

ENGLISH 3140 (Section 001) – Beginning Fiction Writing – Spring 2026

Professor: **Miroslav Penkov** (he, him, his)

Class type: In person, with some online instruction.

Office Location: **AUDB 213C**

Office Hours (in person or via Zoom): **W/Th – 5:00 – 6:00 pm, by appointment.**

Email: miroslav.penkov@unt.edu

January 14, 2026

Required Texts

- ✓ Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction*.
- ✓ All other required reading materials will be available on Canvas.

Course Objectives

This course is designed to develop your skills in writing short fiction. By carefully reading the stories of some contemporary practitioners of the short story form we'll learn how to identify and understand the basic elements of fiction (point of view, setting and atmosphere, character etc.). Hopefully, this understanding will help you write better stories of your own. A significant portion of this class will be devoted to workshop. You will be expected to turn in one complete short story (you can find the specifics of your story assignment on Canvas) by the deadline specified in the syllabus. For the story you turn in, you will receive written feedback from your peers and from me. You will later revise the story and resubmit it as part of your final portfolio, along with an analysis of your revision strategies. Your final grade will be based upon individual progress in writing, as well as your willingness and ability to critique the work of others.

Attendance and Participation

Attend class and participate in workshops. This is mandatory. Workshops fail if no one shows up, or if I am doing all of the talking.

You will be permitted one unexcused absence. After that, your final grade for the course will drop one letter grade for each subsequent absence ("A" becomes a "B"). The only excused absences are the ones defined as such by university policy (<http://policy.unt.edu/policy/15-2-5>). Unless your absence fits one of these categories, I do not need to know your reasons for missing class.

Per university policy, a student is responsible for requesting 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.

Arriving more than 15 minutes late or leaving half-way through the class (on the break) will count as one whole absence.

As an adult, you are responsible for your own actions and decisions. This responsibility includes keeping track of your own performance. I do not dispense warnings to students on the verge of violating the policies for this course. These rules apply to all students equally—that is what makes them fair. No one receives special treatment. I retain the right to reward students who make serious efforts of attendance and participation by raising their grade.

If you are experiencing any [symptoms of COVID-19](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html) (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>) please seek medical attention from the Student Health and Wellness Center (940-565-2333 or askSHWC@unt.edu) or your health care provider *PRIOR* to coming to campus.

In-class Participation

You will receive participation credit for each weekly class session. To receive this credit, you must make at least one insightful comment per story discussed. If you are physically absent from class, you will receive no in-class participation credit (naturally, Canvas posts about the discussed stories do not count as in-class participation).

Mechanics of Writing

This is an upper division writing course. Students must have proficiency with fundamental grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax, and other mechanics of writing. We won't spend (much) time on these topics and I will lower grades substantially for errors. If you are not proficient in written English, you're likely to receive a D or F, despite creative potential. I reserve the right to withhold manuscripts from workshop for reasons of grammar or offensive content.

Course Materials for Remote Instruction

This is an in-person class, with some online instruction. A switch to remote instruction may be necessary if community health conditions change or you need to self-isolate or quarantine due to COVID-19. In the case of a shift to remote instruction, our weekly meetings may be held in Zoom (**Wednesday at 6 pm**) and you will continue to post your workshop responses on Canvas [for this you will need access to a microphone; the use of a web camera is optional, though encouraged]. In case you must quarantine, you will continue to post your usual workshop responses on Canvas. Information on how to be successful in a remote learning environment can be found at <https://online.unt.edu/learn>

Course Requirements and Grading

Scale

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|--|-------------|
| • Written responses to Stern's <i>Making Shapely Fiction</i> – 10% | A 90% |
| • Written responses to the assigned stories – 20% | B 80% |
| • Written responses to the work of your peers – 20% | C 70% |
| • In-class participation – 20% | D 60% |
| • Original short story – 20% | F Below 60% |
| • Final portfolio – 10% | |

Generative AI – The use of generative AI in this course is allowed for some assignments and completely barred for others. Please read below for details.

Written responses to Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction*

Throughout the semester we will study elements of craft from Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction*. On certain weeks, you will be asked to answer a series of questions based on assigned book entries, and complete a number of brief writing exercises. You will post all of these in the dedicated discussion thread

on Canvas **by the beginning of class (Wednesday at 6 pm)**. You will receive full credit for a completed assignment unless I reply to your post or contact you via email stating otherwise. There will be no make-up for late or missing assignments, except with an excused absence (see “Attendance” above). **Any use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or others) in your responses here will be considered a violation of UNT’s academic integrity policy and addressed accordingly (see “Academic Integrity” below).**

Written responses to the assigned stories

Throughout the semester we will also study stories of relevant authors. Each story assigned within a given week will have its own discussion thread on Canvas. You will be expected to download and read each story (provided as a PDF file), then, **by the beginning of class (Wednesday at 6 pm)**, post, in at least **150 words, one discussion question** that interests you about the story **followed by your own answer to this question**. To get you started, you will find an extensive list of possible discussion questions in each relevant Canvas thread. You will receive full credit for a completed assignment unless I reply to your post or contact you via email stating otherwise. If your answers are not lengthy enough, or stray off topic, you will not receive credit. There will be no make-up for late or missing assignments, except with an excused absence (see “Attendance” above). **Any use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or others) in your responses here will be considered a violation of UNT’s academic integrity policy and addressed accordingly (see “Academic Integrity” below).**

Depending on the quality of these posts, I may choose to replace the written responses to assigned stories with in-class quizzes based on the assigned stories. You will be notified of this change in advance.

Written responses to the work of your peers

We will devote much of the semester to the workshop of your original stories. Each story assigned within a given week will have its own discussion thread on Canvas. You will be expected to read each story (provided to you as a physical print-out and/or as a Word file on Canvas), then, **by the beginning of class (Wednesday at 6 pm)**, post a written response of at least **300 words** (your “critique”) in the respective Canvas thread.

Your critiques should discuss specific elements of the story and the ways in which they function (elements like POV, setting, voice, dialogue, action, thought, description, scene, summary, exposition, pacing, language, imagery, dramatic tension etc.). The critiques should avoid broad generalities. They should be specific about what’s happening in the draft and avoid prescriptive feedback (“here’s what I would do”) as much as possible. For further instructions, please consult the relevant documents on Canvas.

You will receive full credit for a completed assignment unless I reply to your post or contact you via email stating otherwise.

Any use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or others) in your responses here will be considered a violation of UNT’s academic integrity policy and addressed accordingly (see “Academic Integrity” below).

*Note: If the workshop transitions to remote instruction, you will also be expected to post responses to at least **two** other student critiques within each thread. Each reply should be at least **50 words** long and **posted by midnight every Friday**.*

Original short story

For workshop you are expected to turn in one original short story, which aims to teach you how to develop character and story conflict, and utilize properly various basic elements of fiction (i.e. point of view, setting, time period etc.). You can find the specifics of your story assignment on Canvas. The story is due on **Thursday (yes, Thursday) February 12**. A Word file (.doc or .docx), the story should be **four to eight** double-spaced pages long, with the following margins: Left/Right 1” Top/Bottom 1.” Use Times New Roman, font 12 (the one used for this syllabus). Include your name, my name, the title and section of the course (ENGL 3140, Section 001), and the date in the upper-left corner of the first page of the story, but do not use a cover sheet. Number the pages. **If you do not follow these formatting requirements exactly, I will drop 10% from your final grade for the course.** You can find an example of a properly formatted manuscript on Canvas.

No late short story assignments will be accepted after one week of the original due date, except with an excused absence. If you do not attend the workshop of your own story, you forfeit the chance to have the story discussed by the class (though you will still receive student responses on Canvas, and have the option to meet with me in Zoom or in person for a one-on-one discussion). If you do not attend the workshop of your own story and that absence remains unexcused, your grade for the short story assignment will drop by 10%.

The use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or others) in writing this major story assignment is allowed to help you brainstorm or to revise parts of the story you’ve already written on your own. Such use must be acknowledged in a specific declaration at the end of the manuscript (see “Short Story Assignment” on Canvas for details). Using a generative AI tool, but failing to acknowledge this use will be considered a violation of UNT’s academic integrity policy and addressed accordingly (see “Academic Integrity” in the course’s Policies and Procedures).

You must upload your story on Canvas (under the “Assignments” tab) as a **Word file (.doc or .docx)** by **6:00 pm on Thursday (yes again, Thursday) February 12, 2026.**

- Name the file as follows: **3140, Last Name, First Name**
(Example: 3140, Tolstoy, Leo.docx)

Final Portfolio

The final portfolio must take the form of a **single Word file (.doc or .docx)** which contains:

- A substantial revision of the original short story you turned in for workshop. The use of generative AI writing tools here is allowed for brainstorming or for revising existing prose, but must be acknowledged in a specific declaration at the end of the manuscript (see “Short Story Assignment” on Canvas for details).
- 500-word typed assessment of the revision, which may include commentary about how you made revision choices and/or how you feel about this revised draft. Any use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, or others) in your assessment here will be considered a violation of UNT’s academic integrity policy and addressed accordingly (see “Academic Integrity” below).

You must upload your final portfolio on Canvas (under the “Assignments” tab) by **6:00 pm on May 6, 2026**. I will not accept the portfolio at a later date (but you may submit it early).

- Name the file as follows: **3140, Last Name, First Name**
(Example: 3140, Tolstoy, Leo.docx)

Fundamentals of Workshop Conduct

All members of a workshop deserve to be treated with basic respect. This means using preferred pronouns (please include yours, if you’d like, alongside your name on the first page of your story). It means avoiding microaggressions as well as more overt expressions of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, or other bigotry. It means avoiding language that feels dismissive, mocking, contemptuous, demeaning. A failure to extend these basic courtesies to your classmates could result in actions described in the *Acceptable Student Behavior* section below.

Online Challenges

One additional problem we face when posting student critiques online (on Canvas) is that we only have each others’ written words in front of us. No one can hear our tone of voice or see the expression on our face. So a joke may not register as a joke. Irony and sarcasm, subtlety and nuance, may be lost. A comment may come off as more aggressive or more defensive than intended. Also, as we know well, online discourse too often heads in the direction of combativeness, escalation, callousness and cruelty – basically people acting in unpleasant and uncivil ways they never would in person. Miscommunications and misunderstandings are inevitable. We’re only human. But many problems can be avoided if we write and read with care. So please be mindful of this in your different roles this semester, both in the words you write for your fellow writers and in the way you read the words they’ve written about your own work.

Content and Trigger Warnings

The public debate and scientific research regarding trigger and content warnings continues. Yet, if there’s any possibility that people might be traumatized or re-traumatized by content they read in a class without warning, particularly content dealing with sexual violence and abuse as well as racial violence and hatred, then we should take reasonable measures to prevent that. When possible, I will try, as course instructor, to provide warnings for content that might be triggering. But the practical problem remains that, in a workshop where we’ll sometimes be posting a great deal of written work rapidly, I might not have the time or the opportunity to detect everything that requires a trigger warning. And so, I would ask that, if you think something you’re submitting or someone else has submitted might be triggering, please let me know so I can add appropriate warnings. Thank you for that.

Please note, however, that when we talk about triggering content we’re talking specifically about trauma. We’re not talking about writing in which we encounter behaviors or speech of which we don’t approve or political / ideological / religious views with which we don’t agree or situations that make us uncomfortable, annoyed, or anxious. Reading literature puts us in such situations constantly, and it’s part of our growth as readers and writers to find ways to navigate these situations and (ideally) learn from them. Also, by using or advocating trigger warnings, we’re not saying that writers should be discouraged from tackling difficult and fraught subject matter or taking necessary risks. Writers often write best when they write about their pain, their struggles, their trauma. And good literature can often be ugly when it’s

being accurate and honest about the ugliness in our world. It must be acknowledged that art, when it's doing what it should, is often necessarily uncomfortable, provocative, even upsetting.

Academic Freedom

To this end, the reading material for this class may contain “adult situations.” Students taking this class should be willing to consider in a mature and constructive fashion religious, political, and ethical perspectives alien to their own.

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>.

Mechanics of Writing

This is an upper division writing course. Students must have proficiency with fundamental grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax, and other mechanics of writing. We won't spend time on these topics and I will lower grades substantially for errors. If you are not proficient in written English, you're likely to receive a D or F, despite creative potential. I reserve the right to withhold manuscripts from workshop for reasons of grammar or offensive content.

A Note On My Feedback

For years, my feedback to your original short stories took the form of detailed in-text comments, followed by a 1,000-word critique letter. Students were often satisfied with the critique letter, found it exhaustive, and rarely sought to speak to me further about their stories during office hours in the weeks that followed their workshop. This semester I will eliminate the critique letter and focus in greater depth on the in-text comments. I will still provide my detailed verbal critique in person, in class. I hope that this change will encourage many of you to discuss your stories and rewrites with me during my office hours in the weeks following your workshop.

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.

Any use of generative AI writing tools (such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini or others) in your assignments outside of the contexts permitted in this document will be considered a violation of UNT's academic integrity policy (06.003) and addressed accordingly.

ODA Accommodation

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 \(https://disability.unt.edu/\)](https://disability.unt.edu/).

Prohibition of Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation (Policy 16.004)

UNT prohibits discrimination and harassment because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected under applicable federal or state law in its application and admission processes; educational programs and activities; employment policies, procedures, and processes; and university facilities. The University takes active measures to prevent such conduct and investigates and takes remedial action when appropriate.

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.

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.

Acceptable Student Behavior

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. Visit UNT's [Code of Student Conduct \(https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct\)](https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/conduct) to learn more.

Access to Information – Eagle Connect

Students' access point for business and academic services at UNT is located at: my.unt.edu. All official communication from the University will be delivered to a student's Eagle Connect account. For more information, please visit the website that explains Eagle Connect and how to forward e-mail [Eagle Connect](https://it.unt.edu/eagleconnect) (<https://it.unt.edu/eagleconnect>).

Student Evaluation Administration Dates

Student feedback is important and an essential part of participation in this course. The student evaluation of instruction is a requirement for all organized classes at UNT. The survey will be made available during weeks 13, 14 and 15 of the long semesters to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate how this course is taught. Students will receive an email from "UNT SPOT Course Evaluations via IA System Notification" (no-reply@iasystem.org) with the survey link. Students should look for the email in their UNT email inbox. Simply click on the link and complete the survey. Once students complete the survey they will receive a confirmation email that the survey has been submitted. For additional information, please visit the SPOT website at www.spot.unt.edu or email spot@unt.edu.

Survivor Advocacy

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.

References and Cross References

UNT Policy 04.008, Records Management and Retention
 UNT Policy 06.035, Academic Freedom & Academic Responsibility
 UNT Policy 06.038, Safety in Instructional Activities
 UNT Policy 06.039, Student Attendance and Authorized Absences
 UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity
 UNT Policy 16.001, Disability Accommodation for Students and Academic Units
 UNT Policy 16.005, Sexual Harassment

Academic Support & Student Services

Mental Health

UNT provides mental health resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus that can support your academic success and mental well-being:

- [Student Health and Wellness Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center>)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- [UNT Care Team](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care>)

- [UNT Psychiatric Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry>)
- [Individual Counseling](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling>)

Additional Student Support Services

- [Registrar](https://registrar.unt.edu/registration) (<https://registrar.unt.edu/registration>)
- [Financial Aid](https://financialaid.unt.edu/) (<https://financialaid.unt.edu/>)
- [Student Legal Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services>)
- [Career Center](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center>)
- [Multicultural Center](https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center) (<https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center>)
- [Counseling and Testing Services](https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services) (<https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>)
- [Pride Alliance](https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance) (<https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance>)
- [UNT Food Pantry](https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry) (<https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry>)

Academic Support Services

- [Academic Resource Center](https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources) (<https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources>)
- [Academic Success Center](https://success.unt.edu/asc) (<https://success.unt.edu/asc>)
- [UNT Libraries](https://library.unt.edu/) (<https://library.unt.edu/>)
- [Writing Lab](http://writingcenter.unt.edu/) (<http://writingcenter.unt.edu/>)

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>

Senate Bill 212

Senate Bill 212 requires employees of public and private higher education institutions to report sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence or stalking against a student or employee to the institution's Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator. Employees have always been required by UNT Policy to report instances of sexual misconduct, but this policy requirement is now a state law.

Most importantly, the law, which went into effect on Sept. 1, 2019, requires the university to terminate any employee (including tenured faculty members) who is found to have failed to satisfy the mandatory reporting requirement.

Additionally, failure to report sexual misconduct will be a misdemeanor criminal offense beginning on Jan. 1, 2020.

For more details about Bill 212, please see: <https://www.unt.edu/notices/new-texas-law-requires-unt-employees-report-sexual-misconduct-they-are-aware>

On Senate Bill 212 and Workshop

Please note that the recently passed Senate Bill 212 applies not just to incidents that university employees observe firsthand but also incidents they learn of indirectly and after the fact. The implications of this legislation for creative writing workshops, where students often share personal experiences of the kinds described in the bill both in their writing and in their class discussions, are obvious, of course. Personally, I hope this new law doesn't discourage those students who want or need to write about such experiences from continuing to do so. But please do remain mindful of this new law and what it means. And please be aware that, if you disclose, in class or in private, certain experiences to your professors or instructors, they can offer you their sympathy and support but not their confidentiality.