



# Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction

CRWR 210A, Section 4, Fall 2013

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**Meeting time: 1:10 to 2:00 p.m., MWF**

**Classroom: LA 306**

**Instructor: Michèle Van Haecke** (my name is pronounced: me-SHELL van HECK-y)

Email: [michele.vanhaecke@umontana.edu](mailto:michele.vanhaecke@umontana.edu)

Office and hours: COR 258; 2 to 3 p.m., Mondays and Tuesdays

**Class website and blog:** <http://introtofictionvanhaecke.weebly.com> (bookmark this)

## Course Description and Objectives

*“I think talent is like a water table under the earth; you tap it with your effort and it comes through you.”*

— Natalie Goldberg, “Writing Down the Bones”

Sometimes, it’s best to let a simile do the work of conveying what would otherwise make, well, an overlong syllabus. Goldberg is referring to her own writing and teaching approach in this quote, but it succinctly tells what this course aims to achieve, and how.

CRWR 210A is an introductory fiction-writing course with a focus on craft, on learning to use productive, purposeful work to tap our creative resources. Through reading, discussion, writing, workshop, and other hands-on activities, we will explore fundamental concepts and techniques for making successful fiction. These include methods for developing plot, form, structure, and other essentials, such as believable, compelling characters; dialogue; and consistent point of view. We will practice by using a variety of tools, such as journaling and workshopping stories in a safe, constructive space with peers.

As you’ll see by the tentative schedule, the course work includes a reading and writing load designed to stretch and build writing muscle. Readings will include both essays on craft (to develop understanding of fiction-writing concepts, techniques, and terminology) and short stories and novel excerpts (to develop critical acumen and to practice reading as a writer). Journal writing in and outside of class is designed to let you try different writing tools to help you identify what works and develop your own writing practice. Blog posts and other exercises will let you practice writing for peers, outside of the journal space. In the second half of the semester, we will continue reading published fiction but will shift our focus to student-generated work. We’ll practice writing and revising our short stories through workshop, reading work and responding in classroom discussion (workshop) and written critique.

## Texts

*Required:* Readings will be posted on the class website. You are required to print these and bring them to class.

*Recommended:*

- Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Eighth Edition. Longman, 2010. (Many of our readings on craft will come from this book.)
- *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume E, Literature Since 1945*, Eighth Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012
- A good dictionary and a style guide such as *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. Refer to *Resources* on the class website for some free, online dictionaries and other sites helpful to writers.

## Course Requirements

1. *A paper journal.* Get a notebook you feel comfortable writing in (and carrying everywhere) and bring it to every class. This is not a personal log of daily happenings but your writing journal of story prompts, ideas, sketches, experiments, bits of overheard conversation, gripes and rants, and other fodder for and from your writing mind. You’re required to keep your journal on a rigorous schedule (daily is ideal). Successful writing means being free to write whatever you want, so please do; when I collect your journal, exclude entries you don’t want me to read by marking them “private” or “keep out” or similar.
2. *Writing exercises.* Writing exercises must be submitted on the date due, formatted and printed per course submission guidelines. Keep these, my comments, and other comments in your working portfolio.
3. *Blog comments.* Weekly responses to my posts, which may ask for reading responses, concept discussions, or exercises.
4. *Major assignment.* One short work of fiction 10 to 15 pages long, first and revised drafts. You will work on this over the course of the semester. You will be responsible to provide multiple hard copies formatted and printed to course guidelines for classmates and me for workshop. (I’ll let you know how many when we have a final class count.)
5. *Portfolio.* A pocket folder or small binder to store and organize handouts, exercises, comments and peer critiques. Instead of a final exam, you will submit a final portfolio including your story draft and revision.

## Evaluation and Grading

I will not be grading your talent but your understanding of the craft of fiction, its fundamental concepts and techniques, its tools and your willingness to engage them. That said, your final grade will be composed of:

- **40 percent:** active participation. Show up to class prepared, engage in class discussion and writing exercises, comment on blog posts and peer work (workshop discussion and written comments), contribute to our writing community.
- **30 percent:** successful completion of all writing assignments, workshop critiques, and your journal. Turn these in on time and be sure to format them according to course guidelines. Exercises, critiques, and journal entries will be evaluated with a check system, not a letter grade, and will not be graded on spelling, grammar, or other mechanics. (Check grades will be averaged: *check plus* equates to an A; *check* to a B; *check minus* to a C or D; *unsatisfactory* to an F or zero.)
- **30 percent:** your 10 to 15 pages of fiction. Turn in your draft by the submission deadline and substantially revise it by the end of the semester. Demonstrate improvement and the ability to effectively respond to criticism. Spelling, grammar, and other mechanics will be considered in grading the draft and revision.

## Attendance and Late Work

As in an applied studio art or music course, learning in this craft course is accomplished by active practice, coming to class prepared and ready to work. Failing to turn in a major assignment by its deadline affects the whole group. It means your work will not be workshopped as scheduled or possibly at all, and other writers will find their time wasted. You will be permitted three (3) unexcused absences before your grade is lowered. Major assignments submitted late will be marked down two letter grades. Homework and journals turned in after the start of class on due dates will be marked “late” and given half credit. Final portfolios must be handed in (no digital submissions) at the start of our last class. No incompletes will be given.

## Plagiarism and Academic Honesty

All work submitted in CRWR 210A must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. Students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. Students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code, available at [http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student\\_conduct.php](http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php)

## Students with Disabilities

Qualified students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations in this course. Please speak with me privately after class or in my office. Please be prepared to provide a letter from your DSS Coordinator.

## Important Dates and Deadlines

**Sept. 16:** last day to drop/add the course

**Major assignment first draft:** see the workshop schedule we establish the first week of class

**Final portfolio due:** 1:10 p.m. Friday, Dec. 6, 2013 in LA 306

**Final exam slot:** 1:00 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 11 in LA 306. Students may pick up portfolios and final grades at this time.

## Other Bits and Matter

### *Work, Workshop, and Critique*

A schedule of tentative readings and exercises is included in this syllabus. Please review it and seriously consider your ability and willingness to commit to the workload. Regarding critique, we'll be working the first half of the semester to turn our classroom into a community of writers so we are accustomed to peer critique when we workshop our stories later. This calls for an attitude capable of providing and receiving helpful, respectful, vigorously thoughtful criticism.

### *Grammar and other Mechanics*

Aside from your major assignment, writing will not be evaluated for spelling, grammar, or other mechanical components. However, mechanics affect a story's success; pay careful attention to mechanics for your draft and revision, at the least.

### *Story Content*

The nature of this course is cooperative. Shocking, alienating, or nauseating readers may not be the best tactic for getting the most out of peer review. Beyond this, I have only one restriction: no fan fiction, please, as it precludes exercising the *creative* muscle we are attempting to develop here. I'm available during office hours, after class, and by email to discuss questions or doubts you may have.

### *Readings*

Missoula is a vibrant literary community. Although not required, I suggest you take advantage of readings, conferences, and gatherings occurring this semester.

### *Caveat*

This syllabus and schedule subject to change.

## Tentative Schedule

### Week 1: Introductions (defining “story,” fiction-writing process and practice, getting started)

- *Reading:* “Whatever Works: The Writing Process,” Burroway; “The Things They Carried,” O’Brien; “Psyche and Eros,” Bulfinch; “Girl,” Kincaid; “The Cask of Amontillado,” Poe; “The School,” Barthelme.
- *Writing:* in-class exercises; letter to the instructor; reading response; photo exercise; story prompts; journal entries.
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 2: Showing and Telling

- *Reading:* “Seeing is Believing: Showing and Telling,” Burroway; “Big Me,” Chaon; “A&P,” Updike; “What Writing Is,” King; “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Oates.
- *Writing:* in-class exercises; sensory detail exercise; description exercise; journal entries.
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 3: Characterization, Part I

- *Reading:* “Building Character: Characterization, Part I,” Burroway; “Gryphon,” Baxter; “Reunion,” Cheever; “Hills Like White Elephants,” Hemmingway; “Rock Springs,” Ford;
- *Writing:* in-class exercises; Valentines, Where Were You Last Night?; dialogue exercise; journal entries.
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 4: Characterization, Part II

- *Reading:* “The Flesh Made Word: Characterization, Part II,” Burroway; “Bullet in the Brain,” Wolff; “Brownies,” Packer; “A Temporary Matter,” Lahiri; “Emma’s Mother” from “Terms of Endearment,” McMurtry.
- *Writing:* in-class exercises; characters in conflict; character sketch exercise; journal entries.
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 5: Fictional Place and Time

- *Reading:* “Far, Far Away: Fictional Place,” Burroway; “Fires,” Bass; “Powder,” Wolff; excerpt from “The Sheltering Sky,” Bowles; “Long Ago: Fictional Time,” Burroway; “A Serious Talk,” Carver; “The Half-Skinned Steer,” Proulx.
- *Writing:* in-class writing; character exercise; postcard exercise; scene setting exercise
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 6: Story Form, Plot, and Structure

- *Reading:* “The Tower and the Net,” Burroway; “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” O’Connor; “To Build A Fire,” London; “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” Marquez; “Car Crash While Hitchhiking,” Johnson
- *Writing:* in-class exercises; plot exercise; journal entries
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 7: Point of View

- *Reading:* “Call Me Ishmael,” Burroway; “The Lottery,” Jackson; “Orientation,” Orozco; “How to Become a Writer,” Moore; “Is and Is Not: Comparison,” Burroway; “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix Arizona,” Alexie.
- *Writing:* in-class exercises; point of view exercises; mid-term journal review; journal entries.
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 8: Storywriting and Conferencing

- *Reading:* “Shitty First Drafts,” Lamott; “Don’t Do This,” Stern; additional reading TBA.
- *Writing:* story drafting; conferencing.
- *Blog:* No blog post this week. Story writing instead.

### Week 9: Theme, Preparing for Workshop

- *Reading:* “Asking the Big Question and How Fictional Elements Contribute to Theme,” Burroway; “Earn the Right,” Goldberg; “About the Writing Workshop,” Burroway; story for practice workshop; additional reading TBA.
- *Writing:* story drafting, summary and scene exercise; peer critique practice; journal entries.
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Weeks 10-14: Workshop

- *Reading:* student stories; other reading TBA.
- *Writing:* peer critique worksheets and draft notes; writers’ reflections; journal entries.
- *Blog:* See my post for instructions. Post a response no later than class time Monday.

### Week 15: Revision

- *Reading:* “Revision: Play It Again, Sam,” Burroway; writing a novel; genre blur, flash fiction, experimental form
- *Writing:* revision workshop; story revision