

CW 3200: Workshop in Fiction: Writing the Writing Only You Can Write
Fall 2018

Professor: Peter Markus

Wednesdays 6:30-9:50

301 Wilson Hall

Office Hours: After/Before class and/or by appointment

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Workshop Overview:

I teach this workshop under the grandiose and perhaps even misguided assumption that everyone who has signed on for this course wants to be a writer. By virtue of that desire, then, I take you on as serious young writers with the ambition and the passion to write. You will be a writer at least once each week when you walk into this classroom. That said, if you think you can be a writer by being a writer just once a week (for 3 hours) then you perhaps are as much misguided as I am when it comes down to what it takes to be a writer (or even what it takes to be a student of writing). We are all of us in this room students of writing. Even I am a student of writing. Writing doesn't get any easier the longer you write. If anything, it gets harder with time spent doing it to sit yourself down in a chair and do it. But we will do our best to see what it is that we all have to say when we sit ourselves down in a chair to speak. To say is the beginning of becoming, the genesis of being. I look forward to being with you in this semester-long adventure and opportunity toward your own becoming what only you can become as writers. We will become through the fiction we make up and through the language that we make with. As a writer—not a critic or an academic—I will take you as seriously as you take this course. Come to this class each week, as a writer, as one wanting to write and to read and to find ways to become a better, more original writer—an open mind, open heart—and I promise you that you will get much out of our time together. Come to this class week after week thinking that you already know everything there is to know about writing and reading fiction and you will see only what you already see. To see more is what is at the core of this workshop. The poet Jack Gilbert makes the claim, "We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars." This should be our motto as we make our way, together, into this landscape that is the world of fiction, a place where anything—no, everything—is possible. To discover ourselves—our strengths, our weaknesses—and the stories that only we can write, that only we can make: that is the ultimate aim here. I am here to guide you.

Course Description (taken from the Oakland University Course Catalog):

This course introduces students to the craft of fiction and narration. Students will focus on all aspects of the creative process—from brainstorming to revising. Throughout the course, students will read and analyze short stories to understand the choices writers make as they tell stories. Students will learn about traditional narrative development as well as more experimental story-telling. One of the key components of the course is the writing workshop, in which students will offer up their short story manuscripts for feedback from peers and the instructor. The course also emphasizes the importance of finding and developing a writing community. Students will write two to three short stories, a piece of flash fiction, and a revision; they will also serve as readers and critics of classmates' stories.

Learning Outcomes:

In this workshop students will be able to identify the parts of a story and will be able to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of a work of fiction, both their own fiction and the fiction of others (peers as well as published authors). They will generate a portfolio of fiction and will see these stories through the multiple drafts and stages of the writing process.

Workshop Expectations:

Students will be expected to produce short fictions both in and out of class, and will be reading works (mostly short fiction) both in and out of class (see list of required books).

Students will be expected to “workshop” their own fictions (twice) over the course of the semester (schedule of workshop dates to be determined on the second day of class), with a third story expected in the Final Portfolio. Students will be doubly expected to read and offer both oral and written remarks (in a spirit that is both generous and honest) about all the student fictions that we will be “workshopping.”

Elements of the craft of fiction will be addressed, in mini-lectures, each week, but this student-centered workshop depends more on discussion and student discourse than it does on formal lecture.

On Grading:

Your grade will be based on a number of factors, among them: attendance, completion (on time) of all assigned readings and workshop responsibilities, class participation, and your general presence and conduct during workshop sessions. Some of these factors, such as attendance, are quantifiable; other factors, it should be noted, rely on subjective judgment, namely mine. The founding principle of the workshop model is grounded in the belief that by helping others, by talking about how to best make the fiction of others better, we are also bettering ourselves. The workshop method is an opportunity for the student writer to develop our abilities and strategies as a reader, editor, and critic.

On the Further Breakdown of Grades:

25%: Attendance/Attitude/Discipline/Effort/Participation/Presence/Will

25%: Letters to the author (these are your typed up responses to the stories of your peers turned in for workshop. See more details about this on page 4.)

50%: Final Portfolio (which is made up of all the fiction that you've written this semester for this workshop, including your "Invention of Childhood" notebook, as well as a "Why I Write" essay, all of which is due on the day of our final exam.)

On Attendance:

More than one absence can impact your final grade. My hope is that you will look forward to coming to class so attendance should not be an issue.

On Attitude:

You are entitled to love or hate or to be confused/offended/bored or inspired (hopefully this) by anything we encounter in this workshop. That said, what you are not entitled to do is to write something off, ignore it, demean, quit reading it, call it stupid, or call someone else stupid because they liked it more or less than you did. This classroom will be an environment where all writers will feel comfortable expressing themselves and sharing their work and their critical opinions and passions for the work at hand.

On the Workshop Letter:

This letter must be typed and should be at least half a page in length (single-spaced) though you'll find that you sometimes have more than a half page to say. Be sure to say what you say in a way that is useful. Be kind. Say what's working. Be honest: Say what needs work, what might be done to make it better. Be specific. Keep in mind: the pages of others are like mirrors. What you see in others is what you need to see and say to yourself. One copy of the workshop letter will be given to the writer to whom this letter is addressed; a second copy will be turned in to me as part of your final portfolio.

On the Invention of Childhood Notebook:

The task here is to keep a weekly journal/notebook where each entry begins with the words: "When I was a kid, I used to..." Each entry should be no less than 350 words and should document (which is to say invent, make up, create) a fictional experience in the life of the first-person narrator who is not actually you (and yet this other-than-you that is being conjured up by you is, in turn, a part of you, yes?). We are the stories we tell.

On Double Space:

Stories turned in for workshop should be double-spaced. On your workshop nights, you must bring a copy of your story for every member of the class. It is not acceptable to email your stories to me or to the class and expect us to print them out. Use a font that won't make me squint to see it (14 point Baskerville).

On Plagiarism:

It should go without saying, though I'll still say it now: if you turn in writing that isn't yours, this act of cowardice and betrayal is the worse kind of failure and will result in you failing this class.

On Cell Phones in the Classroom:

Since this is a three-plus-hour class, I'm not going to insist that you power down your cell phone. But during workshops especially, especially when we're supposed to be looking closely at the fictions of others, if I see you

gazing down into the face of your cell phone, I will warn you right now: I've been known to throw phones against a classroom wall. This may or may not be a true story.

Required Books:

Asunder by Robert Lopez

Niceties by Elizabeth Mikesch

Sudden Fiction edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas

Why I Write edited by Will Blythe

Suggested Further Reading:

I encourage you to get to know my own fiction to better understand where I'm coming from as a writer and teacher/guru of writing. There are plenty of stories of mine to be found online in addition to reviews and interviews where you can hear me run my mouth about what I talk about when I talk about fiction.

My books of fiction:

The Fish and the Not Fish

We Make Mud

Bob, or Man on Boat

The Singing Fish

The Moon is a Lighthouse

Good, Brother

My book of non-fiction:

Inside My Pencil: Teaching Poetry in Detroit Public Schools