

**ENGLISH W381
(SUMMER 2008)**

Instructor: Dr. Paul Ruffin
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Office "hours": 7:45-8, 10-12, 2-3
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Texts: *The Man Who Would Be God*, *News About People You Know* (both provided by me)

Course goals: The primary goal of English 381 is to introduce the student to the fundamentals of writing short fiction through an intense examination of a small number of complete stories and through an analysis of separate elements of a great many stories. These examination samples will come from *The Texas Review* or will be duplicated and handed out. As the student progresses through the course, he/she will prepare numerous assignments applying the principles of good short fiction and fuse these assignments into two finished stories; hence, every written assignment on the elements of story writing should be a contribution to a whole story.

Knowing, as I do, the difficulties involved in *beginning* a story, I'll spend a few days discussing the origins of stories, techniques for getting those first pages down, etc. Through reports on books about writing we'll also examine particular problems other writers have faced and solutions they offer to those problems.

The course concludes with a brief introduction to the familiar essay, a form gaining popularity among magazines and journals in this country.

Secondary goals of the course are to introduce the student to manuscript preparation and to the markets for short fiction and the familiar essay; further, the student will become familiar with the publishing process through which a raw manuscript becomes a printed piece.

Grade derivation: Grades will be derived from written assignments, writing journals, class participation, attendance, and your final exam (see note at bottom of syllabus). Formal written assignments--book and manuscript reviews, the final exam--will be graded conventionally, and all written assignments must demonstrate thoroughness, neatness, and a grasp of fundamentals for full credit. Stories and familiar essays and parts thereof will not be assigned conventional grades, though extreme brevity, shoddy work, and obvious violations of conventions could result in a *minus* or *zero*; in some instances exemplary creative work (that which demonstrates extraordinary effort and seriousness) may earn extra plusses. Deriving a grade in a course like this is difficult. I have argued for a pass/fail approach for years, but as long as the GPA system is around, I suspect that I'll be required to post conventional grades. I'll make every effort to remain objective and professional in assessing your performance. You may drop by anytime to inquire about your progress in the course.

Formal papers: All formal papers must be typed, double-spaced, and you must follow conventional grammar and composition rules. All documentation must follow current MLA style. Formal guidelines are attached.

Late Work: I will accept late work; but unless you have a very good excuse, there'll be a grade penalty. I don't want to seem harsh here, but I have to discourage late work.

Absence policy: After one absence--unless you have a legitimate excuse--grade reduction will commence: two absences--five points off final grade; three absences--ten points; four absences--twenty points; five absences--automatic failure in course. Obviously I will make allowances for protracted illness or family emergencies. Two instances of tardiness will count as one absence. (Please try to avoid being tardy, since interruptions are unfair to me and the rest of the class.)

SYLLABUS

Tuesday, June 3 -- Course orientation. **Assignment:** Read "Lamar Loper's First Case" and "The Fox."

Wednesday, June 4 -- Introduction to *The Texas Review* and *The Sam Houston State Review*.

Thursday, June 5 -- Discussion of stories from *TR* and *SHSR*. **Assignment:** Prepare list of story ideas for discussion on Friday, June 6.

Friday, June 6 -- Discussion of story ideas.

Monday, June 9 -- Where stories come from. **Assignment:** Reports on books of theory due Monday, June 16.

Tuesday, June 10 -- Discussion of the attributes of good fiction. **Assignment:** Opening scenes due Tuesday, June 17.

Wednesday, June 11 -- Discussion of opening scenes, plots, and conclusions.

Thursday, June 12 -- Discussion of characterization, point-of-view, dialog, and dialect.

Friday, June 13 -- Discussion of "Lamar Loper's First Case." **Assignment:** Complete story due Thursday, June 19.

Monday, June 16 -- Presentation of oral reports of books of theory. Discussion of "Lamar Loper's First Case" continued.

Tuesday, June 17 -- Presentation opening scenes. **Assignment:** Reports on *News About People You Know* due Monday, June 23.

Wednesday, June 18 -- Discussion of "The Fox."

Thursday, June 19 -- Stories due. First workshop _____

Friday, June 20 -- Workshop _____

Monday, June 23 -- Presentation of oral reports of story collections. Evaluation of *Texas Review Manuscript* (final) due Monday, June 30.

Tuesday, June 24 -- Workshop _____

Wednesday, June 25 -- Workshop _____

Thursday, June 26 -- Workshop _____

Friday, June 27 -- Workshop _____

Monday, June 25 -- Workshop _____

Note: We'll stick to the syllabus as much as possible, but I intend to provide enhancements of

various sorts throughout the semester, usually to be plugged in on Fridays, which are typically "presentation days." I'd like to give you at least a cursory introduction to desktop publishing, and during the semester I hope to have a couple of visiting writers and at least one expert on using the Internet for publication; further, I plan to take the class over to our printing department for a first-hand observation of the publication of a book of poems. We'll work these in as we can.

Suggested reading list of books for reports (choose what interests you most):

The ABC's of Writing Fiction (Ann Copeland)
The Art of Fiction (John Gardner)
The Art & Craft of Novel Writing (Oakley Hall)
Beginner's Guide to Getting Published (Editors of *Writer's Digest*)
The Best Writing on Writing and The Best Writing on Writing II (Jack Heffron)
Breathing In, Breathing Out: Keeping a Writers' Notebook (Ralph Fletcher)
The Complete Guide to Fiction Writing (Barnaby Conrad)
Conceiving the Heavens: Creating the Science Fiction Novel (Melissa Scott)
The Craft of Fiction (William Knott)
Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem (Donald Murray)
Creating the Story (Rebecca Rule and Susan Wheeler)
Creating Fiction from Experience (Peggy S. Curry)
Creating Short Fiction (Damon Knight)
Creative Nonfiction (Philip Gerard)
Creative Writing: The Art of Lying (Edward Loomis)
The Fiction Dictionary (Laurie Henry)
Fiction Writer's Handbook (Burnett)
Fiction Writer's Workshop (Josip Novakovich)
For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History (Charely Kempthorne)
The Handbook of Short Story Writing, Vol. I (Writer's Digest)
The Handbook of Short Story Writing, Vol. II (Writer's Digest)
How To Write a Children's Book and Get It Published (Barbara Sevling)
How To Write and Sell Your First Novel (Oscar Collier)
How To Write a Short Story (Michael Joseph)
How To Write Short Stories (Sharon Sorenson)
Idea Catcher (Editors of Story Press)
Into the Deep: A Writer's Look at Creativity (Susan McBride Els)
Look, Think, and Write (Leavitt and Sohn)
Mastering Fiction Writing (Kit Reed)
The Novel Sentence (Robert Goodspeed)
Professional Fiction Writing (Jean Owen)
Revision (Kit Reed)
Theme and Strategy (Ronald Tobias)
Thirty Steps to Becoming a Writer and Getting Published (Scott Edelstein)
The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (And How To Avoid Them) (Jack Bickham)
The Triggering Town (Richard Hugo)

Turning Life into Fiction (Robin Hemley)
Turning Memories into Memoirs (Denis Ledoux)
The Writer's Digest Handbook of Novel Writing
Writers and Their Craft: Short Stories and Essays on the Narrative (Nicholas Delbanco)
Writing Fiction (Janet Burroway)
Writing Fiction (R.V. Cassill)
Writing for Money (Loriann Hoff Oberlin)
Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular (Rust Hills)
Writing Personal Essays (Sheila Bender)
Writing Short Fiction for Pleasure and Profit (Marian Gavin)
Writing the Short Story: A Hands-On Writing Program (Jack Bickham)

There are, of course, hundreds of other books that could be on this list; if you find one you'd like to report on, I ask only that you allow me approve it.