

## FORM AND TECHNIQUE IN FICTION

SPRING 2016 — 351:307:01  
M 9:50 – 12:50 MURRAY HALL 002 COLLEGE AVE

John Holliday • LSH B106A  
Office Hours: M 8:30 – 9:30

### COURSE DESCRIPTION & GOALS

The primary business of this course is honing your craft as a fiction writer. So the big goal of the course is developing your own writing, your own voice and style. But good writers are good readers. So another crucial goal of the course is honing the skill of reading as a writer. Along, then, with dealing in writing exercises, workshop, revision, and discussion about craft, we'll also spend significant time reading and analyzing published fiction with a writerly eye. Form and Technique in Fiction fulfills the English Department learning goal of "the ability to write persuasively and precisely, in scholarly and, optionally, creative forms."

### COURSE STRUCTURE

#### CRAFT

In the first half of the semester, we'll deal exclusively in the craft the writing, the how to and why, the nuts and bolts of putting together a solid story. In order to sort these things out, we'll see how the pros do it, dissecting and discussing and putting the elements of craft to work ourselves.

#### WORKSHOP

In the second half of the semester, we'll workshop your own completed drafts. Workshop is the main way we'll attempt to grasp at the more elusive business of pulling the pieces of writing craft together into something that sings. The goal is to sharpen your work, of course. But it's also to sharpen our writerly acumen, our ability to understand what a piece is doing and to help it do it better.

### REQUIRED TEXTS

All required texts are posted on Sakai (in the Resources section).

### RECOMMENDED TEXTS

- Cook, William Wallace. 2011. *Plotto*. Portland, OR: Tin House Books.
- Garner, Brian. 2009. *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kiteley, Brian. 2008. *The 4 A.M. Breakthrough*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books.
- . 2005. *The 3 A.M. Epiphany*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books.
- LaPlante, Alice. 2007. *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Miller, Laura and Adam Begley, editors. 2000. *The salon.com Readers Guide to Contemporary Authors*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Tin House Books. 2012. *The Writer's Notebook II: Craft Essays from Tin House*. Portland, OR: Tin House Books.

## ASSIGNMENTS &amp; GRADING

Course Requirement	%
Participation	30
Exercises	10
Class Workshop Submission	10
Group Workshop Submission	10
Workshop Comments	25
Revision	10
Presentation	5

Note: All work should be typed unless stated otherwise. Please use Times New Roman, 12-point font, and one-inch margins (for prose, double space; for poetry, single space). This is standard manuscript formatting. All assignment due dates are listed in the course schedule below.

**PARTICIPATION**

The success of this class turns largely on your presence and contribution to discussion. You are generally expected to attend every class. But life happens. Thus, one absence will be overlooked, no questions asked. Absences will be excused *only* on account of medical reasons, religious observances, or personal emergencies. For any medical reason, you must, at minimum, submit a self-signed, handwritten note in which you testify that you were too ill to attend class. For any religious observance, you are required to notify me of this *in advance*. Personal emergencies will be addressed on a case-by-case basis. All students begin the course with a 100% participation grade (30 points). For every unexcused absence, your participation grade will be reduced 10 points. For every 15 minutes of unexcused lateness, your participation grade will be reduced 1 point.

For every class in which we read published work, you are required to prepare one question and one comment prior to class (one sentence each is sufficient). These questions and comments must be posted on Sakai (on the Workshop page) one hour before class begins; they also must be distinct from any other questions and comments already posted. For every class in which we read published work, if you do not post a distinct question and comment to Sakai on time, your participation grade will be reduced 1 point.

**EXERCISES**

Each week we'll spend time on writing exercises. We'll write and sometimes share what we've written by reading aloud. During the first half of the semester, you are required to revise and submit 4 of these exercises (at 1–2 pages each). For every class an exercise is late, its grade will be reduced 5 points (each exercise is worth 25 points).

**WORKSHOP SUBMISSIONS**

We will have one round of workshop with the entire class and one round with small groups. For each round, you are required to submit 7–11 pages of fiction (this must be must be one single story). In the first few weeks of class, we will create a schedule for workshop. ***Your workshop pieces are due in class one week before the date you are scheduled for workshop.*** You must post a PDF of your submission to our Sakai site (on the Workshop page) and bring enough paper copies of your submission to class for the class (21 copies) or your small group (6 copies). If you do not meet this deadline *and* these requirements, you will forfeit your workshop slot and your submission's grade will be reduced 20 points. For every additional class your submission is late, its grade will be reduced an additional 20 points (each submission is worth 100 points).

**WORKSHOP COMMENTS**

You are expected to make constructive line edits and marginal notes in others' workshop pieces and are required to type one constructive comment of 200–250 words (roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$ 's of a page) for each class workshop submission. You should address a submission's strengths and give suggestions for improvement. Typed comments are due on the day the pieces are scheduled for workshop. You must bring *two* copies of your typed comments (one for the writer and one for me). For every class a comment is late, its grade will be reduced  $\frac{1}{2}$  point (each comment is worth 1 point).

**REVISION**

Using some of the feedback you received in workshop, you are required to revise one of your workshop submissions. Along with this revision, you must submit the original submission I marked and a 2-page commentary in which you discuss your revision and your literary vision. For every *day* your revision/commentary is late, its grade will be reduced 20 points (the revision and commentary are each worth 50 points).

**PRESENTATION**

The writers we love influence our own work one way or another; and it's important to have writerly role models. You are required to give a brief presentation (5 minutes) on one fiction writer who really moves you. You must bring a sample of the writer's work to read aloud to the class and then explain what you find so great about this writer, how the writer influences your own work, and why we should all read this writer. No late presentations are permitted (the presentation is worth 100 points).

**GRADING SYSTEM**

Grades for all assignments will be calculated in terms of raw %. All assignments completed in good faith<sup>1</sup> and submitted on time will receive full credit for the requirement. Any assignment not submitted or not completed in good faith will receive 0%. Final grades for the course will be calculated as follows (Rutgers does not recognize minuses):

<b>%</b>	90	85	80	75	70	65	60	0
<b>letter</b>	A	B+	B	C+	C	D+	D	F

**GRADE DISPUTES**

It is my job to make every effort to grade as accurately and fairly as possible, and I take that job seriously. But should you believe I've made an error in recording or assessing any of your assignments or participation, please let me know as soon as possible. If you believe there is an error in recording, speak with me in person (during office hours or before or after class). If you believe there is an error in assessment, speak with me in person (during office hours or by appointment) *and* submit a signed letter detailing why you believe reassessment should be considered. All disputes submitted in a timely manner will receive a response within two weeks. ***No disputes will be considered after Wednesday, May 4<sup>th</sup>.***

---

<sup>1</sup> The notion *completed in good faith* is a measure of effort. While it doesn't have a strict definition, there are clear cases of what does and doesn't count as completed in good faith. For instance, assignment submissions that meet the assignment criteria (genre, page length, subject matter), lack egregious typos, have coherent syntax and diction, and don't repeat a single line for pages on end in the supposed name of being "avant-garde" have clearly been completed in good faith. On the other hand, assignment submissions that fall far short of the assignment criteria, contain egregious typos (such that it's clear the writer didn't proofread one bit), have incoherent syntax and diction (where this doesn't mean things that may, on first blush, seem incoherent, but on closer inspection are obviously deliberate and labored over, like, say, some late Samuel Beckett), or repeat a single line for pages on end in the name of whatever, have clearly not been completed in good faith. As you move away from these extreme ends of the good faith spectrum and toward the middle, there is a degree of murkiness. Whether partial credit will be given for such cases will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

### ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All students are expected to comply with the Rutgers Academic Integrity Policy. Any violations of this Policy will be confronted and reported. For more information on the Rutgers Academic Integrity Policy, visit [academicintegrity.rutgers.edu](http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu).

### RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES AND OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any course requirements due to religious observances, you are required to notify me of this *in advance*. If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any course requirements due to medical reasons, you must give me a note signed by a health care professional documenting the date of a medical appointment or time during which illness prevented the completion of course requirements. If you are unable to meet the deadlines of any of the course requirements due to personal reasons, speak to me as soon as possible (some form of documentation will be required). *No requests for accommodation of any kind will be considered after the last day of class.*

### SPECIAL NEEDS & SITUATIONS

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, you must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation (<https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>). If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus' disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with me and discuss the accommodations with me as early as possible. To begin this process, complete the Registration form on the ODS web site (<https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>).

### OFFICE HOURS & THE LITERARY COMMUNITY

Stop by. For questions or concerns, of course. But also if you just want to talk shop. If my hours don't work for you, let me know. We'll work something out. Also know that the literary community extends well beyond our classroom and my office hours. I encourage you to attend the Writers at Rutgers Reading Series, Inside the Writers House, or the Writers at Newark Reading Series. And if you know of something literary going on, tell us.

### ON TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

At some point, if you continue to write and read about the business of writing, you'll encounter the question of whether writing can be taught (or you could now just do a quick internet search and see the slew of results). I think the answer is, in one sense, obviously yes. But I also think the question is a little unclear or confused. What can be taught are matters of craft: lyrical devices, character development, narrative pacing, descriptive techniques, and so on. Insofar as these things can be noted, analyzed, applied, and practiced, they can be taught. This seems little different than teaching the technical machinery of any art. And between writerly-minded reading and writing exercises, we'll be engaged in learning the matters of craft all semester long.

But what's clearly trickier is how to put all these technical elements together to create something emotionally powerful or aesthetically glorious. Making great art is not a mechanical affair (or at least not wholly so). It takes something more, something seemingly inspired, something beyond a mere grasp of craft. Can this be taught? Umm, probably not, if "teaching" means someone can simply show you how to write the next great American novel. But we can still try to put our fingers on how the stories and essays and poems we love make us emotionally riveted and aesthetically moved, how they drop our jaws and send our heads spinning. And we can submit our best attempts at doing the same to others with writerly sense, using their feedback to shape and refine and hone. And so we will.

But also, whatever inspired magic is involved in writing great stuff, only those who work, only those who write, day in, day out, have even a chance at producing such stuff. As Mary Heaton Vorse said, “The art of writing is the art of applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.” And at least for me, at times it seems that art calls for chains and some kind of industrial padlock. The trenches in which writerly wars are fought are so, so far from inspiration and creative magic (or whatever). The literary community you’re now part of by being part of this class can, if anything, help you navigate these trenches.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

NOTE: THE DAY READINGS ARE LISTED IS THE DAY THEY WILL BE DISCUSSED.

THE WRITING LIFE	
M 1/25	Course Introduction & Your Stories

SOUND	
M 2/1	<p>PURE SOUND</p> <p>David Foster Wallace, <i>The Pale King</i> §1</p> <p>Lydia Davis, “Men” &amp; “The Song”</p> <p>VOICE</p> <p>Kathleen Founds, “When Mystical Creatures Attack!”</p> <p>George Saunders, “Victory Lap”</p> <p>Junot Díaz, “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars”</p>
M 2/8	<p>DIALOGUE</p> <p>Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”</p> <p>Deborah Eisenberg, “The Flaw in the Design”</p>
M 2/15	<p><b>DUE: Exercise 1</b></p> <p>STYLE</p> <p>Anton Chekhov, excerpt from “The Lady with the Little Dog,” two translations</p> <p>David Foster Wallace, “Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR”</p> <p>Ann Beattie, “Coney Island”</p> <p>Donald Barthelme, “I Bought a Little City”</p> <p>Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”</p>

CHARACTER	
M 2/22	<p><b>DUE: Exercise 2</b></p> <p>PEOPLE</p> <p>Zadie Smith, “The Girl with Bangs”</p> <p>George Saunders, “Sticks”</p> <p>PLACES</p> <p>William Gass, “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country”</p> <p>THINGS</p> <p>Lorrie Moore, “People Like That are the Only People Here”</p>

STORY	
M 2/29	<p><b>DUE: Exercise 3</b>            STRUCTURE &amp; PLOT            Thomas Bernhard, "Pisa and Venice," "In Earnest," "Moosbrugger's Mistake," "Madness"            Joyce Carol Oates, "How I Contemplated the World"            Kelly Link, "Summer People"</p>
M 3/7	<p><b>DUE: Exercise 4</b>            CONFLICT            Margaret Atwood, "Death by Landscape"            Stephen Dixon, "Mother-in-Law"            Rebecca Curtis, "Summer, with Twins"</p> <p><i>Spring Break</i></p>
M 3/21	<p>NARRATION            Mary Gaitskill, "A Romantic Weekend"            Michael Sheehan, "Jean Takes a Moment to Respond"            Amy Hempel, "Reference #388475848-5"</p>

CLASS WORKSHOP	
M 3/28	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>
M 4/4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>
M 4/11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>
M 4/18	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> <li>6.</li> </ol>

GROUP WORKSHOP	
M 4/25	GROUP 1 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
	GROUP 2 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
	GROUP 3 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
	GROUP 4 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6.

GO FORTH INTO THE WORLD & WRITE	
M 5/2	<b>DUE: Revision &amp; Presentation</b>



## WORKSHOP GUIDELINES

NOTE: YOUR SUBMISSION IS DUE BY THE CLASS ONE WEEK BEFORE TO YOU ARE SCHEDULED FOR WORKSHOP. YOU MUST POST A PDF OF YOUR SUBMISSION TO OUR SAKAI SITE (ON THE WORKSHOP PAGE) AND BRING ENOUGH PAPER COPIES OF YOUR SUBMISSION TO CLASS FOR THE CLASS (21 COPIES) OR YOUR SMALL GROUP (6 COPIES).

### DISCUSSION RULES

- The work of each writer will receive 20 minutes of discussion, during which the writer may not speak. After the discussion is over, the writer may ask questions of clarification.
- Discussion members may not ask the writer anything and should not direct any comments to the writer. The discussion is one to be had by all but the writer (it should be as though the writer isn't in the room). After the discussion is over, the writer may be asked questions.
- The first 5 minutes of discussion are reserved for discussing the successes of the work.
- The remaining 20 minutes should be focused on constructive criticism.

### DISCUSSION ETIQUETTE

- Though we will be acting as though the writer isn't in the room, we must be mindful of the fact that the writer *is* in the room.
- All comments must be directed at *the work*, not the writer. We are discussing and considering the work, not the writer.
- All critical comments must have the aim of helping the writer improving the work (or future work).

### COMMENTS

In all of your comments (written and spoken), you should consider three things: your immediate response to the work, the elements of craft operating or not operating in the work, and what the work is out to accomplish stylistically. But while immediate response is important, take care to recognize when the work is out to do something you might not care for in general. The best workshop reader is able to set aside her particular tastes when such setting aside is called for.

For instance, some people don't like maximalism. But there is a vetted tradition of maximalist work, work praised by critics and general readers alike. So say you happen to be someone who dislikes maximalism, generally speaking. And say what's up for workshop is something operating in the tradition of maximalism. It, then, would be crucial for you to, the best you can, set aside your distaste for maximalism and consider the work's success within that tradition. As a workshop reader, you always need to ask yourself how well a piece is functioning as the kind of thing it is. To critique a maximalist piece from a minimalist perspective would be to do the piece a great disservice. There are various literary traditions at odds with one another. Workshop is not the place to debate which, if any, tradition has the aesthetic upper hand.

### MARGINAL COMMENTS

Treat these as a running discussion of your response to the work as you read it. If you find something moving or funny or confusing or awkward or off-putting, say so, even if you can't pin down why the passage had this effect for you. It's helpful for the writer to know how people simply respond to the work. Of course, if you can pin down why a passage has particular effect for you, that's all the more helpful.

### END COMMENT

This is the place to reflect on your overall impression of the work and do your best to be as specific as possible. First, comment on what you see as the successes of the work and why you see them as successful. Then note where you think the work is falling short and how these things might be addressed in revision. And if you think any particular tastes of yours might be clouding your reading, say so. Structure your typed end comment as a single-spaced letter to the writer.

**CRAFT QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER***Language*

- Is the title compelling? Do the first sentences compel you to read on?
- Does the tone suit the subject matter?
- Are descriptions evocative? Are they ever heavy-handed?
- Are metaphors/similes effective? Do they ever get in the way?
- Are sound devices (alliteration, consonance, repetition, etc.) used well?
- Are there any confusing passages on account of muddy syntax or diction?
- Are paragraph breaks used well?
- Given the stylistic tradition the piece is operating in or aiming toward, is it stylistically successful?

*Character*

- Are the characters believable? Are their actions believable and psychologically compelling?
- Are their actions consistent? If not, is there a good explanation for this?
- Are they round rather than flat? If they are flat, is it deliberately so and working?
- Is the narrator compelling? Is there a clear voice?
- Is dialogue natural? Does it move the piece forward? Is it interesting?
- Is the POV best for the piece? If it shifts, does it do so well?

*Story*

- Is conflict evident early on? If not, does it matter?
- Is the plot compelling? Is the pacing effective? Too fast or slow? Is the end fitting and believable?
- Are there any passages/scenes that could be cut or trimmed?
- Is there anything told that would be better shown (and vice versa)?
- Is the setting fitting?
- Are the emotions actually evoked the emotions the story intends to evoke?
- Is there too much or too little backstory?

**LINE EDITS**

If you notice a typo, unintentional grammar/usage error, or unintentional tense shift, mark it. If you find some phrasing awkward or not as powerful as it could be and have a suggestion for improvement, mark it.

**A NOTE FOR WRITERS**

While hearing a group of people take your work super seriously for 20 minutes can be exhilarating, receiving criticism on something you put your heart into can sometimes be tough. But at the time of workshop, it's important that you're open to criticism and do your best to distance your person from your piece (however much that's actually possible). The whole hope of workshop is to see where your piece is working and where it still needs work (and then, of course, the bigger hope is that you see how to address the areas that need work). If you're resistant or defensive, you might overlook a comment or critique that would help your piece in the long run.

But after you've honestly considered all comments, throw out what you don't find helpful, what doesn't fit with your vision for the piece. And that might be a lot. But it's that bit that does resonate, that you might not have ever seen yourself, it's this that can take a piece to the next level. If you come away from workshop with a handful of solid suggestions for your next draft (or your next piece), then you've come away with something incredibly valuable. Alice LaPlante puts it this way: "I tell my students that they need to approach a workshop critique carrying two equally strong but contradictory thoughts in their heads: to be open to criticism and ready to receive whatever it is they can learn from the discussion, and to retain the option of telling people to go to hell if the advice doesn't make sense" (*The Making of a Story* 549).