

Introduction to Fiction and Poetry
CRWRI-UA.815.007
Fall 2021

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Class Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30-1:45 p.m.

Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:45 to 3 p.m. (right after class) or email me to set up another time.

The Basics

This is a combination of a creative writing workshop and a more traditional English class. On Tuesdays we will discuss our classmates' writing and on Thursdays we will discuss famous people's writing. We will strive to approach both sets of work with the same **respect and close attention**.

Our goal is to improve as readers and writers. As readers, we will identify the choices that make a piece of writing delightful, honest, beautiful, or necessary. As writers, we will learn how to incorporate these choices and qualities in our original work. Additionally, we will discuss certain hot-topic questions such as "What purpose does literature serve in society?" and "What are the ethics of empathy?"

The Texts

The only full book you need to buy/rent/check out of the library for this class is Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (NYRB Classics). Copies are available at the NYU bookstore and probably at other local bookstores (Three Lives, The Strand, etc.). All other class readings are available in a packet available from the NYU bookstore for \$[TBA]. If this poses a financial hardship, please email me separately. You will need to annotate as you read and bring the packet to class. Screens will not be allowed in class except under extraordinary circumstances clearable with me by email.

The Workload

For every Tuesday class, you need to come prepared with a paper copy of your classmates' work, which you have marked up, as well as a one-page single-space critique letter for each person being workshopped. You also need to either email or give me a paper copy of this critique letter.

Each person will submit twice during the semester and may submit either poetry or prose, though I encourage you to do one submission of each. A poetry submission should be **one to four single spaced pages** and up to **four poems**. A fiction submission should be **seven to 15 double spaced pages**. If you are scheduled to be workshopped the following Tuesday, you will bring 12 printed copies of your piece (**proofread**, 12-point boring font, one-inch margins) to hand out to me and your classmates. You will also email a copy to the class in case anyone is absent. Workshopping

can be thought of as a three-week long process. Week one: You submit. Week two: You are workshopped. Week three: You meet with me in office hours to debrief the workshop.

For every Thursday class, you need to have read and marked up the assigned readings, which will usually involve several works of poetry and fiction alongside a paired essay or interview. Weekly readings will be less than 90 pages and must be done with extreme care.

Each week, one of you will be the Resident Expert. RE's will open the class with a ten-minute presentation on the themes of the text(s), relevant historical context, and background about the author(s)—contemporary influences, recurrent preoccupations, poorly-aged political beliefs, relevant love affairs, etc. When we are reading more than one author for that class, the RE may focus on the author(s) and text(s) of their choice. To this end, the RE should have read at least one and probably more than one longer critical piece on the texts and/or authors in addition to any that may be assigned. Good places to look for such pieces are the [London Review of Books](#), [New York Review of Books](#), [Harper's](#), [New Yorker](#), [Bookforum](#). You can email me if you need suggestions or are getting paywalled out. More academic sources can be found through the [NYU libraries](#). A good RE presentation will be information-dense and show evidence of significant research. No visual component is necessary, but if you want to do a powerpoint or something, feel free.

For your final portfolio, you will submit a substantial revision of either previous submission and either two new poems or three pages of new fiction, which can but need not be the start of something longer.

Attendance

You have to come to class. You get one no-questions-asked absence (obviously this can't be on a day when you are being workshopped, submitting to workshop, or Resident Experting). Every two additional absences will lower your grade by one letter grade. Persistent, egregious tardiness (i.e. being more than five minutes late more than twice) will count as an absence. In the case of an emergency (family, medical, or otherwise) the rules are obviously different. Please let me know about anything that comes up as soon as possible.

One missing absence can be made up by attending a poetry or fiction reading and writing a two-page single-spaced reflection. I encourage you to do this for your own edification and pleasure even if you do not need to make up class. Additionally, one lucky person (i.e. the first person who asks) can make up an absence by signing up to be RE a second time.

Grading

Your grade is

- 20% The timeliness and polish of your submissions.
- 20% The quality of your Resident Expert presentation.
- 20% The detail and care taken in the critique letters and in your comments in workshop.
(See HOW TO CRITIQUE.)
- 20% Your close attention to the assigned reading, as evidenced by your eager participation in class and original, specific comments.
- 20% The timely, polished completion of your final portfolio.

Plagiarism

I will fail you for this, but it will make both of us sad, so please don't do it. If you are trending toward the kind of desperation that might bring you to plagiarism, please come to office hours as soon as possible.

Number Assignments

1 =	7 =
2 =	8 =
3 =	9* =
4* =	10 =
5 =	11 =
6 =	12 =

The Schedule

Sept	2	Intros, Mingling, Syllabus, Handouts (INFO GATHERING, HOW TO CRITIQUE, PRESCRIPTIONS, "The School" by Donald Barthelme) HW: Read both "Otherwise" by Jane Kenyon and the "Husband Stitch" by Carmen Maria Machado. Pick one, mark it up, and write a sample critique letter for the author. (See HOW TO CRITIQUE handout)
Sept	7	Review of HOW TO CRITIQUE and other workshop norms. Sample workshop of Kenyon and Machado.
Sept	9	<u>The Prose Poem</u> Poems: Charles Baudelaire, Jorge Luis Borges, Lydia Davis, Ben Lerner, Daniil Kharms, Peter Handke, Carolyn Forché, Ars Poetica by Czeslaw Milosz Essays: "Why I Write" by Paul Auster and "On Keeping a Notebook" by Joan Didion The Resident Expert is 12.

		Students 1 and 2 submit for workshop.
Sept	14	Workshop 1 and 2. 3 and 4 submit for workshop.
Sept	16	<u>Dirty Realism and its Heirs.</u> Fiction: Denis Johnson from <i>Train Dreams</i> , Ottessa Moshfegh from <i>Homesick for Another World</i> , Virginie Despentes from <i>Vernon Subutex</i> . Poems: Allen Ginsberg, John Darnielle, Richard Hugo, Essay: “The Sentence is a Lonely Place” by Garielle Lutz The Resident Expert is 11.
Sept	21	Workshop 3 and 4. 5 and 6 submit for workshop.
Sept	23	<u>Writing About Sex, or Autofiction Part 1</u> Fiction: Garth Greenwell from <i>What Belongs to You</i> , Elfride Jelinek from <i>The Piano Teacher</i> Poems: Sappho, Natalie Diaz, W.H Auden, J. Cole, Adrienne Rich, Louise Glück Essay: “Today the artist is a saint...” by Edmund White Optional Podcast: Public Books 101—Novels and Intimacy The Resident Expert is 10.
Sept	28	Workshop 5 and 6. 7 and 8 submit for workshop.
Sept	30	<u>Ennui, or Autofiction Part 2</u> Fiction: Lucia Berlin from <i>Manual for Cleaning Ladies</i> , Sigrid Nuñez from <i>The Friend</i> Poems: Li-Shang Yin, Emily Dickinson, Phillip Larkin, John Berryman, Frank O’Hara, Sylvia Plath, John Ashbery, Kendrick Lamar, Snow Tha Product Essay: “Tell me everything” by Christian Lorentzen The Resident Expert is 9.
Oct	5	Workshop 7 and 8. Students 9 and 10 submit for workshop.
Oct	7	<u>Toni Morrison</u> Fiction: From <i>Sula</i> , <i>Song of Solomon</i> Essay: From <i>Playing in the Dark</i> The Resident Expert is 8.
Oct	12	NO CLASS. Monday schedule.
Oct	14	<u>Essayistic Fiction and the Educated Narrator</u> Fiction: Teju Cole from <i>Open City</i> , Daryl Pinckney from <i>Black Deutschland</i> , Kazuo Ishiguro from <i>Remains of the Day</i>

		The Resident Expert is 7.
Oct	19	Workshop 9 and 10. 11 and 12 submit for workshop.
Oct	21	<u>The Wry Short Story, or the Avoidance of Cliché</u> Fiction: Nathan Englander from <i>For the Relief of Unbearable Urges</i> , Sam Lipsyte from the <i>New Yorker</i> , George Saunders from <i>Tenth of December</i> , Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah from <i>Friday Black</i> . Essay: “Politics and the English Language” by George Orwell The Resident Expert is 6.
Oct	26	Workshop 11 and 12. 1 and 2 submit for workshop.
Oct	28	<u>Writing Under and About Oppression</u> Fiction: J.M. Coetzee from <i>Life and Times of Michael K.</i> , Herta Müller from <i>Land of Green Plums</i> Poems: Noor Hindi, Wilfred Owen, Lucille Clifton, Mary Oliver, Solmaz Sharif, Tracy K. Smith Essay: “Everybody’s Protest Novel” by James Baldwin, and excerpts from Maggie Nelson’s <i>Art of Cruelty</i> The Resident Expert is 5.
Nov	2	Workshop 1 and 2. 3 and 4 submit for workshop.
Nov	4	<u>Empathy and Appropriation in Fiction</u> Fiction: Extremely short excerpt of <i>Middlemarch</i> by George Eliot Poem: Walt Whitman Essays: “The Banality of Empathy” by Namwali Serpell, “Fascinated to Presume” by Zadie Smith, “Getting in and Out” by Zadie Smith, “How to Unlearn everything” by Alexander Chee The Resident Expert is 4.
Nov	9	Workshop 3 and 4. 5 and 6 submit for workshop.
Nov	11	<u>David Foster Wallace</u> From <i>Infinite Jest</i> , <i>Pale King</i> , <i>Brief Interviews with Hideous Men</i> Poem: Mary Karr from <i>Tropics of Squalor</i> Essay: “Human, all too Inhuman,” by James Wood The Resident Expert is 3.
Nov	16	Workshop 5 and 6. 7 and 8 submit fiction for workshop.

Nov	18	<u>The Academic Tricksters</u> Fiction: Vladimir Nabokov from <i>Pnin</i> , Jorge Luis Borges from <i>Ficciones</i> Poetry: From <i>Pale Fire</i> Essay: Martin Amis from <i>The War Against Cliche</i> The Resident Expert is 2.
Nov	23	Workshop 7 and 8. 9 and 10 submit fiction for workshop.
Nov	25	NO CLASS. Happy Thanksgiving!
Nov	30	Workshop 9 and 10. 11 and 12 submit fiction for workshop.
Dec	2	<u>The Post-Post-Modernists</u> Fiction: Helen DeWitt from <i>The Last Samurai</i> , Dana Spiotta from <i>Innocents and Others</i> , Rachel Kushner from <i>The Flamethrowers</i> Poem: Anne Carson from <i>The Autobiography of Red</i> The Resident Expert is 1.
Dec	7	Workshop 11 and 12.
Dec	9	<u>The Voicey, Digressive Sentence</u> Fiction: Mauro Javier Cárdenas from <i>Aphasia</i> , Roberto Bolaño from <i>By Night in Chile</i> , Fernanda Melchor from <i>Hurricane Season</i> . Poems: Hannif Abduraquib, Dorothea Lasky Essay: Cárdenas Interview with Dustin Illingworth. Opportunity to be Resident Expert to make up an absence.
Dec	14	<i>Season of Migration to the North</i> (Tayeb Salih) through page __ Make-up workshop if necessary.
Dec	16	<i>Season of Migration to the North</i> through end. Final Portfolio's Due Festivities!

Student Wellness Policy (From NYU)

Unless we see explicit evidence in workshop that the speaker of a work is the writer themselves, we assume the speaker is fictional. However, certain content relating to murder, depression, suicide, sexual assault, or severe mental distress, such as seems to be a possible cry for help, will likely prompt the instructor's attention. Please send an email putting this work in context before submitting work, especially for workshop, that may be interpreted as such. If you do feel you need someone to talk to at any point in the semester, please feel safe to reach out to me and I can guide you to the NYU Wellness Center.

Disability Disclosure Statement (From NYU)

Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980.

NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities

726 Broadway, 2nd Floor

New York, NY 10003-6675

Telephone: 212-998-4980

Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114

Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

Sophia Cornell
March 2021

HOW TO CRITIQUE

The Basic Theory

The first step of a helpful critique is to **identify the author's intent**. The intent may be a reaction they are trying to provoke in the reader, the emulation of a certain style, a polemical argument, a weaving of themes, etc. You should not ask yourself what *you* would have done, or even what *you* would have liked to see your classmate do differently, but rather what, as you understand it, *your classmate* meant to do, and which choices might help them achieve their intent. As always, you should be as specific as possible, and when possible, cite actual examples from the submission.

Etiquette and Kindness

Your classmates are your colleagues and should be treated with respect at all times. As noted in the Student Wellness Policy, **do not conflate a narrator or character in the story with your classmate unless they specifically endorse the conflation**. It is often helpful to refer to “the narrator” rather than “the author.” Please consider how to offer your critique as kindly and humbly as possible. It is often more helpful to ask a question (“What is making Sandra so angry?”) or to express your confusion (“I’m not sure why Sandra is so angry”) rather than express a generalized dislike (“It was annoying that Sandra got angry”). Not only are the first two formulations more kind, they are more likely to be taken into consideration by the student being workshopped. If you can find little to enjoy in a piece, consider how you may not be the ideal reader for it, and try to imagine what the ideal reader would say.

A Note on Believability

When critiquing, you may be tempted to critique something in a story on the grounds that it is not sufficiently realistic. For example, “People don’t talk like this,” or “No eight-year-old is that mature.” Before making such critiques, please consider whether it applies to the reality of the story, rather than to the reality in which you personally live. If the critique still applies, consider framing it as a question: “Would Sandra really talk like this?” “Would young Bartholemew really know so much about his mom’s birth control?” etc.

Questions to Consider

Did the writer achieve their intent?

If so, which moments contribute to that achievement?

If not, which specific moments are holding the piece back? E.g.:

Is the piece too long or too short? Which parts might be expanded or condensed?

Where does the writer lose control of their language? Where do they lack precision?

Is the tone consistent? If not, are the inconsistencies intentional?

Is the point of view consistent? If not, are the inconsistencies intentional?

If parts of the story left you confused, what are they? Cite specific examples.

In revising, how (specifically) can the writer better reach their intent?

Sample Critique

It's not at all mandatory to follow this template. Your critique need only be kind, considered, honest, and about one page, single-spaced.

[Date]

Dear [So-and-so],

Thank you for this poem/story/excerpt. I understood it to be about [summary]. I noticed [a few things] about the structure and form. Your intent seems to be [intent].

I enjoyed [a few specific things]. The most memorable moment was [a quote from the text.]

[Brief discussion of some of the *Questions to Consider*.]

When revising, you might consider [specific suggestion]. Also perhaps [a few more specific suggestions.]

Best,

[Your name]

PRESCRIPTIONS

Famously, writing has no rules. However, the more you read, the more you realize that most writers seem to adhere to a set of rules that beginning writers may not be familiar with. You may of course ignore these prescriptions, but please make sure you have an intention behind doing so.

1. Unnecessary words should always go.
2. Every sentence should provide new information.
3. Every sentence has a formality budget. Formal language is more expensive and should be spent with care. Unless you want an academic tone, “yet” is a rip off compared to “but.” “Utilize” should be “use.” “Cognizant” should be “aware.” “For” should be “because,” etc.
4. The constructions “There are/It is” are a waste of space and should be banished, especially at the beginning of sentences. Any phrase like, “It could be said that there might have been” is a monster to be slain.
5. Passive tense should be used with care.
6. Don’t use easily mocked jargon.
7. Related: clichés are bad not because they are familiar, but because they are often imprecise.
8. Scenes that happened in the past should generally use past tense. Switching to present is often gimmicky, and if done, must be consistent.
9. Verb tenses should be simplified whenever possible.
 - a. Change progressive verb tenses to simple verb tenses. (e.g. change “As I **was studying** the prescriptions, I **was disagreeing** with Sophia’s every thought” to “As I **studied** the prescriptions, I **disagreed** with Sophia’s every thought.”)
 - b. To refer to repeated actions in the past, use “would + verb” once and then just use the simple past tense.
 - c. To refer to something that happened in a more distant past, use “had + verb” once, and then just use the simple past tense.
10. Avoid overuse of gerund phrases and [present participles](#), such as “Repressing the urge to check Instagram, I read the prescriptions. Stifling a yawn, I switched to iMessage.”
11. Related: the subject of the sentence should usually come as early in the sentence as possible.
12. When possible, the last syllable of the sentence should have some punch.
13. Excessive use of [em-dashes](#) is often a sign of poor sentence control.
14. Replace a bad adverb and verb/adjective with a better verb/adjective, e.g. “slightly angry” should be “miffed.” Bad adverbs are mostly the ones with more than three syllables.
15. Among [conjunctive adverbs](#), I prefer “still,” “also,” and “instead.” Other choices create a usually unwanted term-paper tone.
16. Avoid “topic sentences” at the beginning of paragraphs. Just dive in.
17. When writing a list, it is often best to move from the simplest elements to the most complex, or from shortest to longest.
18. As far as dialogue tags, “said” and “asked” usually get the job done.

March 2021

INFO COLLECTION

Name that I should call you:

Pronouns:

Please list three published poems or pieces of fiction that you have read in your life and liked:

And one that you did not like at all and why not:

Have you heard of anyone on the syllabus? (Totally okay if you have not!) If you have, what do you think of them?

Phone Number:

OK To Be Added To Class Group Chat?: YES NO

Anything else you'd like me to know?