FICT 54 W
Building a Story from the Ground Up
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Required Text


Introduction

This is a course about the hands-on experience of composing a piece of short fiction from start to finish. It is a course about learning by doing. As such, it is messy, difficult, and for students and myself, one of the most rewarding classes I have taught in my twenty years as an instructor of creative writing. It is an immersive experience that offers group support to develop and transform individual talent.

Beginning in Week One, we will start with a memory, anecdote, news item, or even a scene or image, and each week work through successive iterations toward Week Eight, in which we will present a polished draft of a short story of approximately 10-15 pp. (5000 word max), to be workshopped in Weeks Nine and Ten. I will also be writing a story, and will share my drafts on Canvas as we go.

Each story iteration will be a building block of a larger narrative, adding approximately 500 words of text each week. Students will turn in each iteration of their developing stories to me and to a different small group each week for comment. I will post my iterations on Canvas for your comments, as well. Each week, we will meet for a Zoom Chat to discuss our craft lessons, and in the last two weeks of the quarter, to workshop our stories.

What should each iteration do? I use the word “iteration” rather than draft, because each week we will develop and transform rather than simply add to or revise existing text. In the early weeks of the course we will be transforming, rethinking, and reshaping our ideas, not necessarily accreting more pages in a chronological narrative – although marching ahead chronologically can make sense, too. Especially at the beginning of the quarter, we should be open to transforming our stories, completely revising and re-envisioning them. For this reason, the 500 word per week figure is a suggestion rather than a goal. Later in the quarter, we will add flesh to the already sturdy skeletons of our stories – and this will be especially true later in the quarter, when we shape our stories and revise them before workshop.

Each successive iteration will focus on developing one particular aspect of narrative craft – Character, Setting, Point of View, and other considerations. Students will study these aspects of craft by reading and responding in writing to stories in our textbook, *What If?* (3rd Edition) that exemplify these skills, experimenting with exercises
in each aspect of craft in *What If?*, and most importantly, practicing these skills in the stories we are writing for the class.

Our comments in our small groups on each successive iteration should focus on encouragement. The primary aim of each iteration is not to polish our prose – though that is something we should always strive to do – but to develop our stories-in-progress as well as to master a specific aspect of craft.

For example, in Week Two, our Story Skills will be Character and Beginnings. We will make notes on our characters and craft a beginning for our stories. I’ll encourage you – and myself – to try a voice that’s unfamiliar. If you are writing from a memory or anecdote, you might chose a point of view that isn’t your own, or the one from which you have usually heard the story.

In each weekly iteration of your story, both developing your story and mastering an aspect of craft are equally important. A fundamental assumption of this class is that mastery of craft (plot, character, point of view, and scene) makes storytelling possible. A story told from a first person point of view creates different narrative possibilities than a story told from a third person point of view. Learning to use these different aspects of craft makes you a more capable, flexible storyteller.

Each Sunday at a time to be determined we will have a Zoom Chat session to discuss our reading, assignments, and exercises for the following week. So, in our Week One Zoom Chat, on Sunday, January 8th, 2017, we will discuss the reading, assignments, and written work due for our Week One Unit.

Each Wednesday, your written work, including reading responses and the week’s story iteration, will be due. Your first assignment, a story sketch, will be due on Wednesday, January 11th, 2016. Your comments on the work of the other members of your small groups, and my comments on your work, will be due each Saturday, so our comments on the Week One work will be due by Saturday, January 14th.

Only in Week One, when you comment on the brief story sketches, and in the Workshop Weeks Nine and Ten, when you comment on finished drafts, will you be required to comment on all of your fellow students’ work. In all other weeks, you will be required only to comment on the work of the members of your small groups.

The weekly cycle will then start over with our Week Two Zoom Chat on Sunday, January 15th, in which we will discuss the reading assignments from Week One and preview the craft issues for Week Two. This pattern of discussion of the previous week’s reading and a lesson on craft and preview of the following week’s reading will continue until Week Eight, which will be a time for you to revise your stories before workshop. I will hold “office hours” during our regular Zoom Chat time, to address any questions or concerns you might have about your drafts, which will be due March 5th. We will workshop half of our stories on March 12th and half on March 19th.
Each week, you will have until Saturday to comment on each other’s work, but it will be wise to finish your comments before you have started the reading from *What If?* for our Sunday Zoom Chat. In the last two weeks of class, during which we will have workshops, you will be responsible only for reading your peers’ full stories.

Each weekly iteration of your story will receive written comments in rotating small groups, with each group responsible for reading **only** the group members’ weekly iterations. This should keep your weekly reading load manageable. Bear in mind, however, that each weekly iteration’s maximum word limit will increase.

In the last two weeks of class, we will workshop your complete stories. Since we will be reading and commenting on successive iterations of your stories throughout the quarter, the workshops of your stories will be less detailed than if we had not read them before, but we will have an intimate understanding of each others’ stories from successive prior drafts. I have designed the syllabus this way to give you the maximum amount of time possible to work on your stories, including a Week Eight “writing week” during which we will have no other work due, but when I will be available to discuss your stories by e-mail and during “office hours” at our regular Sunday Zoom Chat time.

Each week, I will provide focal points for our commentary, including which aspects of narrative craft to assess and how to evaluate and comment on them. Our Week Nine lecture will include detailed instructions on how to workshop your complete drafts.

Two constants in all of our commentary in the class should be civility toward one another and sensitivity to the ambitions of one another’s work.

Since this class will be intensely interactive, with all of us sharing our work as we go along, it is very important for us to maintain kindness and to comment on each other’s work in a spirit of helpfulness and respect. It’s often easy when commenting online to forget the courtesy we extend to one another in person. Please keep this courtesy in mind in this class.

It is also easy online not to listen, to get caught up in one’s own private echo chamber. One of the most important aspects of this class is to learn how to respond to one’s own work, and the work of others’, flexibly and pragmatically, to listen to what the stories are trying to mean, rather than what we think they mean. In reading each other’s work, we should first strive to understand each story’s nascent ambitions, and to comment on them in the spirit of furthering those ambitions. We should also keep in mind that we will not agree with all of the comments we receive. We will find some readers more sympathetic to our story’s aims, and we will learn to filter the comments we receive accordingly. This is another skill to learn as a writer. On the other hand, we should always listen carefully and consider comments that challenge us or even make us uncomfortable. These are often the comments that will help us to grow as writers. In learning to listen to each other’s work, we learn to listen more closely to our own.
This process of mutual respect and attention to each other’s work, as well as to our own work, is at the heart of this class.

**Grade Options**

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)
Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions.

Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions, and complete a piece of written work (to be discussed further in class).

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

**Weekly Outline**

**Week One: Story Sketch**

Work Due: Story Sketch, 500-word max (please double-space)

Reading: What If?: “Family Stories, Family Myths” (pp. 71-2); Notebooks, Journals, and Memory (pp. 261-72); “The Whore’s Child” (pp. 391-400); “Sheep” (pp. 363-76)

Reading Response: Respond to your peers’ Story Sketches.

Writing Assignment (500 word max): Story Sketch, posted to the Week One Writing Assignment thread. All students should respond to all of your peers’ Story Sketches with brief and encouraging posts. I will also post my Story Sketch on Canvas.

**Week Two: Setting**

Work Due: Setting Story Iteration, 1000-word max. (please double-space)

Reading: What If?: Notebooks, Journals, and Memory; “Bringing Abstract Ideas to Life,” “Naming the Diner, Naming the Diet, Naming the Dog,” “Faraway Places,”

Reading Response (500 word max): How does Michael Cunningham use the temporal and cultural setting of the suburban sixties to contextualize his characters and advance the plot of “White Angel”? How does Dagoberto Gilb use the relationship between Ibáñez and Daniel to explore issues of racial identity? How does Bobby Ann Mason create characters by both employing and subverting cultural stereotypes about the American South? What physical objects are important in each story? How do they function in both a practical way, in the action of the story, and a “symbolic” way to convey meaning?

Writing Assignment (2000 word max): Please post your Setting Story Iteration in your appropriate group thread. You will be assigned to your group, which will change each week, in Week Three. I will comment briefly on all posts. You should comment only on the posts in your group. Your comments should briefly address how the story iteration uses setting to deepen characters and to complicate or advance plot, and how it uses physical objects to do the same. As always, I will also post my story iteration, too.

Week Three: Character & Beginnings

Work Due: Character & Beginnings Story Iteration, 1500-word max. (please double-space)

Reading: What If?: Beginnings (pp. 5-30); Characterization, The Interior Landscape of Your Characters (pp. 31-54, 89-110); “Gryphon” (pp. 287-97); “Cathedral” (pp. 306-15)

Reading Response (500 word max): Please post your responses in the Week Two Reading Response thread. Read the first two or three paragraphs of “Gryphon” and “Cathedral,” and answer the following questions BEFORE you read the rest of these stories. Using “First Sentences: Beginning in the Middle” (What If?, p. 7) as a reference, tell us what the first few paragraphs of “Gryphon” and “Cathedral” do, in terms of answering the following questions for the reader:

- What is happening? What do you think will happen next?
- Who is telling the story?
- What does the main character want?
- Where and when are we?
- How close or distant in time is the narration of the story from the events in it?

NEXT, AFTER you have finished the stories, tell us how these beginnings set up these stories’ endings: How the character does or does not get what he wants, and how our understanding of who the character is creates the story’s meaning.

Writing Assignment (1500-word max): Please post your 1000-word Character & Beginnings Story Iteration in your appropriate group thread. You will be assigned to your group, which will change each week, in Week One. I will comment briefly on all
posts. You should comment only on the posts in your group. Your comments should 
brieﬂy address whether the story iteration fulﬁlls the requirements of a story beginning, 
and conveys what the characters want. I will also post my Story Iteration.

Week Four: Point of View

Work Due: Point of View Story Iteration, 2000-word max. (please double-space)

Reading: What If?: Point of View, Perspective, Distance (pp. 31-72); “Separating 
Author, Narrator, and Character,” (pp. 162-63); “Brownies” (pp. 377-90); “Would You 
Know It Wasn’t Love?” (pp. 344-52); “Under the Roof” (pp. 414-28), and “How to 
Talk to a Hunter” (pp. 340-43)

Reading Response (500 word max): Pick one story and read it very closely to understand 
how its point of view works. How does the author control point of view in these stories? 
How does the author use point of narration, grammar, and subtle word choice to comment 
upon her narrator’s narration of events? How does she use dramatic irony?

Writing Assignment (2000 word max): Please post your Point of View Story Iteration in 
your appropriate group thread. You will be assigned to your group, which will change 
each week, in Week Two. I will comment briefly on all posts. You should comment 
only on the posts in your group. Your comments should brieﬂy address how the story 
iteration establishes and uses a particular point of view to convey the main character, 
especially what he or she wants. As always, I will also post my story iteration, too.

Week Five: The Ticking Clock

Work Due: Ticking Clock Story Iteration, 2500-word max. (please double-space)

Reading: What If?: Plot: Introduction (pp. 111-13), “From Situation to Plot,” “Peter 
Rabbit and Adam and Eve,” “What If?: How to Develop and Finish Stories,” “There’s A 
Party and You’re Invited,” “So, What Happened?,” “Plot Potential;” and Dialogue (pp. 
73-88), especially “The Invisible Scene” and “A Verbal Dance”

Reading Response (500 word max): Re-read two of the stories that we have read so far 
(actually re-read them – it will do you good as a writer, and I will be able to tell in your 
response if you haven’t). Then answer these questions for each story: What events drive 
the story and make you ask what will happen next?

Writing Assignment (2500 word max): Please post your Ticking Clock Story Iteration in 
your appropriate group thread. You will be assigned to your group, which will change 
each week, in Week Four. I will comment briefly on all posts. You should comment 
only on the posts in your group. Your comments should brieﬂy address how the story
iteration creates a chain of events that engages our expectations and makes us want to keep reading. As always, I will post my story iteration, too.

Week Six: Writing Week One: Finish Your Draft

Work Due: No work due this week.

Reading: Re-read one story of your choosing from What If?

Reading Response (500 word max): Re-read one of the stories that we have read so far (actually re-read it – this will do you good as a writer, and I will be able to tell in your response if you haven’t). Then answer these questions: What is at stake in the story? What is the conflict between the characters, and how is it resolved? How are these conflicts worked out in the action, setting, dialogue, and other aspects of the story?

Writing Assignment (3000 word max): Please post your Opposing Forces Story Iteration in your appropriate group thread. In this Story Iteration, you should finish a draft that completes the action of the story. You will be assigned to your group, which will change each week, in Week Four. I will comment briefly on all posts. You should comment only on the posts in your group. Your comments should briefly address how the story iteration explores opposing forces between the characters. Does it give you a clear sense of what the conflict is in the story? Does the story make clear the desires not only of the main character but of the other characters, as well?

Week Seven: Shaping Your Story

Work Due: Report on your Story Cut-Up (500 word max)

Reading: What If?: A Writer’s Toolbox, Sec. 53-59; re-read “White Angel,” “Gryphon,” “Would You Know It Wasn’t Love?,” and “Shiloh”

Reading Response (500 word max): Re-read any two of the stories that we have read so far (actually re-read them – it will do you good as a writer, and I will be able to tell in your response if you haven’t). Then answer these questions for each story: What is at stake in the story? What is the conflict between the characters, and how is it resolved?

Writing Assignment (500 word max): Please post your Story Cut-Up Report in your appropriate group thread. In it, please briefly discuss what you learned about how to shape your story from your Cut-Up. You will be assigned to your group, which will change each week, in Week Four. I will comment briefly on all posts. You should comment only on the posts in your group. No need for elaborate comments this week.
Week Eight: Writing Week Two: Revising Your Story

Work Due: No work due this week.

Reading: Read the story in What If? that you most admire, from which you have learned the most, or which you have found most useful to your own story.

Reading Response (500 word max): Share your observations about the story you’ve chosen this week and analyze how it does what it does, using the lessons about Story Skills – plot, character, setting, conflict, etc. – that you have learned this quarter. I will also post a short essay on my favorite story.

Writing Assignment: No writing assignment due this week – work on your stories.

Week Nine: Workshop Week One

Work Due: Your full stories.

Reading: Our stories for Workshop Week One

Reading Response (500 word max): Your specific, encouraging, and honest comments on each of this week’s workshop stories. You should also put line comments on each manuscript via Track Changes or other digital means.

Writing Assignment: Your full stories.

Week Ten: Workshop Week Two

Work Due: Your full stories.

Reading: What If?: The Elements of Style (pp. 133-42) and Revision: Rewriting Is Writing (pp. 197-222); Your peers’ stories for Workshop Week Two

Reading Response (500 word max): Your specific, encouraging, and honest comments on each of this week’s workshop stories. You should also put line comments on each manuscript via Track Changes or other digital means.