you find any content to be triggering or have difficulties engaging with the work. **Note to Writers:** If there's a possibility that your readers may be triggered by your work (e.g., content containing abuse, violence, racial violence, bigotry, etc.), please provide a trigger warning at the start of your work.

Plagiarism: Submitting someone else's work with the intention of being passed off as your own, is considered plagiarism and grounds for automatic failure. **About ChatGPT and AI tools:** This course does not specialize in, or critique creative work written in collaboration with artificial intelligence. Any work written entirely by or with the assistance of AI falls outside the learning objectives of this course. Plagiarism and work authored and/or assisted by AI will not be considered of your own creation and subsequently be given a failing grade and reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Syllabus Changes: I reserve the right to alter the syllabus at any point in the semester. Due dates, readings, and other aspects of this course may be subject to change.

Assignments and Activities

Assigned Readings: Check Course Schedule on Canvas for required readings. Craft questions will be provided for you to consider as you read. Read and annotate texts before class and bring texts to class to facilitate class discussions. (Quizzes may be implemented if discussions are non-participatory.)

Group Discussions: In groups of four or five, you will discuss the readings, question responses, or craft elements introduced in class. Subsequently, each group will share their insights with the class.

Writer's Notebook and Writing Prompts: Your notebook will be used for writing prompts and free-writes. Use it “creatively” to jot down any observations or thoughts you find worth exploring. This raw material sparks our writing (and fills our fiction); I encourage you to feed this “creative well” on a regular basis by making time each week toward developing something you’ve witnessed or thought, no matter how small, strange, or commonplace. Prompts target craft techniques discussed in class but mainly aim to help you develop ideas to use for your fiction. Occasionally I may ask you to share excerpts with your peers but consider these private. **Grading:** I will conduct journal spot checks at several points in the semester to give credit (don’t worry I won’t read through your entries). Full credit is given to journal entries that fully meet each prompt’s requirements.

Character Sketch: Write a sketch of 500-600 words for a flash round workshop (10 mins). The sketch must contain scenework and a central character. Character sketches typically characterize the MC, reveal their desires, wants, fears, or motivations, and contain conflict of some type. I highly encourage the interaction of two or more characters for an effective sketch.

Workshop Submission: Submit a short story (3000-6000 words) to workshop in class. Workshop submissions receive full credit if all specified criteria are met. **Directions:** Upload workshop piece as a .doc Word file (*not pdf, Google pages, or file link!*) before 5 pm on March 16th. Once I receive your work, I will schedule the workshop days and provide printed copies a week in advance for students to provide feedback. **Formatting:** Proper header, double-spaced, 12-point font, 1-inch margins, and last name/pagination on every page (see formatting template). Excessive typos, grammatical mistakes, poor story development, or improper formatting will receive partial credit.

Peer Workshop Letters: As a peer you’re expected to critique your classmates’ workshop stories. Bring two typed copies of your feedback (for writer and instructor) for that day’s workshop. Feel free to hand over your story copy to its respective writer (I don’t need it). Minimum 300-word critical response. Full credit is given to students that provide critique letters and attend the workshop. Refer to “Feedback Guide” for detailed instructions.

Literary Citizenship: To the general public, we writers are characterized as introverts wrapped deep in our thoughts when we’re not plugging away at our desks burning the midnight oil. Even if that typecast fits a few of us, the truth is that writers thrive and belong to writers’ communities. (Think, the people involved in a creative process spanning creation to published work: supportive friends, fellow writers, workshop peers, readers, agents, editors, etc.) Literary citizenship entails participating in (and supporting) a local hub of writers, artists, and creative minds. Even as passive participants you may find that these events engage our creative minds. **Directions:** Seek out events in the local writing community. These may be school-related, but I encourage you to look into local open mics, poetry readings, writer talks, events that connect with writing or storytelling. Cafés, bookstores, and libraries are good starting points. Check with me before attending the event. Write and submit a short response (350-500 words) connecting the event with class themes or your fiction writing.

Final Portfolio: The course culminates with a final portfolio consisting of the following:

- 1) a revised version of the longer workshop piece,

- 2) a copy of the original, unrevised work,
- 3) a 300-word holistic assessment (not line-by-line account) of the
 - a. revision process for the piece in the portfolio,
 - b. consideration of peer feedback, or
 - c. a future vision for the work,
- 4) a 300-word aesthetic statement speaking to a consolidation of a creative vision in fiction (or how you've grown or changed as a writer over the course of the semester).

Check rubric on Canvas for further details. Submit as a single file by 5 p.m. on May 7th.

Grade Distribution:

- 5% - Literary Citizenship
- 8% - Character Sketch (5%) and C.S. critique letters (3%)
- 10% - Group discussions
- 10% - Workshop submission
- 15% - Final portfolio
- 15% - Writer's Notebook/Writing prompts
- 17% - Workshop critique letters
- 20% - Participation

Grading Scale: A: 100-90 / B: 89.5-80 / C: 79.5-70 / D: 69.5-60 / F: 59.5 and below

Course Schedule (subject to change)

Week	Day	Class Topics	Reading Due (read before class)	Activities/H.W
1	Monday 1/13	Syllabus Introductions Why Write?		Syllabus Quiz Prompt #1 (writer self-assessment)
	Wed 1/15	Narratives across Mediums Literary vs. Genre Fiction Writing and the Writer	Haruki Murakami Manga, "Where I'm Likely to Find It"; Benjamin Percy, "Thrill Me" Writer's Field Guide to Craft of Fiction, "Introduction" (pgs. 1-7)	Prompt #2 (the germ)
2	Mon 1/20	MLK Jr. Day	NO CLASS	
	Wed 1/22	The Seed or Creative Spark Write What You Know / Like	Noll, <i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 20-24) Debra Spark, "The Trigger: What Gives Rise to a Story"; Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory"; Lucy Corin, "Miracles"; Sam Savage, "Cigarettes"	Prompt #3 (water)

3	Mon 1/27	Setting Backdrop Sensory Detail and Specificity	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 136-142, 239-244); Wells Tower, “Down Through the Valley” Murakami’s “The Seventh Man” from both Manga Stories and Course Reader	Prompt #4
	Wed 1/29	Character Desire, Motivation, Stakes	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 26-29, 166-170); Erdrich, <i>The Mighty Red</i> (pgs. TBD)	Prompt #5
4	Mon 2/3	Character Type, Change Show vs. Tell	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 67-71); Erdrich, <i>The Mighty Red</i> (pgs. TBD); Writers on Research handout	Prompt #6
	Wed 2/5	Plot Cause/Effect, Structure, Arc,	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 78-81, 91-95, 190-196); Erdrich, <i>The Mighty Red</i> (pgs. TBD); Anton Chekhov, “The Darling”; Mia Cuoto, “War of Clowns”; Lucy Corin, “Material”; Writers on outlining handout	Prompt #7
5	Mon 2/10	Epiphany, Conflict, Tension, and Urgency	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 36-40, 83-87); Erdrich, <i>The Mighty Red</i> (pgs. TBD) Charles Baxter, “Captain Happen: Notes on Narrative Urgency”; James Joyce, “Araby”; Nathan Harris, “The Mine”; George Saunders, “Sticks”	Prompt #8
	Wed 2/12	POV 1 st /2 nd /3 rd person POV, narrators, perspective	Erdrich, <i>The Mighty Red</i> (pgs. TBD); James Alan MacPherson, “Gold Coast”; Nguyen, <i>The Sympathizer</i> (pgs. TBD); Madison Smartt Bell, “Modular Design”	Prompt #9
6	Mon 2/17	Psychic Distance, Tense and Time	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 197-201); Nguyen, <i>The Sympathizer</i> (pgs. TBD); Jamil Jan Kochai, “Playing Metal Gear V: The Phantom Pain”; Murakami Manga, “Birthday Girl”; ‘Pemi Aguda, “The Hollow”	Prompt #10 Character Sketches due 2/18, 10pm
	Wed 2/19	Narrative Modes Interiority	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 107-110); Nguyen, <i>The Sympathizer</i> (pgs. TBD); Ghassan Zeineddine, “Speedoman”	Prompt #11
7	Mon 2/24	Character Sketch: Small Group Workshop	In-class workshoping	
	Wed 2/26	Narrator Modes Conciseness, Gestures, Subtext; Compress/Expanding	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 101-105); Erdrich, <i>The Mighty Red</i> (pgs. TBD); Manuel Muñoz, “Anyone Can Do It”; Flannery O’Connor, “Good Country People”; O’Connor on symbolism	Prompt #12

8	Mon 3/3	Dialogue	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 113-117, 118-123, 130-134); Samanta Schweblin, "Underground"	Prompt #13
	Wed 3/5	Voice Narration style, Diction, Syntax, Sentence/Paragraph, Consistency	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 119-224, 225-230, 253-255); Benjamin Percy, "Sounds Like Writing", Steven Millhauser, "Home Run"; Wendy Brenner, "Nipple"; Cortazar, "Instructions"	Prompt #14
X	Mon & Wed 3/10 - 3/12	<i>SPRING BREAK</i>	<i>NO CLASS</i>	Workshop Submission due on 3/16 at 5 p.m.
9	Mon 3/17	Theme	<i>Craft of Fiction</i> (pgs. 249-251); Steven Millhauser, "Mermaid Fever"; Delgado, "Little Woman from the Capital"	
	Wed 3/19	Narrative Beginnings / Pitfalls	Jerome Stern, "A Cautionary Interlude" Murakami Manga Stories, "Super Frog Saves Tokyo"	
10	Monday 3/24	Workshop 1	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
	Wed 3/26	Workshop 2	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
11	Monday 3/31	Workshop 3	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
	Wed 4/2	Workshop 4	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
12	Mon 4/7	Workshop 5	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
	Wed 4/9	Workshop 6	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
13	Mon 4/14	Workshop 7	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
	Wed 4/16	Workshop 8	Story Workshop: 2 writers	
14	Mon 4/21	Workshop 9	Story Workshop: 2 writers	

	Wed 4/23	Revision	Jane Smiley, "What Stories Teach Their Writers"	
15	Mon 4/28	Portfolio: Assessment	Informal Workshop: Critical assessment rough draft	
	Wed 4/30	Farewells, Tearful Goodbyes	TBD	
16	Mon 5/5	Finals Week	No class	
	Wed 5/7		No class	Portfolio due: 5/7, 5:00 pm

Feedback Guide

Read peers' workshop pieces carefully before writing feedback. Workshopping involves discovering your own process of critiquing others' work. The method that works for me: 1) Read from start to finish with pen in hand, noting where you become lost, need context, admire the language, have questions, etc.; 2) Reread via a close reading, targeting pivotal moments; 3) Type letter of critique after the last step. We all digest work differently, so find a method that works for you, while giving your best feedback.

Feedback must be typed before the workshop begins. Length requirement is 300 words for each workshop piece. Letters need to be printed (2 copies) and handed to the writer and instructor before the end of class. *Providing a letter does not excuse peers from participating (i.e., speaking) during the workshop.*

Feedback Tips:

Some of you may be unfamiliar with critiquing creative writing and may be more familiar with analyzing/critiquing through a literature lens which isn't entirely adequate for our purposes. The following tips may help you critique your peers' workshop pieces.

- Note your emotional reactions. What feels "hot" or engaging to you? Where are you moved? Where do you feel most immersed? When you finish the piece, what stands out the most? An image? A line of dialogue? Character gesture? Identify 1-3 places where you feel moved, note them in the letter, and explain why they are working for you.
- Engage the work in terms of craft. Identify craft choices discussed in class that are working in the piece, or, alternatively, offer suggestions on how a different craft choice could help a section become more effective in the piece.

- Note what is not yet working. Identify at least 2 places that need improvement and try to articulate why they are not yet working. Ask probing questions, e.g., What associations does this image bring to mind? How is my reading impacted by the use of white space on the page? Why does this line strike my ear differently than others around it? What effect does this have on me as a reader? Try to capture your experience of the writer's craft choice. *It is important here to think of yourself as a writer in the role of a reader. Our jobs are not to delineate meaning for the writer, or to reduce their work down to symbols or analysis. It is not our job to tell the writer how to develop a section, but merely to act as an engaged audience noting what it is like to read their work.*
- Some of you may be novice writers and feel inexperienced critiquing the work of others. But even the most inexperienced writer can be instrumental in providing feedback—we are all readers, we have all read, listened to, watched fiction, and more importantly, we are all human beings with the ability to be moved, irritated, confused, delighted, stunned, etc. Your emotional and intellectual responses as people are valuable, share them with your peers.

Workshop Procedures

We will work with a slightly altered version of the traditional workshop model.

- Workshop begins with the writer reading a short passage (less than 2-minutes) they are proud of, or feel encapsulates the significance of the piece. No explanation is needed.
- The writer will then remain silent and take notes for the duration of the critique.
- Critique begins with peers voicing their praise: the things you liked about the piece (e.g., lines, language, characters, craft, images, etc.).
- After positive feedback, we will shift to a constructive critique. Important questions to keep in mind: How can we help the writer improve the piece? What elements are helping, needed, or hindering the piece? Where do we need more information? While reading, where did we get confused? It's important that we use a craft-based critical lens here and employ the language and terminology discussed in class.
- The workshop is led by peers—students must participate in both stages of critique. As the instructor, think of me as a mediator, steering the conversation in different directions but not as the discussion leader, nor the source of answers. All peers should thoroughly read each piece, so they are confident in delivering feedback. Students may refer to their letters while speaking but a more organic conversation between readers is preferred. If you agree with others' feedback, chime in, and mention it so the writer spots readerly patterns. Similarly, if you disagree, mention the reasons. Remember fiction is subjective and we're here to give our honest take. The workshop is not a debate, nor competition; it is a roundtable discussion designed to help the silent writer improve their work.
- Once all feedback is shared, the writer will have the opportunity to ask questions. The writer should not defend their writing—no one likes hearing a five-minute monologue about what

readers didn't "get"! Instead, try articulating your vision of the piece and bounce ideas off your peers on how to best implement it.

The workshop is not a place to be hurtful nor a platform for students to "flex" their knowledge or literary muscle: Feedback needs to be constructive. We're all young writers here and the goal of a workshop is not only to make us better writers, but also guide us to finding our voices.

A Word to Writers Being Workshopped:

By sharing our work, we expose our fledgling work to critique, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable for the sake of growing as writers. Be proud of yourself for taking this important step in your development.

Writers need to be open to constructive criticism—peer feedback is important because fresh eyes to our work are something we as writers cannot provide for ourselves.

Not all feedback is created equal; part of developing as a writer is learning to identify which feedback is useful for you. Something that strikes you as wrong or misses your intent may in fact open you up to new ways of viewing your work, or different ideas for your stories. For this reason, I encourage students to get to know each other and use the course to network with other creative writers and voice their differing aesthetic choices and viewpoints.

Take notes while your piece is being discussed. If feedback is confusing, note it as a clarifying question at the end of the workshop. Your notes will make the revision process easier.

Look beyond feedback that offers only validation. Likewise, don't linger on criticism. Not to belabor the point, but: DO NOT defend or justify your work to your peers or gag them from providing honest feedback. Instead, think of how in future revisions you can better implement your vision and overcome the issues they've pointed out.

UNT POLICIES:

ADA Accommodations Statement: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of 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 accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the ODA website at disability.unt.edu.

Academic Integrity Standards and Consequences: According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

The decision of the instructor will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity, which is responsible for maintaining student conduct records. The incident may result in an official disciplinary record for the student(s).

Academic integrity violations can include copying a passage from a source verbatim, but they can also include improper or misleading citations. Please note that all source material must be acknowledged, even if the material is paraphrased. Be careful to always acknowledge the work of other writers and take the time to work out your thoughts and arguments without copying the work of others. (<https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-049>)

Emergency Notification and 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.

Sexual Assault Prevention: UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct. Federal laws and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex as well as sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648

Retention of Student Records: Student records pertaining to this course are maintained in a secure location by the instructor of record. All records such as exams, answer sheets (with keys), and written papers submitted during the duration of the course are kept for at least one calendar year after course completion. Course work completed via the Canvas online system, including grading information and comments, is also stored in a safe electronic environment for one year. Students have the right to view their individual record; however, information about student's records will not be divulged to other individuals without proper written consent. Students are encouraged to review the Public Information Policy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws and the University's policy. See UNT Policy 10.10, Records Management and Retention for additional information.