

## **ENGL 3140 – Beginning Fiction Writing**

**Meeting Dates and Times:** T TH 9:30 AM – 10:50 AM

**Class Location:** Language Building 319

**Instructor:** Ross Wilcox, PhD

**Instructor email:** ross.wilcox@unt.edu

**Office Hours:** Language Building 409C T TH 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM

**Course Overview:** This course is a combination of literature study and creative writing workshops. We will focus our analytic and creative attention on the genre of fiction. We will study the modes and techniques of fiction writing. We will then discover our own strengths and weaknesses by writing our own creative works in these genres and submitting them for class workshop. In short, the first half of the semester will be spent reading stories and discussing various aspects of craft, and the second half of the semester will be spent workshopping your own and your peers' stories.

**Course Objectives:** By reading works by a diverse range of authors, we will become familiar with and deepen our understanding of fiction writing as a craft, or an art form. The workshop element of the course will require you to showcase your creative work to the class in the form of two short works of fiction in a genre/medium of your choice, at which point we will offer you constructive criticism on strengths and weaknesses of your work. To this end, the three main objectives of this course are:

- To write your best, most imaginative and polished creative work
- To effectively communicate your thoughts about art
- To incorporate the thoughts and input of others and use it to improve the quality of your own work

**Personal Statement:** My goal for this course is to help you find your own voice as a writer by offering constructive criticism with respect to the craft elements of your work – things like voice, style, structure, character, plot, et cetera. I will never dictate to you how you should be writing with respect to subject matter, genre, medium, and so on. That's all up to you. To the best of my ability, I will strive to help you realize your artistic vision for your work.

As far as grades go in this course, I do not believe in grading art. To me, boiling a work of art down to a letter of the alphabet or trying to quantify its quality is limiting to the value of art and counterproductive to our artistic experiences, both as creators and consumers. To this end, so long as you turn in your stories and provide feedback to your peers, you will get an A in the class.

Another reason I don't believe in grades for a class like this is that I do not want my own tastes or preferences to in any way dictate what or how you write. I want you to write what is true to you without regard for what I or anyone will think of it (this is easier said than done). Most importantly, I want you to feel free as an artist to take risks and even to fail. As artists, I believe we need to be brave and challenge ourselves, and I don't think it's fair to encourage that kind of risk-taking if it comes at the expense of your grade.

One more thing, and it is important: the only way you will do poorly in the class is if you don't turn in your stories or if you don't consistently give your peers written feedback (more on this in a minute). I feel strongly about holding you accountable for providing your peers with feedback. It is

not fair if your peers are consistently putting in the time and effort to offer you thoughtful input on your work and for you not to do the same with them.

**Statement on AI:** Personally, I hate AI. I think it robs humans of their own intellectual properties, and I think using it to create “original” art is antithetical to everything art stands for. My policy for this course is that I WILL NOT accept any AI-generated work. Why? Because in my view, there’s nothing to read and critique. There’s no mind behind the work. I’m not interested in what a machine will spit out. I am, however, deeply interested and excited about seeing what your human imaginations conjure on the page.

## Assignments

**Two Original Works of Fiction:** The creative writing portion of this course will require you to submit two original works of short fiction. When I say fiction, I mean this in the broadest sense possible. You can submit short stories, novel chapters, screenplays, plays, videogame scripts, graphic literature (including comics and manga). In terms of length, works of prose (short stories and novel chapters) should be around 1,000 words to 5,000 words at the upper limit. For screenplays and plays (which read much faster than stories or novel chapters), works as long as 30 pages are fine. For graphic literature, I think around 10-12 pages is good for an upper-limit, though I’m open to input from you guys as I have limited experience in this medium.

You will submit the stories on our Canvas course page via a submission box. Please title each file, regardless of medium, “Your Name Story #1.” I will then post your story in a folder called Story #1, where your peers can then easily locate that story on the day it is to be read. Note: you can absolutely title your work whatever you want, and you can put that title on the work itself. But just for the purposes of keeping things smooth and easy to navigate in terms of reading and critiquing one another’s works, everyone’s story will appear in the folder as “Name Story #1,” “Name Story #2,” and so on.

I would love it if the stories could be submitted as Word documents. This way, I can make comments and line edits on the story using the Track Changes feature on Microsoft Word. If you’re unfamiliar with this feature, don’t worry. I’ll go over it in class. But it’s a really handy way to make edits to a document that must be approved by the original author before they are finalized. I will also give you a page or so of typed feedback following the story itself. I will email you this feedback immediately after we workshop your story in class.

To make things fair, all the stories will be due on the same day. The order of the workshop will be determined by a random name wheel. We will spin the wheel together in class, and I will enter people’s names into the syllabus schedule as they are landed upon.

**Feedback to Peers:** In addition to writing and submitting two original works of fiction, you will also be required to provide written feedback to each of your peers’ works. To this end, I will create a discussion thread for each person’s story in the Discussion section of our Canvas page. Each discussion will simply be titled “Student Name Story #1” to keep things simple and easy to navigate. There is no word count requirement for the written feedback, though it should be substantive and helpful to the writer. The feedback will be due for each student will be due on the same day that we workshop that student’s story.

**Workshop:** The feedback portion of the course also consists of the workshop format we will employ when evaluating one another's stories. Since the class period lasts 80 minutes, that means we can probably workshop 3 stories per class, which means we spend about 20-25 minutes on each person's story. We'll go into much greater detail about how the workshop portion of the class will function as we progress further into the semester.

**Presentations:** The presentation for this class is informal and low stakes. You will select a work of narrative art (story, novel, TV show, movie, anime, manga, comics, video game) and give a short 10-15 minute presentation over the work, preferably using a presentation format such as PowerPoint, Google Slides, or Canva.

My goal with this assignment is simply for you all to discuss a work you love. I am not evaluating you on the academic quality of your analysis or anything like that. Instead, this is a fun chance for you to simply share with us one of your favorite works of narrative art. Hopefully, some of your peers who haven't read/seen the work you discuss will be enticed to do so.

### **Breakdown of Points:**

The course will consist of a total of 250 points:

2 stories @ 50 points each = 100 points

Feedback to peers = 100 points

Presentation: 50 points

### **Grading**

As I mentioned before, I do not believe in grades in a class in which we create art. To this end, all the assignments are graded pass/fail, meaning if you do the work, you will get the points. However, I am adamant about people giving feedback to their peers. I think it is rude and inconsiderate if we all take the time to read and critique your work but you don't take the time to do the same for your peers.

### **Class Policies**

**Attendance:** UNT's policy requires that you attend class. Observance of religious holidays and university-sanctioned events are considered excused absences. Honestly, I am very laid back and understanding and I know that stuff happens in life. I'm willing to work with you if things happen. Lastly, if you do choose to miss class, it only hurts you. You'll miss out on points, and it will hurt your grade. Plus, you'll miss the endless amounts of fun we'll be having and you will suffer severely from FOMO.

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is not tolerated and will result in a zero on your assignment. It can also be reported to the Dean of Students and go on your permanent academic record, which is like having an academic felony. In short, committing plagiarism is like selling meth: there's a possibility you can profit greatly, but there's an even stronger possibility you'll get caught and crash and burn.

**AI Writing:** For this class, no AI-generated work will be accepted.

**Content Warnings:** My top priority is the safety and wellbeing of you all. To this end, I provide content warnings for the stories we will read if they contain elements that some readers may find

disturbing. If you see a content warning that deals with something traumatizing to you, you can notify me privately and you will not be required to read it. I will never force anyone to do something that could adversely impact their own mental health. Likewise with the workshop. I would ask that you provide a content warning and a list of those elements at the top of your story if it contains things that some readers may find disturbing. If you are uncomfortable engaging in or listening to a discussion of a story that involves elements you find traumatizing, you will not be required to attend class that day. Again, just notify me privately, and I will excuse your absence. Here are some examples of things that warrant a content warning: **sexual violence of any kind, self-harm, suicide, mental illness, eating disorders, bullying, torture, incest, abortion, racism, racial slurs, homophobia, homophobic slurs, transphobia, transphobic slurs, ableism, ableist slurs, harm to children, animal abuse.**

**Disability:** If you have a disability and need to be accommodated, you can notify me privately and I will work with you in whatever way you need. You can also contact the Office of Disability Services. I am committed to accommodating you however you need in order for you to succeed.

### Schedule

**\*Note:** I will read all the stories aloud in class. As for presentations, we will randomly determine the order, and I will put your name on the day you will give your presentation.

For workshop, you will be required to read your peers' work outside of class and come prepared to discuss their work.

### Week 1

1/13: Syllabus; Introductions

1/15: Introduction to Fiction: Genres & Mediums

### Week 2

1/20: Character

1/22: "[The Thing Around Your Neck](#)" (content warning: brief instance of sexual assault)

### Week 3

1/27: Presentations; Plot

1/29: "[Remedies](#)"

### Week 4

2/3: Presentations; Verb Tense

2/5: "[The Paper Menagerie](#)" (content warning: racial slur against Asian Americans, mention of human trafficking, mention of sexual assault)

### Week 5

2/10: Literal and Figurative Language

2/12: "[Seasons of Glass and Iron](#)"

### Week 6

2/17: Presentations; Setting

2/19: Presentations

**Week 7**

2/24: Presentations; Weak vs. Strong Prose Writing

2/26: Presentations

2/27: Story #1 due on Canvas @ 11:59 PM

**Week 8**

3/3: Workshop Story #1

3/5: Workshop Story #1

**Week 9**

3/10: NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK

3/12: NO CLASS - SPRING BREAK

**Week 10**

3/17: Workshop Story #1

3/19: Workshop Story #1

**Week 11**

3/24: Workshop Story #1

3/26: Workshop Story #1

3/27: Story #2 due on Canvas @ 11:59 PM

**Week 12**

3/31: Workshop Story #2

4/2: Workshop Story #2

**Week 13**

4/7: Workshop Story #2

4/9: Workshop Story #2

**Week 14**

4/14: Workshop Story #2

4/16: Workshop Story #2

**Week 15**

4/21: Workshop Story #2

4/23: Workshop Story #2

**Week 16**

4/28: Workshop Story #2

4/30: Workshop Story #2

**Week 17**

5/5: Workshop Story #2

5/7: Workshop Story #2