

4. How to Write Compelling Fiction (Short Stories and Novels)

Beginning/intermediate

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Are you ready to write some fiction?

Do you have stories inside you insisting that you tell them?

Do you have lots of story ideas but no clear plan for getting them on paper? (Are you afraid to try?)

Have you started a story—and somehow lost your way?

Whether you're just starting your journey as a fiction writer or would like a solid, practical refresher on the basics of good fiction, we'll be talking your language all week.

We'll study the seven core principles of good fiction and key elements of effective story-telling, including point of view, character, and scene structure.

If you have a story already written or in progress, bring it with you and plan on spending quality time with it outside of class this week. If you haven't started, don't be surprised if you have a story or two working before you leave Friday afternoon.

You'll write in-class each day and have optional overnight writing assignments. We'll discuss your work and critique some "classic" and contemporary fiction, mainstream and genre, to see what it can teach us about our writing.

Day One: Start Someplace That Matters

Love at first line:

10 classic opening lines and what makes them memorable

7 jobs your novel or story opening could accomplish

* Introduce your protagonist (main character).

* Make readers care about him/her.

* Establish point of view, tone, voice, and attitude.

* Establish time frame/locale.

* Begin creating a believable world for the reader to live in and characters she's willing to spend time with.

* Create tension/conflict.

* Get your reader to worry and wonder.

You be the judge:

Which of these 10 novels would you continue reading? Why?

In-class writing assignment

Optional overnight writing assignment:

An opening for a novel or story (500 words maximum)

(You can create a new piece for this class or bring a work-in-progress)

Day Two: Credible Characters and Effective Descriptions

Building character

Does your character have a secret? (Don't we all?)

What is he most afraid of?

What would she do if she got cut-off in traffic?

Do you really need to know all that kind of stuff?

Categories of stock characters and their purposes

Should your story include any/all of the following?

- * hero/protagonist
- * sidekick
- * villain/antagonist
- * henchman
- * victim
- * chorus
- * foil

Thematic description

How much, when, and what for?

In-class writing assignment

Optional reading of last night's assignment

Optional overnight writing assignment:

Write (or bring) a thematic description

Day Three: Point of View

How to decide who should tell your story: 7 options

- * first person (narrator)
- * second person (direct address)
- * third person (limited)
- * third person (roving)
- * omniscient
- * objective
- * oleo

Examples for analysis

In-class writing assignment

Optional reading of last night's assignment

Optional overnight writing assignment:

Rewrite your opening scene from a different point of view

Day Four: Dialogue

7 Dialogue Do's and Don'ts

- 1) Write dialogue, not conversation.
- 2) Use dialogue to drive plot and create character.
- 3) Give each character a distinctive manner of speaking.
- 4) Allow characters to interact, disagree, interrupt.
- 5) Don't let them make speeches.
- 6) Don't put exposition in quotation marks.
- 7) Create invisible attribution.

Examples for analysis and reading aloud

In-class writing assignment

Optional reading of last night's assignment

Optional overnight writing assignment:

Write (or bring) a scene that relies primarily or wholly on dialogue.

Day Five: Scene and Beat

Elements of a scene—and why they matter

- * A single location
- * Action in real time
- * An experience
- * Action/reaction
- * Dialogue
- * One or more beats

What you have to know about your scene

- * What is revealed?
- * What is withheld?
- * What is foreshadowed for later?

How to get from one scene to another

Top 7 Tips for Writing Great Fiction

- 1) Respect your reader. Assume she's as intelligent as you are.
- 2) Don't tell or explain too much. Give your reader room to make inferences and create meaning.
- 3) Select a point of view that lets you tell your story effectively.
- 4) Be faithful to that point of view, with all its limitations.
- 5) Start your story at a critical point, someplace that matters.
- 6) As much as possible, reveal character and plot through action and dialogue, not exposition.
- 7) Use description sparingly and purposefully.

In-class writing assignment

Optional reading of last night's assignment

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others' work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.