

San José State University
Department of English and Comparative Literature
ENGL 241, MFA Fiction Workshop, Fall 2020

Course and Contact Information

Instructor:	Nick Taylor
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Office Hours:	By appointment
Class Days/Time:	Thurs 4:00pm – 6:45pm
Classroom:	Canvas and Zoom

Course Description

This is the most advanced fiction workshop offered at SJSU. It is designed for students pursuing writing as a vocation. Students enrolled in the MFA Program in Creative Writing have registration priority. If there is extra space, graduate students in other disciplines and Open University students may enroll with instructor permission. The majority of our class time will be spent discussing student work. We will also read from a fiction anthology and a PDF anthology of published stories selected by members of the workshop. Additionally, we will discuss aspects of the writing profession. Topics include finding time to write, managing time, revision, genre, using material, finding an agent or publisher, and networking.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLO)

This course addresses the following Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) approved for the MFA in Creative Writing:

- SLO 3: Students will demonstrate an appropriate level of knowledge of literary history, literary theory, and craft and theory of creative writing.
- SLO 4: Students will demonstrate critical and analytical skills in the evaluation and interpretation of literary texts.
- SLO 5: Students will demonstrate a command of written academic English, including the abilities to: a) organize and present material in a cogent fashion; b) formulate and defend original arguments; c) employ effectively the language of their discipline; d) write under time constraints.

Required Texts/Readings

Textbooks

- Doerr, Anthony, and Heidi Pitlor, eds. *The Best American Short Stories 2019*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019. ISBN: 9781328484246
- Clark, Roy Peter. *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*. Little Brown Spark, 2006. ISBN: 9780316014991.

- PDF packet of published short stories selected by your classmates (available on Canvas by the third class meeting)

Course Requirements and Assignments

- Two new pieces of fiction. There may be time to turn in additional pieces if you choose. [SLO #5]
- In place of a final exam, you will turn in a significant revision of one of the pieces you workshopped. [SLO #5]
- Your comments on your classmates' work. [SLO #4]
- Participation in class discussions. [SLO #4]
- Leading class discussion on a published story of your choice. [SLO #3]
- Attendance at least two literary readings and written responses. [SLO #3, #4, #5]

Final Examination or Evaluation

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop submissions. Examples of changes that might be included in a substantial revision include adding or deleting a character, changing the point of view, inserting a new scene, and altering the ending of the story. It is not enough simply to correct the spelling and grammatical errors of the first draft. To earn a high grade on the revision, you must alter the story in some significant way. The revision is due the last day of class.

Grading Information

Creative writing can be evaluated according to general standards used to determine how well a piece of writing works. These include: 1) Textual and/or technical competence and eloquence. 2) Imaginative risk. 3) Energy and freshness of language. 4) Effective use of metaphor and other forms of figurative language. 5) Clarity and precision of detail. 6) Capacity for mixed feelings and uncertainty. 7) Effective use of grammar, syntax, and rhythm. 8) Naturalness and believability. 9) Appropriateness of style to subject. 10) Compelling audience interest.

Grades will be based on the quality and quantity of writing you do as well as the quality and constructiveness of the criticism offered during the workshops.

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

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| • Your fiction (2 stories and a revision) | 60% |
| • Class participation and peer commentaries | 20% |
| • Leading the discussion on a published story | 10% |
| • Responses to two literary readings | 10% |

For extra credit you can attend at up to two more literary readings. Responses must be turned in by the last day of class.

Determination of Grades

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A- = excellent; B+/B/B- = above average; C+/C/C- = average; D+/D/D- = below average; F = failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

One-Unit Enhancement: Attendance at Literary Readings

Because this is a 4-unit course, students can expect to spend a minimum of twelve hours per week preparing for and attending classes and completing course assignments. This course will have integrated into the syllabus the following 1-unit enhancement:

- International Education / Cultural Enrichment

You are required to attend **two readings** by poets or prose writers. Given that present circumstances prevent large in-person gatherings, you will need to attend these readings online. SJSU's Center for Literary Arts (<https://www.clasanjose.org/>) has a full schedule this semester. I recommend you attend those events, but you may also choose to write your responses to readings by other authors.

After attending each reading, you will write a **1000-word personal response to each**. You may respond to any aspect of the reading, for example the speaker, the venue, the material performed, or the Q&A with the audience. Explore how your attendance at the reading changed the way you think about creative writing as an art form or as a profession. Your response papers are due by the end of the semester.

Workshop Procedure

At the first class meeting, we will determine the order for workshops. Each of you will choose at least two dates when you want to hand in your stories. On those dates, you will **upload a digital file (Word or PDF)** of your story to the Canvas message board for that class meeting. Your story must be **double-spaced, single-sided**, and it must include **page numbers**. Your classmates will read your story, make comments using Track Changes or Adobe Acrobat notes, and type a one-page commentary, which they will post as comments on the message board. At the next class meeting, we will discuss your story. We will discuss up to three stories per class. At the end of the discussion, everyone will hand the author their marked-up manuscripts and commentaries.

Peer Commentaries

Your typed commentary on each student story will address (a) your interpretation of the story (what the story is about, what the author is trying to accomplish) and (b) suggestions for improvement. A portion of your final grade will be determined by the quality of your peer commentaries.

Classroom Protocol

In a workshop, writers must feel safe sharing their work with the group. Please keep your critiques confined to the work, not the author. Hostile, threatening, or personal criticism will not be tolerated. If you feel threatened by a classmate, please bring the issue to my attention so I can address it promptly.

Procedure for Discussing Published Fiction

One of the most useful skills you can learn in graduate school is how to lead a discussion. I will ask each of you to lead a class discussion this semester on a published story of your choice. **Please upload a PDF of your chosen story to the Class Anthology message board on Canvas by the second class meeting.**

When it is your turn to lead discussion, please come prepared with enough questions to keep the class talking for approximately fifteen minutes. I would like to approach these stories from a writer's perspective, so questions should lean more toward craft issues than thematic ones. I will talk more about what I have in mind during the first couple of weeks of class.

Late Assignment Policy

It is important that you turn in your stories when you say you're going to. This is your most important responsibility. **Late or emailed stories will not be accepted.** If you need to change your workshop date, it is your responsibility to find someone willing to trade dates with you, and to tell me that you've switched.

University Policies

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' [Syllabus Information web page](http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>.

Course Schedule

This class meets every Thursday, starting on Thursday, August 20. The last class is Thursday, December 3. Class will not be held on Thursday, Nov 29 (Thanksgiving). **In lieu of a final exam, you will submit your final revision on the day reserved for the final exam, Thursday, December 10.**

Reading assignments meet SLO #1, writing assignments SLO #3.

Note: This schedule is subject to change. Announcements will be made in class.

Week	Date	Topics, Readings, Assignments, Deadlines
1	8/20/2020	Introduction
2	8/27/2020	Due: PDF of published short story Readings: <i>Best American Short Stories 2019</i> , "The Era" through "Pity and Shame," plus Preface and Introduction
3	9/3/2020	Readings: <i>Best American Short Stories 2019</i> , "Anyone Can Do It" through "Omakase"
4-16	9/10/2020 - 12/3/2020	Student workshops; student presentations on published stories
17	12/10/2020	Final revision due