

## Introduction to Fiction WRCR6207

### Course Outline

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**Description:** This course takes the mystery out of fiction writing and provides a fun and furious launch into the basic elements of narrative fiction including: setting, point of view, character, dialogue and plot. Helpful tips and useful shortcuts will add strength to your writing and to the development of the writer's craft. At-home assignments will help students master writing techniques. And an in-class workshop will help stimulate constructive feedback – an essential component of the creative process.

**Course Goals:** This course is intended for writers new to writing fiction or those who want to brush up on the basics or hone new skills. You may love to read and have a solid story idea or a character or a scene that you want to develop. This course will help move you beyond self-doubt and procrastination to a system where you can write a well-crafted story with a strong character. The student will learn the building blocks of fiction writing including characterization, point of view, dialogue and plot, beginnings, climax and endings. As well, the student will obtain a greater understanding of the craft of writing and be encouraged to share his or her writings in the classroom, and with editors beyond. We will write in class and be encouraged to share our work.

**Course Objectives:** At the completion of this course, the student will be able to get a character or scene that is real to you on to the page. You will develop a skills toolkit in fiction writing that include these critical elements; how to plan, write, edit and re-write your work. You will also develop the ability to listen and look critically to find the telling details that animate your writing work. Going forward, you will read with a critical eye that will help feed your writing skills and creativity – a boost no matter what your field of interest.

### Attendance Requirements:

Students must miss no more than two classes to receive a completion for this course. A grade report can be printed from myWCS.

### Code of Student Conduct

The purpose of the Code of Student Conduct is to define the general standard of conduct expected of students registered at Western University, provide examples of behaviour that constitutes a breach of this standard of conduct, provide examples of sanctions that may be imposed, and set out the disciplinary procedures that the University will follow. For the complete Code of Student Conduct: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/board/code.pdf>

**Evaluation:** This is a non-graded course.

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## Course Schedule:

### Week 1

**Introduction:** Creative writing is a solitary craft so working together in a class setting can be liberating. The class will hear from everyone about their hopes and expectations in the course and about their writing background/experience. We will discuss how creative writing can give us important skills of observation that are useful in our careers and lives. As well, we will explore how to train all of your senses to find those nuggets and telling details that put flesh on the bones of our stories. We will talk about what a story is and how to find it. We will share how to establish writing habits that produce results. The details about the workshop format will be reviewed and how to share work with classmates to get back useful feedback. And we will discuss the mighty and muscular verb and how to banish the passive voice for good.

**Assignment:** You will be given a form to fill in with jot notes about your character. Ask yourself, what is it about the character that grabs your interest? What do they look like? What are they wearing? What aura do they give off to a casual observer? Can we tell their social class? Are they confident? Be prepared to share this at our next class. Please re-read your favourite fictional character and see what you liked most and least about them. I will have some short story books to borrow if you would like to find a new character to think about.

### Week 2

**Character:** Character is the key element, the fundamental building block, of fiction writing. If you are skilled at creating characters, you can create readable fiction. Character leads to plot, theme, and style. But it is not enough to imagine and describe a character. Characters need to act, and they need conflict or a challenge or a predicament to come alive – an important goal of good fiction writing.

There are many different types of characters such a protagonist or antagonist, the hero or villain.

We will discuss how you pick the right character to offer the point of view. How do you find the right voice for your character? Do you want to be the character? Where else can you find inspiration? How do you look around and distill the essence of your life experience into a character? We will discuss how to build a character around the people you know and love – or maybe someone you had a conflict with in high school and want to flesh out to resolve an old wound – maybe it is someone you overheard on the bus and want to bring to life.

**Assignment:** From your jot notes, begin to develop a character. What do they look like? Where did they go to school?

What you want your audience to feel about your character: love, pity, revulsion, compassion—or nothing at all? What is your character's purpose or goal? How will your characters deal with the obstacles that stand between them and reaching their hearts desire? What is their attitude? Do they have a strong personality? Leader or follower? What are their quirks? Do they have fears or secrets?

### Week 3

**Plot:** Show, don't tell. That is a simple but potent way to think about plot. There is technique to writing – structure – and plot, like your high school teacher may have told you, is about the craft of writing, the bones or architecture of a story. Plot is often described as a road map - how the story goes from point A to point B with a conflict thrown in between to show a fork in the road and a climax that logically leads to

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the conclusion of the conflict and the end of the story. We will discuss rising action and development - the art of building suspense and dramatic tension - for readers love a good struggle.

**Assignment:** Use the character you have begun to create to write a problem for the character to resolve – this can be an internal or external problem but try to make it as meaty as possible. And show, don't tell.

## Week 4

**Voice and style:** To have a strong narrative voice you need to develop an ear. We will discuss narration and continue to flesh out the concept of show vs. tell, particularly as it relates to emotion, until you can recognize the difference. The goal is to see the world from your character's viewpoint – inside out. What is narrative summary and when should we use it? When shouldn't we use it? What is an internal monologue and when do we use it?

Vague and inconsistent narrators, uncertain tense and an unclear voice are all the result of poor narration. A good writer will control the narrative voice that guides the reader through the story and beginners often find it best to use the first person. We will also discuss third person narratives, the key point is to ensure that the narrator is actually defined as clearly as any other character, regardless of how visible or invisible you want that narrator to be. A good narrative voice is generally consistent, and doesn't switch from first to third.

**Assignment:** Take a paragraph from your favourite writer's work. Try a Canadian classic author like Margaret Atwood or some other well respected novelist and take careful note of the narrative voice. Now write out a paragraph on the narrator. Describe his/her motivations, past, and the how the narrator is involved in the story. Then, create a profile of your narrator in your story under construction. Write out his/her "back story" about his/her life, motivations and fears.

## Week 5

**Dialogue:** Dialogue can challenge even experienced writers. It must have a purpose and be concise.

Again, show, don't tell. Like music, dialogue should have rhythm and flow and sound almost effortless and spontaneous. But dialogue is different than a spoken conversation and we will discuss how you can adapt the way you speak to a loved one from real life to the page.

We will also cover the nuts and bolts of writing up dialogue – single or double quotation marks, commas and other important rules such as paragraph lengths, dialogue lengths and speeches. We will discuss the very important concept of pace.

**Assignment:** Write up one page of dialogue between your character and a new character, or, write a page of internal monologue.

## Week 6

**Setting and scene building:** Where am I? Why should I care? What are the smells and sounds? Your reader will ask these questions and you must be prepared to give them a satisfactory orientation. This is not just an exercise in geography but a means to see the scene in terms of an era - or an emotional terrain written on the heart. And as a character moves through a story you have to re-orient the reader to every major change in setting.

We will discuss the importance of sensory detail - what would your character see, hear, smell, taste or feel? Is it cold or hot – is there a wind? Are the birds chirping? Can you make your reader feel like they can touch the scene you are building?

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**Assignment:** In 250 words or less, build a scene for your character. Appeal to each one of the senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste.

## Week 7

**Beginning and Endings:** In the beginning, you need a strong lead paragraph for a simple reason - to get distracted readers hooked so they continue to turn the page. We will discuss how to set up a strong lead that is supported straight through until the end. And of course in the vast middle you will struggle alongside your character to resolve all sorts of problems especially the big one for the climax.

We will use this class to review. How do all these elements together to create good fiction? What is so important about rewrites and revision?

**Assignment:** Rewrites! This is the opportunity to fine-tune what you have written to incorporate all we have learned about writing good fiction – character, plot, voice and style, setting and scene and building dialogue. Revise and make your words sparkle.

## Week 8

Fiction workshop night! You have made it through. Now you can read from your work and get valuable feedback from classmates. Tonight you get to ask questions about fiction writing and discuss any specific problems you may have regarding your manuscript. Questions may also include ideas you have for future stories. I will offer insights on how to take the next step – getting published. This will be a lively class and we will also enjoy a few refreshments for energy.