PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS

Scene by Scene: The Building Blocks of Story
Stanford Continuing Studies
Instructor: Deborah Johnson

PLEASE NOTE: Although the time commitment for this course is dependent upon one’s degree of participation, students should plan on investing four to six hours per week in order to participate at a substantial level.

A note from the instructor:

When I wrote my first novel some years ago, I had no idea what I was doing. As a result, I made a lot of mistakes and did several major rewrites. I came to understand that I could have saved a lot of time if someone had simply taught me how to write a scene. Whether you’re writing fiction or nonfiction, a scene contains the basic DNA of all good storytelling: compelling characters, dynamic dialog, an emotional arc, and narrative momentum. We’ll study all the different aspects of basic scene-writing craft. Once you know how to write a scene, you’ll have all the tools you need to tell a compelling story, whether that is a work of short fiction, a novel, a memoir, or other work of creative nonfiction.

Grade Options and Requirements

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
  - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
  - Score will be determined by student attendance and participation.

- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  - The following will determine a student’s grade:
    Scene-writing exercises (weeks 1-5): 40%
    Full-length workshop piece (weeks 6-10): 40%
    Classroom participation (discussion assign. and workshop critiques): 20%

Weekly Outline

Week One: What is a Scene?
How to recognize a scene in fiction. The fundamental requirements of any scene: something happens and something changes.

Writing assignment: Write a scene in which something happens to push a character
out of his rut (pretend it’s the first scene of a novel or short story).

Note on the writing assignments: As well as providing a craft directive, like the one above, I’ll also be offering prompts for those of you who need more inspiration. For example, in this case the prompt might be: “A stranger comes to the door” or “Your character finds an abandoned baby.” You’re always free to ignore the prompts, provided you fulfill the assignment.

There will also be a short reading assignment from one of the set texts. This first week, in lieu of discussion questions, you’ll introduce yourselves and your writing goals.

**Week Two: Building Vivid Characters**
Finding the significant details that define your character. How to convey a character by “showing” rather than “telling.” Understanding that you can use action, as well as description, to build a character.

*Writing assignment:* Write a scene in which you convey a character’s key traits through significant detail and action, especially interaction with his environment. Be as specific as possible.

There will also be a reading and discussion assignment.

**Week Three: Understanding Your Characters’ Motivation**
Why characters have to want something. Conscious vs. unconscious motive. Characters don’t necessarily want what’s good for them. How to convey motive through action, description, etc.

*Writing assignment:* Write a scene in which a character takes action to bring him nearer to a goal, and is thwarted. Make it clear why the goal matters, without explaining it directly.

There will also be a reading and a discussion assignment.

**Week Four: Generating Action**
How character generates action. Giving your scenes a three-act structure: action, turn, reaction. What a “turn” is and how to make it the focal point of your scene. Balancing action and information/ back story.

*Writing assignment:* Write a scene with two characters, covering a period of five to ten minutes, in which one does something that changes their relationship with each other (e.g. from fear to trust, from belief to disbelief, from joy to sorrow).

There will also be a reading and discussion assignment.

**Week Five: Writing Realistic and Dynamic Dialog**
Why convincing dialog isn't necessarily “realistic.” Common dialog errors. Writing dialog with friction. Mixing in “beats” (characters’ emotional reactions) and action.

*Writing assignment:* Write a scene in which one character is trying to break through the other’s barrier of denial.

There will also be a reading and discussion assignment.

*Note on writing assignments after week 5:*  
Note: If you’ve volunteered to workshop in week 6, your long piece is due on the Sunday of this week.  
For everyone else, your major writing work should be to craft your 5000-word submission to student workshop. All other writing exercises are optional.

**Week Six: Stringing Scenes Together + Workshop**  
Creating “emotional arcs” for your characters. Arranging your scenes for variety. A story or novel’s three most important scenes: the opening, the “epiphany” and the finale. The role of summary: when to pull back from the “zoom in” that is a scene.

*Short writing assignment:* Choose a character from the writing you’ve done in this class and sketch an “emotional arc” for that character, with a beginning, middle, and end. Write the first page of a novel or story about that character, in which you establish the beginning of that arc.

There will also be a reading and discussion assignment.

**Week Seven: Using Your Setting + Workshop**  
Finding the significant details that establish your setting. How setting can help build character. Using setting to develop tension.

*Short writing assignment:* Convey a character’s emotional state solely by describing a setting and his/her interaction with that setting.

There will also be a reading and discussion assignment.

**Week Eight: Choosing Point of View and Tense + Workshop**  
Finding your scene’s narrative voice: first person, close third vs. omniscient. Advantages of past vs. present tense (and the art of the flashback).

*Short writing assignment:* Write three paragraphs describing the same character from three different points of view: third-person close, first-person, and third-person omniscient.

There will also be a reading and discussion assignment.

**Week Nine: Conveying Emotions + Workshop**
Different ways to “show” rather than “tell” us about your character’s emotions. Avoiding emotional clichés (“his heart pounded”). “Juicing” emotion i.e. avoiding “zombie character syndrome” and giving your characters space to react.

**Short writing assignment:** For a given set of emotions, write a cliché and then think of a unique way to convey that emotion (could be through physical reaction or through action).

There will also be a reading and discussion assignment.

**Week Ten: Beginning and Endings + Workshop**

Different types of scene beginnings. Knowing what action to leave in and what to leave out (and why you should never begin a story with someone waking up). How to ground the reader in time and place. Endings that propel the reader forward.

**Short writing assignment:** Write three scene openings that begin the scene in medias res.

**Workload for weeks 1-5:** Each week, you’ll complete a scene-writing assignment of up to 3 pages (750 words) that allows you to practice that week’s craft element. You will also have a reading assignment, sometimes from one of the set craft books, but usually from one of the novels we’ll be studying, and a discussion exercise. I would also like you to comment on at least two other students’ writing assignments each week.

**Workload for weeks 6-10:** You will write an extended piece (up to 5,000 words) that could be a short story or a novel chapter. Some of you will develop this piece from your scene-writing exercises in weeks 1-5. But you can also workshop a story that you’re working on or chapter of a novel-in-progress, provided that you’ve revised it to apply the scene-writing principles we’ll have learned in weeks 1-5.

We’ll workshop two or three of you each week. I will expect everybody to contribute to the workshop discussion, since learning to see and articulate what works and what doesn’t in other people’s writing will in turn improve your own work.

During the second half of the course, I’ll offer short writing exercises, but these are optional, as some of you will be busy working on your extended piece. Those of you who workshop early on may well choose to complete these exercises so you can continue to practice your scene-writing craft each week.

Note on timing for workshop: Some brave souls will have to volunteer to go first, in week 6, meaning their long piece will be due on the Sunday of week 5 (I’ll extend the usual assignment deadline that week). If you already have a story or novel chapter you are working on, this is a good option for you.

Assignments are due by Wednesday midnight Pacific time.
Zoom: We will have a video chat in weeks 1-5 and in week 10, to be scheduled when most people are able to attend. I also offer one personal 20-minute conference to each student.