Course Title: Novel IV: Manuscript Preparedness
Course Code: OWC 306 C
Instructor: Helena Echlin

Course Summary

You’ve now completed three traditional workshop courses designed to help you finish a full draft of your novel. But since finishing a novel is tough and life often gets in the way, some of you may still have only a partial draft. So whether you are revising a completed draft, filling in a few plot holes, or still floundering in the muddy middle, this course is designed to help you knock your book into shape before you hand it off to your one-on-one instructor.

To help you focus on that goal, this course has no reading assignments and a lighter workload when it comes to critiquing your peers. In the first four weeks, you’ll be doing short revision assignments (totaling about 3,500 words) and in the remaining six weeks, you’ll each revise and workshop a 6,500-word chunk of your novel. Alternatively, if you are still far from finishing your novel and would like to get the maximum amount of new material written in this course, you may draft new material for the short writing assignments and longer workshop piece.

I will also provide a thread where students who would like to write and post more than this can do so, not for instructor feedback, but simply for accountability, and possibly to exchange feedback with other students similarly driven to generate a lot of new material.

Finally, for those of you who workshop early or who are especially industrious, I’ll also be providing short revision (or writing) assignments in weeks 5 through 10. By the end of the course, some of you will have a fairly polished draft and some of you may have a rough—but hopefully complete—draft. But all of you will have a solid arsenal of revision techniques.

My lectures will focus on different aspects of the novel completion and revision process. And each week, we’ll have three or four discussion threads, in which we’ll cover relevant craft points, good work habits, and how to conquer the psychological obstacles to finishing your book. I expect everyone to comment in at least a couple of these threads, even if you only have time to make a brief appearance.
Breakdown of Workload and Course Requirements

**Workload for weeks 1-4:**
Complete one exercise per week of 750-1000 words (a plot outline, the beginning of your novel, a scene in which your character changes, and a passage of dialog). The exercises may be sections of your novel that you have revised or newly written parts of your novel, but either way, these exercises will help me understand your project and see your strengths and challenges so that we can establish your goals for the rest of the semester.
Comment on at least two of the other students’ writing assignments per week.
Participate in at least two discussion topics each week.

**Workload for weeks 5-10:**
Submit up to 6,500 words of your novel for your workshop (either revised or new material).
Read and critique the submissions of one or sometimes two students per week (6,500 words each). Please note that starting in week five, I’ll divide the class into two groups, so that you only have to critique one (or at most two) long writing assignments per week.
Participate in at least two discussion topics per week.
Complete optional writing exercises designed to practice revision techniques.

**Lectures**

1. **Outlining**
   - How to use the “fuzzy outline” method
   - How to outline after you’ve written your draft
   - How to add tension to a slack plot by honing character motivation and goals

2. **Beginning**
   - Deciding where to begin (usually later than you think)
   - Balancing action with information and backstory

3. **Deepening major characters; herding minor characters**
   - Diagnosing “zombie character syndrome.”
   - Different ways to layer in emotion after you’ve written a draft.
   - Creating or clarifying emotional arcs for your characters
   - Minor characters: whether to cut, conflate, or expand.

4. **Sharpening dialog**
   - Recap of common dialog errors in novel manuscripts.
   - Dialog revision techniques: adding friction, mixing in “beats,” and solidifying the stage.
5. Streamlining and deepening your POVs
   • How to know if you’ve chosen the right POV—or too many POVs
   • How to go deeper into your chosen POVs (including how to “show” rather than “tell” a character’s thoughts)

6. Understanding scene versus summary
   • Checklist of the elements that every scene in your book should have
   • Recap: how to identify when to summarize and when to dramatize.
   • Identifying and expanding on the three key scenes of your novel

7. Fleshing out background/ sharpening details
   • Why you should write a schedule for your novel’s action and draw a map of where it takes place.
   • Using setting to build character and develop tension.
   • Research and fact checking
   • How to “sharpen” significant details

8. Developing your theme
   • Identifying the theme.
   • Expanding your theme without being trite.
   • Adding or emphasizing significant imagery.

9. Editing
   • Polishing scene beginnings and endings: how to avoid starting too early and how not to rush your ending.
   • Checklist of common stylistic faux pas (including mixed metaphors, trying to disguise clichés, etc.)

10. Ending
    • How to make your ending feel both surprising and inevitable (hint: revisit the beginning)
    • How to know when your book is finished—and when revising is making it worse.
    • Next steps: identifying helpful readers and parsing their feedback.
My Presence Online

I will be spending several hours a day online and will strive to answer all questions within 24 hours (during weekdays). Assignments for the first four weeks are due by Thursday night at midnight Pacific time. (After that, I’ll be setting individual deadlines for your 6,500-page excerpts.) I will not be able to answer questions or contribute to discussion on weekends. I’ll host a 45-minute Zoom conference each week, to be scheduled when the most students can attend. I also offer each student a 20-minute private phone conference.

Grades

The breakdown is as follows:

Writing exercises (weeks 1-4): 25%
Full-length workshop piece (weeks 5-10): 40%
Classroom participation (discussion assignments and workshop critiques): 35%

Reference Text

Self-Editing for Fiction Writers, Second Edition


Note: This text is meant for you to refer to as you write or redraft. I will also suggest reading specific sections from it that are relevant to that week’s lecture. You are not required to read this cover to cover (though of course you may do so if you wish).