

Fiction Forward

WRCR6210

Course Outline

Description: You have taken a fiction course through Western Continuing Studies and want to accelerate your writing work. You formed a community with fellow writers in class and would benefit from a sustainable writing practice with support from like-minded writers. This course reviews, but takes you beyond the basic elements of narrative fiction such as setting, point of view, character, dialogue and plot. The emphasis will be on providing helpful tips and writing exercises that develop your writer's craft. At-home assignments will help students master these writing techniques. And regular in-class writing assignments will help stimulate constructive feedback – an essential component of the creative process. But the primary deliverable in this new course is the opportunity to build a writer's group that can continue to work together in a collaborative fashion once the course is over.

Course Goals: This course is intended for students with some experience writing fiction who want to hone new skills in a supportive environment. You don't need to have published your work but you must want to write regularly during the course. This course will help move you towards publishing a well-crafted story with a strong character and plot. The student will be given in-class writing exercises to review the building blocks of fiction including characterization, point of view, narrative, scenes and setting, dialogue and plot. As well, the student will be encouraged to share his or her writing work in class. Time will be spent on how to write a successful query letter to an editor.

Course Objectives: At the completion of this course, the student will be able to get a character and scene 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. You will be able to query an editor to get published.

Attendance Requirements:

Students must miss no more than two classes to receive a completion for this course. A certificate 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. However, regular feedback of your writing work by the instructor is a valued component of this course. The course is limited to 12 participants.

There are six classes. Each class will run from 7:00-9:00 PM. There will be a personal meeting time scheduled for 30 minutes before and after each class with the instructor. Each student in the course will receive, at minimum, one half-hour of private one-on-one time with the instructor. This time can also be

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scheduled at the mutual convenience of instructor and student on a different day. It is expected that students will work in teams from 6:30-7PM and 9-9:30PM when they are not meeting privately with the instructor. So be prepared to attend from 6:30-9:30PM. There may also be opportunities for group workshops and author readings outside of scheduled class time.

Course Schedule:

Week 1

Introduction: Creative writing is a solitary craft so working together in a class setting can liberate your work, make it deeper and richer, and improve the quality of your edits. 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. These include psychological observations about love, work, money, power and family that is the basis of much good fiction writing. 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 for this course. We will review how to share work with classmates to get back useful feedback. We will do some worksheets in class on the mighty and muscular verb and discuss how to banish the passive voice for good.

Assignment: You will be given a character sheet to flesh out a character you wish to write about over the next few weeks. 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 and whether they are confident or anxious? I will have some short story books to borrow if you would like to find a new character to work with.

Week 2

Character: Character is the key element, the fundamental building block, of fiction writing. Character leads to plot, theme, and style. Characters need to act, and they need conflict or a challenge or a predicament to come alive – an important goal of good fiction writing. Students will be encouraged to bring in a reading about their favourite fictional character to share.

Assignment: From your jot notes, begin to develop a character. What do they look like? Where did they go to school? What do 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: Beginning and Endings are as important as the ham in the Middle: In the beginning, you need a strong lead paragraph or three to hook readers so they continue to turn the page. We will discuss how to set up a compelling lead. And of course in the vast middle your character will struggle to resolve all sorts of problems and complications especially the big one for the climax. How do you structure a compelling climax? Why do authors usually exit quickly after the climax has been reached?

There is technique to writing plot, 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. The climax logically leads to 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.

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Students can volunteer to read the first page of their favourite book or short story and ask the class if they would turn the page.

Assignment: Write out the barebones of the plot following the format of Freytag's pyramid. What is your beginning, middle and end? 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.

Week 4

Voice, narration and dialogue: We will discuss narration in the first, second and third person. 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. As well, we will continue to flesh out the concept of show vs. tell, particularly as it relates to emotion. We will review the use of narrative summary, internal monologue and dialogue as tools of fiction.

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 5

Setting and scene building: Where am I? Why should I care? What are the sights, 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?

Assignment: In 350 words or less, build a scene for your character. Appeal to each one of the senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste.

Week 6

Last 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. We will review the components of a successful query letter and discuss potential markets for your work. This will be a lively class and we will also enjoy a few refreshments for energy. And where will the group go from here?

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, setting and scene and building dialogue. Revise and make your words sparkle. Write a pitch to an editor that will get your work published.