



Independent Learning

ENGLISH 351

*INTRODUCTION TO FICTION WRITING:
THE SHORT STORY*

Syllabus Preview

Instructor: Sara Stamey
Credits: 5 Quarter Credits
Lessons: 9 Assignments
Exams: No Exam
Prereq: ENG 101
Format: Self-paced independent learning with instructor guidance
Note: WWU English majors/minors may apply up to 10 credits earned through distance learning to their major/minor course of study.

The following pages are an excerpt from the full course syllabus. Western Washington University reserves the right to cancel courses and change instructors, course requirements and textbooks at any time. Check with the Independent Learning office regarding course availability.

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ENGLISH 351

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COURSE INTRODUCTION:

We are all storytellers. Most of us are surrounded by stories in conversations and jokes, on television, film, and media, and there are certain rhythms to building and releasing tension that seem second nature. The medium of short fiction in print is a special breed of story, with its own magic and practices.

This course is an opportunity for you to explore and develop your skills as a fiction reader and writer. Reading comes first, as a writer must read. To deepen your understanding of the medium you'll be working with, you'll study short story models and analyze the elements that contribute to a seamless and powerful piece of fiction. You'll practice the basic fiction writing skills of establishing conflict, character, setting, dialogue, point of view, and theme. You will then develop your own creative ideas by writing two short stories (or one longer story). Finally, you will refine your stories through revision.

In this course we will concentrate on reader-oriented fiction, which means stories that communicate clearly and evoke the desired emotional response in your reader. We will practice traditional narrative forms, rather than free-form "experimental" fiction. As any athlete or musician will tell you, you must practice the basic skills, and then practice them some more, before you're ready to make a transcendent leap.

Be patient with yourself. It takes many years to develop a sure ear and clear voice for fiction. Many people - the same ones who willingly practice long hours to hone their flute scales or high jumps - harbor the conviction that their first stories will spring fully-formed and perfect onto the page. A few geniuses may have that capacity. The rest of us must work at it. So please: resist the temptation to regard your initial drafts as "gold." Realize that we will have to sift for the nuggets, and work to refine the words.

Finally, a word about the infamous Writer's Block: Writing is challenging, hard work, but it's also fun, and wonderfully rewarding on many levels. We all have apprehensions about the process - especially when staring at a blank page or computer screen - but we'll explore ways to free ourselves from overbearing internal critics that can clog the creative flow. So please, come prepared to work and enjoy!

TEXTS:

- *Writing Fiction, a Guide to Narrative Craft*, 7th edition, Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French, 2007, Pearson Longman ISBN 0-321-27736-8
- *Woe is I*, Patricia O'Conner, 2nd edition, 2003, Riverhead ISBN 1-59448-006-0

About the Textbooks:

Writing Fiction by Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French is a comprehensive guide to writing technique, and a mini-anthology. It will generously reward your complete and attentive reading. It offers insights and encouragement for the creative process, as well as discussions of the short story examples provided, and writing exercises to try. During the course we will not cover every story or exercise, but you might want to explore these other possibilities in your continuing writing efforts.

Woe is I is an informal, painless review of punctuation and grammar. The most brilliant ideas can be obscured by shaky control of language, so do refresh yourself with these basic rules.

COURSE PROCEDURE:

I look forward to working with you on a one-to-one basis while you practice your writing skills and develop your creative ideas into one or two short stories. We will establish a true “correspondence,” as I will return a written response to each of your submissions. I encourage you to open a discussion, sending your questions or comments in notes accompanying your assignments or via email.

Revisions of your short stories are part of the assignments. When sending in a story revision, always include a copy of the previous version containing my markups and comments. This helps me gauge your progress.

Procedural Details:

- Use one of the enclosed yellow cover sheets with each assignment you send in. (The Independent Learning office will provide more if you run out.) The assignments should be sent to the Independent Learning office at the address given. The assignments must be done in chronological order; I strongly advise sticking to one assignment at a time, then waiting for my response before submitting the next lesson. Occasionally, under time pressures, you may submit two assignments simultaneously. It's up to you to organize your time and plan ahead for quarter deadlines, etc.
- SASE: If you want your graded assignment returned directly to you, you MUST provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) with adequate postage. Providing such an SASE is standard procedure in the publishing world, so if you're thinking of submitting a story for publication you will need to continue that practice.

- Always keep a copy of your assignment. I will be marking the copy you send to me, using standard editing marks and my own abbreviation (see APPENDIX B in the blue pages at the back of the course manual). I will return the marked copy with my comments and answers to your question.
- REQUIRED MANUSCRIPT FORMAT: See APPENDIX A in the blue pages at the back of the manual for story layout. All lessons (except Assignment 1) MUST be typed/computer printed and double spaced.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. A letter of introduction and an initial ungraded exercise.
2. Reading of entire Burroway text. I strongly encourage a complete reading of *Woe is I* as well.
3. Graded assignments, with reference to the texts -- a combination of essay questions and brief (1-2 pg.) writing exercises.
4. Writing and revisions of two short stories (7-10 pages each) or one longer story (14-20 pages). Wait until Assignment #5 to send in your first story draft. If you decide to write two shorter stories, you will submit the first draft of your second story as Assignment #8.

A story will not receive a grade until its final revision has been turned in. See guidelines in Assignment #5 regarding types of stories that are not suitable for this course.

COURSE EVALUATION:

As you complete the course, you will have an appreciation of how far you have progressed in your writing. A lot will depend on the effort and time you have invested. Your honest self-evaluation will be the most important gauge of what you have accomplished.

When a letter grade is required, I must set criteria: Your main projects, two short stories (or one longer story), will not be graded until the final revisions are turned in. Evaluation will depend on the quality of the writing and your effort and improvement through the rewriting process. The assigned questions and exercises will be graded when turned in, so they may help you get a feeling of what range you're working in. Feel free to discuss with me ways to improve your grade.

GRADING:

A -- Exceptional work. The writing is technically polished and demonstrates strong story values, as well as the writer's commitment to the rewriting process.

B -- Promising work that demonstrates improvement through revision. May lack the skill or polish of exceptional writing.

C -- The work meets course requirements and shows some improvement through revisions, but reflects a lack of effort and commitment.

D -- The work reflects indifference on the part of the writer; clearly little effort has been involved.

F -- Course requirements have not been met.

Students who choose the pass/fail option must earn a C- to receive a grade of “pass.”

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR:

Sara Stamey, a freelance writer and editor, has published novels, short stories, poetry, and magazine articles. She has taught nonfiction and fiction writing courses for Western Washington University since 1988. Earlier, while earning her “credentials” as a writer, she pursued the traditional apprenticeship of travel and assorted jobs, from selling hearing aids to operating a nuclear reactor to teaching Scuba in the Bay Islands of Honduras. Ms. Stamey received her M.A. in English and Writing from WWU.