EGL 13 W – Writing Mysteries and Thrillers: How to Craft Successful Plot, Action, and Characters

**Course Code:** EGL 13 W (Online Class)  
**Quarter:** Summer 2015

**Instructor:** Seth Harwood

**Course Text(s):**
- *On Writing* – Stephen King  
  This will serve as our craft book. We’ll use it to cover issues relating to form, content, writing practice vocabulary and creation of stories (where they come from).

  This anthology will give us the chance to read classic stories in the genre to practice talking about creative work, developing the proper language to read as *writers*, analyzing craft, technique and effective narrative strategies.

**Requirements for a Letter Grade and/or Credit:**
Students have three grading options for Continuing Studies courses:

- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)** - written work is required

- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)** - attendance and participation is required

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)** - no work is required; No credit shall be received; No proof of attendance can be provided. (Not suitable for those requiring proof of attendance/completion.)

Please note that you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting, by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Your grade will be largely based on your level of participation in the class. Whether adding to the online forums, giving your peers feedback on their work, or completing class assignments to build your own writing, I’m looking for you to have fun and to stay engaged. I also know that life intervenes. If you’re worried about missing parts of the class, see below about my **Open Door Policy**.

**Assignment for our first class:**
- Thumb through *The Best American Mystery Stories of the Century* looking at the range of beginning strategies used by the authors. Choose one or two openings that especially grabbed you for sharing during our first week(s). We’ll be talking about openings and how/why certain ones work for us.
Schedule for the course/Weekly Outline:

Week 1
- Intros, Getting to know each other and our writing goals
- Orientation to Canvas
- Discussion: [Story development] Anatomy of an opening
- Writing Assignment: Dialogue Exercise – from the real world
- Reading Assignment: Frank Conroy “The Writers’ Workshop”

Week 2
- Discussion: [Craft Week] Bring your reader in by getting him or her to visualize the story right away—Creating the movie in the reader’s mind
- Writing Assignment: Building Action using Scenes and Dialogue – Set the Stage
- Develop your opening using ideas from scene/dialogue discussion
- Readings: Stephen King and Raymond Chandler

Week 3
- Discussion: [Plot Week] Get the hook in: Balancing suspense, intrigue and “spilling the beans”
- Setting up workshops and discussion of ground rules/procedures
- Writing Assignment: Drafting a climactic scene. Tension at its highest. (The Beehive Theory)
- Reading Assignment: Dashiell Hammett, James Cain, Peter Elbow

Note: After week 3 your major writing work should be to craft your submission to student workshop. All other writing exercises are optional.

Week 4
- Discussion: [Craft Week] Looking at narrative strategy: Have you got it right?
- Writing Assignment: Experimenting with narrative distances and points of view to see how they affect storytelling.
- Student Workshops begin
- Continue your draft using narrative strategy experiments. (optional)
- Reading Assignment: Student workshops, Stephen King, Patricia Highsmith

Week 5
- Discussion: [Tension Week] Building Curiosity without Confusion
  Anticipating Reader Questions and Answers
- Who knows what? (Reader, Author, and/or Character)
• Writing Assignment: Comparing Point of View – trying a few on for size (optional)
• Reading Assignment: Student pieces, Stephen King and Cornell Woolrich

Week 6
• Discussion: [Character Week] Protagonist and Antagonist. Desires—How want drives the what
• Student workshops
• Writing assignment: Exercise on desire driving a scene (optional)
• Reading assignment: Stephen King On Writing and Lawrence Block

Week 7
• Discussion: [Action Week] Major Dramatic Moment: Real or imagined? Where is your story going? How does the outline process help this?
• Student Workshops
• Writing Assignment: Pushing the action: revising for strong verbs! (optional)
• Supplemental info: use of the verb “to be”
• Reading Assignment: Jim Thompson and Bill Holinger handout

Week 8
• Discussion: [Process Week] How to shape plot: Outlines – Now or Later? Can we trust them? How can they help/hurt us?
• Student Workshops
• Writing assignment: Experimenting with outline for work in progress. Metacog on how this helps your current story. (optional)
• Reading assignment: John Steinbeck

Week 9
• Discussion: [Craft Week] Revision – a learnable tool.
• Crafting scenarios, outlines, uncovering the fossils.
• Writing Assignment: Revision Exercise (optional)
• Reading assignment: James Crumley and Dennis Lehane, Stephen Koch handout

Week 10
• Discussion: Wrapping up our class – What have we learned?
• Your Author Career: Where to go from here.
• Story submission, markets, online avenues to fan-building, author platform.
• Student Workshops
OPEN DOOR POLICY

IMPORTANT! Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last little assignment, “real life”—in the form of business and family obligations or who-knows-what—can get in the way. Sometimes, the resulting frustration or anxiety causes students to drop completely out of the class. Rather than adopting an “all-or-nothing” approach to your participation in the course, I recommend simply doing what you can, when you can. If there are a couple of weeks in which you don’t get to the reading, or if there are times when you can’t complete a writing exercise, don’t worry. In terms of priorities within class work, please do your best to comment on your classmates’ submissions and work on your own piece for workshop. If you have to step away from the class for a bit, that’s fine. You can always come back when things become more manageable.

THE WORKSHOP:
In weeks four through ten, we’ll focus on workshopping a 3,000 word selection (max) from works-in-progress, whether short story, novel or what-have-you (a maximum of 12 pages, double-spaced).

We’ll workshop 2 pieces a week, for which I ask that students write a page or so of thoughtful, honest feedback (250-300 words). Our responses will include identifying the aims and accomplishments of each selection, offering specific praise for strengths, and asking specific questions. Much more on this to come later.

I’ll still put up optional writing exercises connected to the craft themes, but the workshops are the heart of the class, and you’ll learn at least as much from the process of thinking through your comments on others’ work, as from the feedback you receive on your own.

ETIQUETTE AND ACCEPTABLE ONLINE BEHAVIOR:
Respect for your classmates is of utmost importance. Critical analysis of each other’s work should be done with tact and professionalism.

Sometimes you do need a thick skin to be an artist, but this should be a friendly and supportive environment in which to share and discuss each others’ work. While there will be many instances of casual interaction, any use of inappropriate language, derogatory remarks, or attempts to monopolize the conversation will not be accepted. You will receive a personal email from me and if the unacceptable behavior continues, you may be dismissed from the online course with no refund of tuition and fees paid. The vast majority of students in the Online Writers’ Studio understand the ethos of mutual respect intuitively and problems of this nature are extraordinarily rare. But if you are having a serious issue with another student that seems to be going undetected, please contact me about it.
Chat/ZOOM
During each week of the class, I’ll hold a 30 to 60 min-long live chat session. This will be an audio/video discussion of art, craft, process, and our weekly topic. Because everyone has different work hours (and time zones), attendance is optional, though highly encouraged. I will do my best to find a time that works for as many people in class as possible. [Generally this is on Tuesday afternoons (around 5PM Pacific.)]

Our primary place for conversations about the reading and writing will be in our text-based discussion boards, but the Zoom Chats are often a fun, lively way to cover a lot of ground in a more personal, face-to-face manner. A lot of the class bonding and community happens here. I will also provide recordings of these that you can watch at a later time.

COURSE STRUCTURE (how the online classroom works)
WEEKLY ROUTINE:
All the materials for the coming week will be up by Friday afternoon. This way you can start your work for the following week over the weekend if you choose. After Week Three, each workshop piece will also be due on Friday by 3:00PM PDT.

Each week, you’ll log onto Canvas and read the “Start Here” page. This will include my art/craft/process thoughts to start the week (the “lecture”), as well as both writing and reading assignments, any optional materials or links. From there, you can post and exchange thoughts with your peers at any time you choose, based on your schedule. One of the big benefits of an online class such as this is the asynchronous schedule, allowing everyone to choose when and where they participate. Onward!

TUESDAY: Zoom Chat online from [Time TBD].

Mon-Weds: Participate in the discussion boards, weigh in on craft topics, readings, student work.

Thursday: Writing exercises and workshop responses are due by Thursday at noon Pacific Time. Both writing exercises and workshop responses can be posted in the FORUM. For your writing exercises, I’ll have you post your work in small group sections and give one another feedback. You’ll have my response by the following Thursday to any work posted before the deadline.

MY ROLE ONLINE: In addition to posting each week’s craft “lecture” and running our Zoom Chats, I’ll moderate the discussions, including workshops. I will come into the online classroom at least four days a week – generally Mon - Thurs – and will respond to work in the order in which it was posted. I may now respond to every post in each discussion, but I’ll ask you all to stay engaged and to keep these active.