**Novel 1 – OWC 303**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Our Novel I course is designed to help you get off to a great start on what will most likely be a very long journey. While it’s true some writers finish off a first draft of a novel in a year, it’s more often the case that they’re at it for much, much longer. In this course we’ll be producing the opening chapter of a novel—30 to 40 pages that have enough energy to go the distance. Does this mean that when you’ve finally finished your book the opening chapter you’ve produced in this course will still work? Possibly. Possibly not. Having just rewritten the first 100 pages of my own novel, I can tell you that the end of your draft may offer a whole new perspective on what the beginning needs. That’s where your revision process will kick in. But in this class, we’re focusing on the first chapter of the first draft, that essential place for discovering your characters, their dramatic potential and the world they inhabit. The first chapter of the first draft does the essential job of engaging you, the writer, giving you room to discover the kind of material that will keep you vitally attentive for the long-haul and setting yourself up to respond to all kinds of creative provocation. In lieu of an outline for the rest of the book, at the end of the course I’ll ask you to write a précis—a one-page narrative summary of what you imagine will happen in the rest of the book based on the dynamics you’ve put into play with your first chapter. A précis is often what a potential agent or publisher requests to accompany a sample chapter or two.

**HOW IT WORKS—IN BRIEF**

Each week you’ll log on to the Schedule page of our course on Blackboard for an introduction of the week’s focus, a reading assignment, a writing assignment, topics for online discussion in our FORUM and other supplemental resources. You’ll also have an email from me, every Sunday, that details the week’s focus and reminds you of my office hours in the CHAT ROOM. As you complete your weekly short writing assignments and post them to our FORUM, you may expect my feedback there within three days. You may also receive feedback from the rest of the class. When it’s time to workshop your novel chapter, you’ll post it to the FORUM just like a weekly exercise. My response and the mandatory responses from each of your classmates will be posted there, as well.
**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

SUNDAY NIGHT: Look for an email from me introducing the week’s topic and directing you to the FORUM threads that include our discussion questions and weekly writing assignment. I will be sure to post these threads by Friday of the previous week in case you want to work in advance over the weekend.

WEDNESDAY, midnight (PST): Weekly writing assignments due. You may expect my feedback within three days. If you post the exercise in after midnight on Wednesday, you’ll still get my feedback—but on a looser turnaround schedule (this is how I keep our focus on each week and on moving forward to the next week rather than on catching up).

TBD: Office hours in CHAT. Here we’ll have an informal discussion about the week’s topics, readings, writing assignments. CHAT is not mandatory, and I’ll record our CHATs for anyone who can’t make it and wants to know what was discussed.

THROUGHOUT THE WEEK: Respond to posts, participate in discussions.

WEEKEND: Feel free to use the weekend to get a jumpstart on the next week’s readings and writing exercise. I may not be on FORUM over the weekend but you’re welcome to start posting for the next week as soon as the threads are up (the Friday prior). Like a great all-night diner, the online classroom is always open.

**SCHEDULE PREVIEW**

The first five weeks of class we’ll focus heavily on outside readings, discussion of the elements of fiction, and writing assignments that explore these elements. Writing assignments are also designed to spark the creative process of starting a novel. The second five weeks will follow the same format, only we’ll reduce the number of outside readings and add workshops to the mix. Workshops not only provide direct feedback on individual work, they also bring up helpful topics for all class members to think about while writing their own chapters. During this time, our weekly reading and writing assignments will address additional concerns that come up when work is well underway—pacing, tension, narrative shape, and more. I know you’re busy, so do what you can during the final five weeks while keeping your focus on completing your own chapter for workshop.

This syllabus is still very much in progress and subject to change.

**Week 1: Character (and the Seeds of Conflict)**
**Week 2: Point of View**

**Week 3: Place, Time and Culture and the Tender Shoots of Conflict**

**Week 4: The Material World and More Tender Shoots of Conflict**

**Week 5: Dialogue and Narrative Pace**

**Week 6: Beginning in the Middle, with History**

**Week 7: A Hard Look at Tension**

**Week 8: Chapters and Novel Shape**

**Week 9: Rough Revision and a Look at Language**

**Week 10: The Road Ahead—What have you done? What could it mean?**

**HOW IT WORKS—IN FULL**

**WEEKLY READING ASSIGNMENTS**

Each week I'll assign readings from our course materials and from online links I will provide. I've chosen a variety of novels as well as a book on craft, and I've selected readings that are designed to facilitate discussions on each week’s topic. Timely reading of the week’s material is important for a thriving class discussion, so try to keep up with the readings as best you can. I'll also start a discussion thread in which you can make your own suggestions for fiction readings to the rest of the class.

While reading, ask yourself, *What do I respond to, and why?* Once you figure out what works in a piece and how a writer makes it work, you are near the point of bringing that technique to your own fiction. Identifying what works for you in the reading is a great topic for our Forum—even if it means disregarding some of the other Forum questions for the week.

**FORUM**
This is our Discussion Board, and I want everyone to feel comfortable using it. Remember that while courtesy is paramount, no one’s checking your grammar or spelling.

**MY PRESENCE ONLINE**

I will be online at least every other day. The advantage of an online format is that we can all do our work when schedules permit. So log on whenever it's convenient for you, morning or night, weekday or weekend. If you have a question about course content or class assignments, please post it in our Forum rather than e-mailing me, so that everyone can benefit from the information. If you have a private question or concern, feel free to contact me via email.

**OFFICE HOURS**

Once a week, TBD, I’ll host a chat, or "online office hour," in the Chat portion of the classroom. This is not a lecture, and is not a mandatory part of the class. All chats will be recorded for those who can't make the "live" time.

In weeks 6-10, I'll hold optional 20-minute individual Chat conferences with writers whose chapters have been workshopped to discuss the writing privately. I'll set up times with you at our mutual convenience.

**LATE POSTINGS**

If you post your weekly assignment by Wednesday, midnight, you will receive my feedback by Saturday. If you post late, I will still comment but I can't guarantee the timing. It's important we all keep the course moving forward rather than spending our energy catching up. That goes for commenting on classmates' "old" works as well. If you want to post late comments for them on the appropriate thread from a past week when you get the chance, that would be great--and greatly appreciated, I'm sure.

**WEEKLY DISCUSSION POINTS**
I'll post discussion questions each week in the Forum. Please respond to one or two of the questions over the course of the week, or address other issues you think deserve attention. Please also feel free to ask your own questions about the stories, or about anything else.

**WEEKLY WRITING EXERCISES**

Your weekly short writing exercises should be posted in the Forum section by 11:59 p.m. Wednesday (although the sooner you post assignments, the more time you'll have to receive, and respond to, feedback). PLEASE ADHERE TO THE WORD LIMIT.

**WORKSHOP**

Workshop will begin about halfway through the course (week 6) and will continue until the final class. In order to get started, we'll need to set up a schedule. Please check the Forum thread during Week 4 marked Workshop Schedule to sign up for a slot. Slots will be assigned on a first-come, first-served basis. If you are planning to submit a chapter you have worked on prior to this class, please sign up for an early slot so that people submitting brand new work have a chance to prepare. Three to four students will be workshopped each week, depending on final enrollment. I expect all students to provide feedback for their classmates.

Formatting Guidelines:

All work should be double-spaced and in 12 point Times New Roman or similar font. Use standard margins, please remember to number your pages, and give your work a read-through for grammar.

Due dates: Workshop pieces are due by 11:59 p.m. the Sunday before you are up for workshop. For example, if you are up for workshop during Week 7, you should post your chapter by 11:59 p.m. the Sunday that kicks off that week. I’ll send a reminder email Sunday afternoon to keep the class on course.

Tips for Helpful Critiques
Each week of workshop, I’ll ask you to respond to your classmates’ work posted on Forum. Please strive to understand the writer’s specific goals for the piece, then offer suggestions that help them achieve these goals. Like the assigned published reading, you should read your classmates' work twice—first for pleasure and a general sense for how it's working, and second to understand why it affected you as it did. As a general rule, begin by identifying the writer’s strengths then move into a discussion of possible improvements in a brief paragraph. Remember to be sensitive and diplomatic so your classmates feel comfortable taking risks. We all deserve respectful feedback.

I'll provide more specific guidelines for your feedback in Week Four.

**MY COMMENTARY**

I’ll comment on short exercises and the longer pieces you turn in for workshop. My remarks on your short pieces will be brief but will be designed to help you develop the piece or think about how it might be extended into something longer (if applicable). I'll post my comments on your chapter--in letter form--in the Forum section for everyone to read. In a live classroom I would make these comments to the class so that everyone could benefit and respond. I'm hopeful that we can achieve a similar back and forth in our “threaded” discussion in the Forum. I’ll read your comments and respond, and you should do the same with mine and those of your classmates. The more conversational the class is, the more fun we'll have and the more we'll all learn.

In general, I will read and respond to writing in the order it is turned in. Again, in order to keep the momentum of the course moving forward, I can't guarantee a response time for late assignments.

**GRADING**

I would like you to prioritize accordingly over the course of the quarter:

- Completion of the first chapter of a novel, approx 30 to 40 pages
- Thoughtful feedback in our FORUM on your classmates' chapters (2\textsuperscript{nd} half of course)
- A good-faith effort to complete the weekly writing exercises
- Meaningful and frequent participation in our Forum discussions of assigned reading, as well as feedback on your classmates weekly assignments as your time permits
I understand that you may sometimes be unable to complete one of the week’s writing exercises, or do the week’s reading, or comment on every classmate’s weekly assignment—that’s really okay. Rather than adopting an "all-or-nothing" approach, you should simply do what you can, when you can, with the understanding that the more you put into the class, the more you’ll gain. Your participation in our FORUM discussions is a benefit to everyone.

All students must enroll for a Letter grade

The grade breakdown will be as follows:

- 40% 1 chapter (30-40 pages)
- 30% Weekly writing exercises and comments on your classmates’ chapters
- 30% Participation in FORUM

I will also consider effort and improvement. Let me know at any time if you have questions about grades.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Thanks for taking part in this course. So much of writing is done in solitude that I always welcome the opportunity to encourage a community of writers, and I’m really looking forward to getting to know you and your work!

Angela Pneuman is a former Stegner Fellow and Marsh McCall Lecturer in fiction at Stanford University, where she has been teaching since 2000. Stories from her first book, *Home Remedies* (Harcourt 2007), appeared in *Best American Short Stories, Ploughshares*, the *Los Angeles Review*, the *New England Review, Glimmertrain* and elsewhere. She has a new story forthcoming in *Best American Short Stories 2012* and a novel forthcoming from Harcourt Houghton Mifflin in 2014.