

Fall 2021

CRWRI-UA.815.021

Tues/Thurs 2pm – 3:15pm

Introduction to Prose and Poetry

Instructor: Omer Friedlander

Course Description and Goals

Our goal in this class is to learn what makes a story work. The very best stories are often highly constructed, although they may appear perfectly natural. We will pick them apart, learn by dissecting literature with an eye for how a story is built and the choices the author made to create his or her work. This is primarily a workshop course, which means you'll be reading work written by your peers, and then you will critique it and suggest ways it can be strengthened. Reading someone else's work to see how it can be improved will help you to read your own work with a critical eye, which will make you a better writer. We'll also learn from other art forms, primarily visual art and film.

Course Duration

September 2nd – December 24th, 2021

Course Structure

We will meet every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon from 2pm-3:15pm, except for school holidays. Tuesdays will be our craft days, where we will discuss the set readings and accompanying writing exercises. Thursdays will be our workshop days, where we will discuss your writing. Over the course of the entire semester, you will submit your work three times for workshop. The first and second time you will submit prose, a short story or novel extract and the third (and final) submission is open. You can submit another short story/novel extract if you choose, or a poem, a piece of non-fiction or memoir, a hybrid work.

Craft

Remember: good writers are primarily good readers. Each week's craft class will be centered on a certain topic. For example: Character, Plot, Setting, Objects in Fiction, and so on. I'd like you to read the assigned work beforehand with this topic in mind. I will provide PDF copies of the reading in advance. Before every week's craft class, I would like you to choose **at least five sentences** from the assigned reading which you either liked or didn't like, and most importantly tell me why. This is an assignment I got from an excellent teacher I had, David Lipsky. There's no right answer, but it's important for us to know why we enjoyed (or didn't) a particular phrase or word choice, so we can learn to use it (or avoid it) in our own work.

Finally, please note that this is a provisional syllabus, subject to change. If there's anything you would like for me to add to the reading list, please get in touch with me and we'll try to make it work.

Workshop

If your group is handing in work, you will turn in your workshop submissions to class one full week before your upcoming workshop. Story submissions should be 4-8 pages of prose, in 12 point font, Times New Roman and double-spaced. Do not feel any pressure to write to the word limit (or over it) – short work can be just as powerful.

Every week, the writers being workshopped will answer a few questions to help guide the discussion in class. This is a strategy my wonderful teacher, Hannah Tinti, used in her workshop and I found it incredibly helpful. The questions are:

1. What was the first image or idea that sparked your imagination and got you to sit down and write this piece?
2. How many drafts are you in? (1st, 3rd, 20th)
3. What are you struggling the most with right now with this piece? Where could you use some guidance?

Final Portfolio

On the last day of class, you will hand in a final portfolio of revised versions of your workshop pieces. Throughout the semester, we will discuss revision strategies. If the first draft is you trying to explain to yourself what you're writing about, the revision stage is where the piece really takes shape.

Grading

Participation (includes writing feedback letters, in-class discussion, attendance): 30%

Non-Workshop Assignments (includes craft assignments and writing prompts) 20%

Workshop Assignments (Weekly hand-ins) 30%

Portfolio (final revised, proof-read version of your workshop pieces) 20%

Extra Credit

If possible, attend a literary event, museum or gallery exhibition or music concert and write a review of it (1-2 pages). Your grade will be bumped up half a mark.

Attendance Policy

This class is discussion-based and so attendance is very important, especially on workshop days. Students should arrive on time, and be ready for discussion. All students are allowed one unexcused absence, but all absences beyond that will drop your letter grade by a third. If you are more than 15 minutes late, that will count as an unexcused absence.

Participation

For craft days, please email me your five sentences beforehand and be ready to discuss. We will also do in-class writing exercises.

For workshop days, please bring a marked-up copy of classmates' piece, as well as a feedback letter. Before class meets, you should email your line-edit notes and feedback letter both to the students being workshopped and to me. Your line-in comments can be input via track changes in Word. Your line-in comments should include notes on grammar/spelling, facts or logistical aspects that need to be clarified, questions about characters, setting or plot, suggestions of cuts, additions or re-arranging of text.

Your feedback letter to the writer should be around a single page. It should include what worked for you and what you remembered most about the piece, what were your biggest overall questions, and suggestions for how to resolve at least one of the questions you brought up.

Technology

Phones should be turned off. If you need to use a laptop, please let me know. Otherwise, a notebook and a pen is all you need.

Academic Honesty

There's zero tolerance for plagiarism. If you are struggling with turning in an assignment, please get in touch with me, rather than considering plagiarism.

Disability Disclosure Statement

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>

Student Wellness Policy

Unless there is 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 catch my 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. I am always available via email, please feel free to reach out at any time.

Office Hours

TBD

Course Calendar

Week One:

THURSDAY, September 2nd:

We will introduce ourselves, go over the course syllabus, and assign workshop groups (A–D).

James Baldwin on the Artist's Struggle for Integrity (audio)

Week Two:

TUESDAY, September 7th: CRAFT – Story Structure

Story structure is the order and shape of a narrative. While plot is what happens in the story, structure is how this information is delivered to the audience. We will look at several different models for stories, such as jokes and fairy tales, for three-part structures and five-part structures.

Reading:

‘A Temporary Matter’ Jhumpa Lahiri

‘Sticks’ George Saunders

‘Creative Writing’ Etgar Keret

Watch: Kurt Vonnegut on the Shape of Stories

THURSDAY, September 11th: WORKSHOP

We will mock-workshop an early version of Raymond Carver's famous story ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.’ This early version is called ‘Beginners.’ We'll also talk about the kinds of edits made by Gordon Lish, Carver's famous editor. This will be helpful to us

when we think of how to provide useful feedback to each other in a respectful and encouraging way.

Reading:

‘Beginners’ / Raymond Carver (extract)

‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’ / Raymond Carver (extract)

‘Rough Crossings: The Cutting of Raymond Carver’ / Simon Armitage (extract)

Week Three:

TUESDAY, September 14th: CRAFT – Beginnings, Openings, Leads

We will talk about different kinds of opening strategies for stories. What catches your attention, makes you want to keep reading, and what doesn't. We will talk about set-up and how to ground your reader. We will discuss how the opening to your story is an invitation, and why first impressions are important.

Reading:

‘White Angel’ Michael Cunningham

‘The Little Knife’ Michael Chabon

THURSDAY, September 16th: WORKSHOP Group A

Week Four:

TUESDAY, September 21st: CRAFT – Character Development

From my teacher, Hannah Tinti, I learned about ‘The Superhero Test’ – a great way to know if your character is working or not. In this class, we will create our own characters / super-heroes.

Reading:

‘The Gilgul of Park Avenue’ Nathan Englander

‘Sonny’s Blues’ James Baldwin

Character / James Wood (extract from ‘How Fiction Works’)

Watch: George Saunders on Story (and asking questions of his characters)

THURSDAY, September 23rd: WORKSHOP Group B

Week Five:

TUESDAY, September 28th: CRAFT – Setting

For our class on setting, we will discuss world-building, research and the importance of maps. Then, we’ll even draw our own maps. If possible and the weather permits, we’ll have this class outside – to change up our own setting a bit!

Reading:

‘Clifton’s Place’ Jamel Brinkley

‘The Hunter’s Wife’ Anthony Doerr

‘Paris’ Lorrie Moore

THURSDAY, September 30th: WORKSHOP Group C

Week Six:

TUESDAY, October 5th: CRAFT – Point of View and Voice

We will discuss the different points-of-view available to us as storytellers, the different effects of first, second and third person POV, the idea of narrative distance: a close-up/zoom, medium-shot or crane-shot. We will also discuss ‘voice’: the style, tone and mood of the story.

Reading:

‘Crazy They Call Me’ Zadie Smith

‘Seven’ Edwidge Danticat

‘The Husband Stitch’ Carmen Maria Machado

Narrating / James Wood (extract from ‘How Fiction Works’)

THURSDAY, October 7th: WORKSHOP Group D

Week Seven:

TUESDAY, October 12th: LEGISLATIVE MONDAY – NO CLASS

THURSDAY, October 14th: WORKSHOP Group A

Week Eight:

TUESDAY, October 19th: CRAFT – Dialogue

First, we’ll learn all about what makes *bad* dialogue. There are many pitfalls when writing dialogue. We’ll learn about some of the more common mistakes writers make and write the worst dialogue we can think of! Then, we’ll start thinking of what makes good and effective dialogue. One of the best ways to learn to write good dialogue is through film and TV– we’ll be looking at some examples in class.

Reading:

‘Edgemont Drive’ E.L. Doctorow

‘The Smoker’ David Schickler

THURSDAY, October 21st: WORKSHOP Group B

Week Nine:

TUESDAY, October 26th: CRAFT – Objects in Fiction

We will discuss the use of objects in fiction – how do writers use specific, physical objects to deepen characterization and advance the narrative? An entire story, even a novel, can revolve around a particular object. For class, we will each bring an object to share for a writing prompt and discussion.

Reading:

‘Found Objects’ Jennifer Egan

‘The Things They Carried’ Tim O’Brien

THURSDAY, October 28th: WORKSHOP Group C

Week Ten:

TUESDAY, November 2nd: CRAFT – Description and Detail

We will discuss how the right detail and a precise description creates authority on the page. We will discuss Chekhov’s famous principle – ‘If in the first act you hang a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired’ – but in reverse. If you fire a pistol at the end of your story, make sure to plant one in the beginning of your story. Finally, we will train our eye with a drawing exercise. The important thing is not your drawing skills, but your attention to detail.

Reading:

‘The Blind’ Sigrid Nunez

‘Cathedral’ Raymond Carver

THURSDAY, November 4th: WORKSHOP Group D

Week Eleven:

TUESDAY, November 9th: CRAFT – Narrative Time

We will talk about different kinds of narrative time: elongated time, condensed time, summary and scene, flashbacks and other narrative tricks.

Reading:

‘The Bear Came Over the Mountain’ Alice Munro

‘Bullet in the Brain’ Tobias Wolff

THURSDAY, November 11th: WORKSHOP Group A

Week Twelve:

TUESDAY, November 16th: CRAFT – Ekphrastic Poetry

In this class, students will choose from a variety of museum postcards of illustrations, paintings, sculptures. Each student will write a response in the form of a poem to at least one of the postcards.

Reading:

‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus’ William Carlos Williams

‘In the Musee des Beaux Arts’ W.H. Auden

‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ John Keats

THURSDAY, November 18th: WORKSHOP Group B

Week Thirteen:

TUESDAY, November 23rd: CRAFT – Memoir and Non-Fiction

In this class, students will either write about the strangest job they ever did, in the spirit of Sedaris's piece, or about moving into a new home/planting a new garden a la Alexander Chee.

Reading:

'The Rosary' Alexander Chee

'SantaLand Diaries' David Sedaris

Watch: Writing Advice from Jason Reynolds (Lesley University Commencement speech)

THURSDAY, November 25th: THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS

Week Fourteen:

TUESDAY, November 30th: CRAFT – Image and Text Hybrid

In this class, we will explore hybrid works which combine both image and text. We will make our own hybrid text, combining images and words.

Reading:

'A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease' Jonathan Safran Foer

THURSDAY, December 2nd: WORKSHOP Group C

Week Fifteen:

TUESDAY, December 7th: The Business of Writing

In this class, we will discuss the business side of writing: how to submit to literary magazines, query agents and apply to residencies. We'll also talk about how to deal with rejection and why all that matters is persistence: don't give up!

THURSDAY, December 9th: WORKSHOP Group D

Week Sixteen:

TUESDAY, December 14th: FINAL CLASS – Pizza & etc