

The University of Texas at El Paso
Forms and Techniques of Fiction
CRW 5364/CRN 13016
Fall 2023

I. Professor's Information

Professor: Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny, MFA

Email: saguilar8@utep.edu

Online Office Hours: On Tuesdays by appointment via Zoom or Teams.

II. Materials

This is an Open Educational Resources (OER) course, which means we won't use a textbook, but instead free, accessible, licensed texts, media, and digital assets. The body of resources that you will find in this course have been chosen and curated by your instructor along with librarians at UTEP.

III. Course Description

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in't” says Polonius to Hamlet, but he might as well be talking about fiction. This course will explore both the method and madness in the practice of fiction. This course is based mostly on *Method and Madness: The Making of a Story* by Alice LaPlante and is an intensive study on form, elements of fiction, plotting, and narrative techniques.

First, we will address what is at stake in fiction writing. Second, we will discuss genres, shapes of fiction and the building blocks of narration. Finally, we will go over narrator, dialogue, plot, characters, setting, language by reading both selected short-stories and essays by various authors as well as the Klaus and Lucas trilogy by Agota Kristof.

You will also have a chance to practice writing with some exercises as well as produce and workshop an original fiction project during the semester. Our final objective is to produce texts –with a bit of method and a pinch of madness—that show our understanding of the forms and techniques of fiction.

IV. Goal and Learning Outcomes

Goal: Students will develop critical and creative thinking to analyze works of fiction and will skillfully practice narrative techniques to create works of fiction that address social, cultural, political, racial, and gender issues in the life of characters.

Learning Outcomes: By the end of this course, the successful student will be able to do the following:

1. Identify genres, forms, and fundamental tools to write works of fiction.
2. Practice techniques and craft elements for writing.
3. Develop critical thinking skills to read as a writer.
4. Engage consistently in workshop and revision sessions.

V. Requirements

1. Discussion Boards. I will post **questions** regarding selected topics based on our readings –short stories or articles—that we will be reading throughout the semester. Follow the guidelines —available in Blackboard—for your posts and your comments to your classmate’s responses.

2. Original Stories. You will write **one** short-story; details on the prompt are included at the end of this document. We will work bit by bit, first you will present your idea, then your outline, later your first draft for workshop in teams, and then a final revised version at the end of the course for your professor’s evaluation. This practice teach you about the process of fiction writing and will secure the quality of your work.

3. Critical Response. You will have two options: **1)** submit an argumentative essay that discusses one of the elements of fiction as seen in one or two stories read throughout the course or **2)** submit a creative essay that describes the method and madness of fiction writing.

4. Quizzes. To make sure you are all reading the short-stories and/or essays of our course you will have two quizzes. Quizzes are mostly open questions and will always include a creative exercise based on the characters or the plot of the story you have read. A calendar will be available in Blackboard.

5. Exercises and Activities. We will do some of the creative exercises of fiction to stretch your creative muscles and gather ideas for your final project. You will also be assigned a few activities as a response to some of the topics discussed.

6. Workshops. We will have two types of workshops, **Quick Workshops** will focus on your exercises; you are required to simply write a short comment (a paragraph max). The whole class will provide feedback to everyone’s exercises. **Project workshop** will focus in the original story written as a final project. For each one of these, you will be required to provide feedback using the Review tool of Word (in-text comments) along with a summary that everyone in your team will be able to read and use for discussion.

Grading Breakdown:

Your grades will be determined by your completion of:

30 points – Discussion Boards and Activities.

10 -- Critical Response

10 -- Quizzes (2)

15-- Creative writing exercises

35– Final Project

VI. Instructor's Policies

Grading, Assignments, & Deadlines: All assignments, announcements, and posts will be sent and received via Blackboard; it is your responsibility to check the page regularly. Also, it is the responsibility of each student to turn in all assignments by the due dates. Late work is not accepted.

Preparing for Class: Students should at least work on their course 3 to 4 hours a week for. This means logging on to read the instructions for the module/week, participate on discussion boards, read the material, and submit exercises. Instructions or formats for discussion boards, exercises, workshops and final projects will be posted in the Guidelines folder in Blackboard.

Email Protocol, Office Hours & Online Contact:

UTEP email is the best possible way to contact me (8am-4pm, M-F) and has the added bonus of recording our conversations, but please first read the module instructions or this syllabus, sometimes the answers to your questions are already there. When emailing me, please consider it a formal communication: include your name, your course, your question/comment.

If you have an extended question or dilemma that cannot be answered by our online communication, we can schedule a phone or Blackboard collaborate appointment to be held during my office hours.

VII. UTEP'S Policies

Academic Dishonesty: Dishonesty in any form is not tolerated in this course. Even one instance will result, at the least, in a failing grade for the assignment. Academic dishonesty is taken very seriously and may result in failure of the course and suspension. The following are brief descriptions of certain types of academic dishonesty. If you have further questions, please speak to the instructor for clarification.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is submitting or using someone else's writing as your own. This is not tolerated. You may wish to use a short quote from another source as part of an essay. You may do this only if the source is properly documented.

Collusion: Collusion is unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing your written work. You may be asked to work with a partner on a specific assignment. Except for those instances, all work must be your own. Getting others to do your work for you is not tolerated.

Students with Disabilities: To promote academic success, UTEP offers a variety of services to persons with documented sensory, mental, physical or temporary disabling conditions. If you have a disability and believe you may need services, please contact the Center for Students with Disabilities to discuss your needs with a counselor. All discussions and documentations are kept confidential.

VIII. Calendar

The following schedule may be modified according to the needs of the class, it is the responsibility of the student to be aware of these changes.

Module 1: What is Fiction

Week 1/Gimme Fiction (Oct. 23rd)

Review: Syllabus and Schedule.

Do: **Exercise 1**, "So, I was born" and provide feedback to classmates.

Participate: Discussion Board 0 (**DB0**) and introduce yourself to the class.

Read: "Alief" by Bryan Washington and Participate in **DB1**: Places and People

Watch: Forms, Shapes and Techniques in Fiction. Video-lecture.

Optional: Read this interview with Bryan Washington:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/bryan-washington-lot-interview-houston>

Week 2/ Method and Madness (Oct 30th)

Watch: Method, Madness. Video-lecture.

Read: "Clean" and "A Good Reason" by Joy Williams.

Participate in **DB2**: Depth in Brevity

Exercise 2: "We saw them..." Instructions on Blackboard. Follow rubric for providing feedback.

Homework: Read "[Orientation](#)" by Daniel Orozco and review instructions for Final project and submit proposal on Nov. 3rd

Optional: Read interview with Daniel Orozco

<https://mastersreview.com/interview-daniel-orozco/>

Module 2: The Elements of Fiction

Week 3/ Characterization (Nov. 6th)

Watch: Character-Based Fiction. Video-Lecture

DB3: Welcome to our office!

Activity 1: Chat of Characters in “Orientation”

Submit final project proposal, provide ideas to classmates.

Homework: Read “Angel’s Laundromat” by Lucia Berlin.

Quiz 1 due Nov. 11th

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/two-step>

Week 4/ Narrator and Plot (Nov. 13th)

Watch: Plotting. Lecture ppt/video

Read: How to choose a narrator

DB4 & Exercise 4: At the Laundromat

Activity 2: Review plotting maps and design yours, due Nov. 17th

HW. Write, write, write, first draft is due Nov. 20th.

Week 5/ Show and Tell-Setting (Nov. 20th)

Watch: Show and Tell/ Setting, video-lecture

Participate: Workshop in groups.

Read: “Fiesta, 1984” Junot Díaz.

Share: Your best side for a Thanksgiving dinner (just kidding)

Week 6/ Revision (Nov. 27th)

Watch: Revision and Editing, video-lecture.

Activity 3: A Potluck

Read: “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid and do **Exercise 4:** Boy, oh Boy

Homework: Edit, revise, expand your short-story

Week 7/ The end (Dec. 4th)

Quiz 2

Participate in **DB5:** My method and my madness

Submit: Critical response

Submit: revised version of final project

IX. Final Project Instructions

For your final project you will “design” a character facing a situation regarding his/her/their adaptation or rejection of a place, literal or metaphorical. As you noticed,

in all of the stories we read, setting is important because it directly or indirectly triggers the story, the interaction between characters, or creates the poetics of the piece. A laundromat, an office, a home, a car, the street, all these places are fundamental for the authors we will be reading.

For your final project you will write a story that develops because of place. Think of urban spaces, think of intimate places, think of their effect in characterization. The main street of a city looks one way during the day, and the vibe might change completely at night, therefore the stories taken place there would be completely different.

You have liberty and creative freedom for this project. I would suggest that you don't have more than three characters as this will be a short short-story, 8-10 pages, 1 ½ line space.

Part of your work will be to: 1) present a proposal, 2) create a map/outline, 3) a draft for workshop, and then submit a revised final version for evaluation.