

Beginner Fiction Workshop

By Andrew Dana Hudson

An introduction to the practice of writing fiction, elements and aspects of the writing craft, from the word level on up. The goal: the discovery, refinement, and pursuit of our own literary tastes, interests, voice, goals, professionalization, and community.

First, we will work our way through the exercises in *Steering the Craft* by Ursula K. LeGuin (your professor's personal pick for G.O.A.T.—greatest of all time). This short, beautiful, practical book will develop our thinking about the aesthetics of story and the written word.

Along the way we will also devote time to “Show-and-Tell.” For these sessions you will be asked to find and share pieces of writing that *you* like and appreciate. We will use these to explore further craft topics while also reflecting on our own literary preferences. What kind of writers do we want to be, and why?

In addition to the exercises, you will also draft a short story, which we will spend the latter weeks of the semester workshopping. During these weeks, as time allows, we will also have lectures on miscellaneous topics related to literature and publishing.

Along with your short story, you will also write a craft analysis of a novel or short story collection (see book list below) as well as a short “creative response,” due at the end of the semester.

Required Reading:

- *Steering the Craft*, by Ursula K. LeGuin
- I will also be sending out additional short stories or chapters to read ahead of some sessions, depending on time.
- You will also be reading and responding to your peers' work. Be prepared to read two short stories each week in the latter part of the semester.
- Finally, you are required to select one novel or short story collection from a list (see last page), which you will read and respond to for your craft analysis paper.

Required Assignments:

- **5 Short Creative Writing Exercises**
- **1 Short Story** (roughly 1000-5000 words)
- **1 Craft Analysis Paper of a novel/collection**
- **1 Creative Book Response** (500-1000 words)
- **Feedback Letters** (short written responses) to the stories workshopped

Craft Exercises

The first two thirds of the course will be spent working through exercises from the Ursula K. LeGuin's *Steering the Craft*, which will guide us through the elements and techniques of good writing from punctuation to point of voice. Every other week, we will share and workshop two of these in class. **For each pair of exercises, you need only complete and turn in one.** We will often start these exercises in class, but it will be up to you to pick the one that you find most generative to complete and turn in. The length of these pieces varies depending on the exercise.

Show-and-Tell

Alternating weeks with our craft exercise workshops, we will devote the bulk of several class periods to sharing examples of writing that interest or move us, working our way from the sentence level to the structure level. That means *you* will be finding passages, scenes or books that reflect the kind of work that you might want to do, or at least that you'd like to learn from. So be on the lookout as you read, and start thinking about your past favorite books or stories. There is no need to fret that your chosen work is not impressive enough or literary enough; all genres and styles are welcome—any writing that we find memorable is probably worth examining closer. These are not graded, but completion is required to pass the class.

Your Short Story

You will write and share one complete short story for this class. We will be workshopping these throughout in the latter part of the semester, so due dates will vary. Early on each of you will sign up for a particular workshop week, with your story due one week earlier. When it is your turn to submit:

- Your story should likely be roughly between 1000-5000 words long. If you go outside this range on either side, expect higher expectations.
- Unless your story requires particular typographical expressiveness, use Standard Manuscript Format: <https://www.shunn.net/format/story/>
- Optional: you may, if you like, include an author statement at the beginning or end of your story articulating your intentions and any questions you have for readers or aspects you would like feedback on.
- Bring sufficient printed copies of your story for the class to the workshop.

Late Stories: Stories for workshop must be submitted on time and will not be accepted late. If you are not prepared to submit your story on your pre-assigned date, you may lose the opportunity to have your story workshopped. If you know that you cannot be prepared on your assigned workshop date, it's important to let me know as soon as possible. Rescheduling is not guaranteed, but there is better chance if you let me know sooner rather than later.

Feedback Letters

The latter weeks of the class will be spent workshopping the above-mentioned short stories. For those

workshop days, you will read two stories written by your peers and provide each with feedback in the form of a thoughtful, typed feedback letter. These workshop letters are not just to help your peers. Reading and thinking about how to make other writers' work better is, in fact, one of the best ways to become a better writer yourself (see Workshop Enlightenment below).

You should come prepared with a completed written response (adding notes during the discussion is fine, but writing this in class is NOT). Within your feedback letters, it is expected that you will:

- Articulate briefly your understanding of the story: genre, vibe, goal, theme, basic arc. A good heuristic for this is to include a paragraph beginning with the phrase “I read this story as...”
- Identify aspects of the writing that are working well in the story, that you enjoyed, admired, or learned from.
- Identify aspects of the writing where you, as a reader, had questions, experienced confusion, saw a need for development, or had a specific suggestion that you believe aligns with the work’s goals and would make the story stronger.
- Every response should offer at least one specific and detailed suggestion for revision

You may also provide your peer with line notes if you so choose (i.e. annotating, marking up, and commenting directly on their draft) – this is not a substitute for writing a feedback letter.

Late Letters: It’s important to read your peers’ stories before workshop, so you can be a helpful participant. If you are unable to come to workshop (because of illness, for example) and need additional time to submit your feedback letters, please contact me about an extension. Because receiving feedback from your peers is such an important part of what you will get out of this course as writers, it’s important to make a priority of providing your peers with timely feedback on their work—it’s what you’ll want them to do for you.

Workshop Enlightenment:

In this class we will be workshopping each other’s fiction. Workshopping can be an intense and challenging experience, particularly for newer writers. An important step in learning to make productive use of this time is to achieve what I call *workshop enlightenment*. This begins with the understanding that **the majority of the benefit of workshopping a piece of fiction flows to the critiquers, not the critiqued**. Workshopping is foremost a way for you to build critical reading muscles by encountering work with an eye for improving it. It is not, unfortunately, a surefire way to hear exactly what you need to make a story everything you want it to be. Especially in a class as large as ours, you will likely get feedback that is contradictory; for instance, some may say your story needs to be longer, while others say it needs to be shorter. You should not expect to be able to synthesize the feedback in 18 critique letters into a perfect set of revisions. Instead, you should learn to understand and trust your own creative instincts—instincts you will build by critiquing each other’s work!

Remember: the words of our peers are a gift that we should be grateful for, because, regardless of whether or not we like those words, they help us learn what kind of writer we ourselves want to be.

Grading Policy:

Grading will be on a point system, for a **possible total 100 points**:

5 Creative Exercises (10 pts each)	50 pts
1 Short Story	15 pts
1 Craft Analysis Paper	15 pts
1 Creative Book Response	5 pts
Preparedness and Participation:	15 pts
Total	100

Class schedule (subject to change depending on class size):

Week 1

Tues: Syllabus, Introductions, Workshop Expectations, Etc.
Thurs: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 1: The Sound of Writing

Week 2

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 2: Punctuation and Grammar
Thurs: Workshop exercises 1+2

Week 3

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 3: Sentence Length and Complex Syntax
Thurs: Show-and-Tell #1 / Sentence Stuff

Week 4

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 4: Repetition
Thurs: Workshop exercises 3+4

Week 5

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 5: Adjectives and adverbs
Thurs: Show-and-Tell #2 / Imagery and Theme

Week 6

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 6: Verbs: Person and Tense
Thurs: Workshop exercises 5+6

Week 7

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 7: Point of View and Voice
Thurs: Show-and-Tell #3 / Character and Dialogue

Week 8

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 8: Changing Point of View
Thurs: Workshop exercises 7+8

Week 9

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 9: Indirect Narration, or What Tells
Thurs: Show-and-Tell #4 / Structure and Plot

Week 10

Tues: *Steering the Craft*, Chapter 10: Crowding and Leaping
Thurs: Workshop Exercises 9+8

Week 11

Tues: Workshop Enlightenment and the Critique of Fiction
Thurs: Workshop Short Stories #1

Week 12

Tues: Analyzing Craft (your book reports)
Thurs: Workshop Short Stories #2

Week 13

Tues: A Quick Tour of Genres
Thurs: Workshop Short Stories #3

Week 14

Tues: Professionalization, or How do I Actually Get Published?
Thurs: Workshop Short Stories #4

Week 15

Tues: Q+A and Reflections
Thurs: Workshop Short Stories #5

Final Assignment: Craft Analysis Paper + Creative Book Response; there is no final exam for this course.

Book List for Craft Analysis Paper

One assignment for this class is a paper critiquing and analyzing a full book of fiction, either a novel or a short story collection. I want to be familiar with the books you are critiquing, but I also don't want to read a dozen+ papers on the same book! Thus I've provided a list of 24 works for you to choose from.

Partly this list flows from my own interests and tastes—these are books I've read recently enough to engage productively with your papers—but I've also crafted it to include a diversity of genres and authors. You should pick a book that might reflect the kind of fiction you yourself might like to write, or at least want to understand better.

Note: this is not a lit analysis paper! This is a craft analysis. You'll be reading not for themes and symbolism but for “what works” lessons that you can apply to your own writing.

I am giving you this list at the beginning of the semester, so you'll have time to choose, acquire and read a book that interests you. While you can do a first read of your chosen book in whatever format you like (ebook, audiobook, etc.), you are responsible for acquiring a paper copy to reference in your assignment. (The exception: if you foolishly choose to read *my* book, I will provide you with a copy.)

Novels:

HHhH, Laurent Binet (historical metafiction, translation from French)

Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino (translation from Italian)

Your House Will Pay, Steph Cha (literary fiction/crime fiction)

Claire DeWitt and the City of the Dead, Sara Gran (detective noir)

Our Shared Storm: A Novel of Five Climate Futures, Andrew Dana Hudson (climate fiction)

The Fifth Season, N K Jemisin (epic fantasy)

Biography of X, Catherine Lacey (literary fiction/alternate history)

The Dispossessed, Ursula K LeGuin (science fiction)

Ancillary Justice, Ann Leckie (science fiction)

The City & The City, China Miéville (weird fiction/crime procedural)

The Bone Clocks, David Mitchell (literary fiction/fantasy)

Detransition, Baby, Torrey Peters (literary/queer fiction)

Red Plenty, Francis Spufford (historical fiction)

Heavy Weather, Bruce Sterling (climate fiction)

The Nickel Boys, Colson Whitehead (historical fiction)

Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, Gabrielle Zevin (literary/popular fiction)

Short Story Collections:

Pump Six, Paolo Bacigalupi

Exhalation, Ted Chiang

If I Survive You, Jonathan Escoffery

What I Didn't See, Karen Joy Fowler

Get In Trouble, Kelly Link

Her Body and Other Parties, Carmen Maria Machado

Secret Lives of Church Ladies, Deesha Philyaw

Tenth of December, George Saunders