

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)
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Session 1: Course Introduction

A. Syllabus and mechanics of class

- Tuesdays readings are due as noted (except this week)
- Once a story is discussed in class it is permanently “in play” – can be used to think of other techniques
 - And – Great stories are good on ALL elements
 - Writers are Readers - what we read influences our writing subconsciously and consciously.

What do you like to read?
From where?

Professionalism – (Colette = First for love, then for a few close friends, and then for money)
Telling lies to tell the truth explores the variety of human experience.

All writers respond to the market of their day. Almost all writers write to get published, and that means that they in some ways adhere to the style and preferences of current editors. You’ve probably heard that Dickens wrote long because he was paid by the word.

Short stories are still paid by the word. In fact, in the Victorian period, there was a strong preference for longer stories and books. Today the preference in stories is under 5K words. Editors rarely buy anything (unless it will win a Pushcart Prize) that is longer than 8K or so because of how many stories they can fit in their magazine. This has nothing to do with the stories themselves—readings for this semester include a story that is over 40 pages and one that is barely 3 pages. Length is often a function of cultural preference.

B. Process

Every writer’s process is unique. A writer should be aware of their own process.

- Writing is difficult, even for the professional
- What time of day do you usually write? Is it consistent?
- pen? computer? In a particular place? At your desk? In bed? In a coffee house?
- Your process can change overtime or for a particular project—and if you run into trouble writing, you might want to experiment with changing process to see if that helps. Try writing in a different place, try a computer if you use a pen, try a different time of day.

(Everyone or anyone?) Talk about your process – think about your process.

*Revision is the heart of the writing process (fun and easier than 1st draft).
Revision often feels like it will be overwhelming, but once you begin you may find it much faster and more rewarding than you imagine. It is much harder to get a story down than to revise it.

Fighting getting stuck

- Stop in the middle of a scene.
- Stop in the middle of a sentence.
- Tear up the last paragraph (or page).

On Thurs, we will begin to address specific idea of **the short story**. Read the 1 page essays and think about what is a short story. How is it different from long fiction?

Writers in this book and writers today all responded to market pressures and preferences of their times.

Concept of natural length – every writer has a “natural” medium

- story
- novel
- play
- poetry

Many people do two or more, some do all.

Most people believe that one starts with the short story and works “up” to a novel, but that’s a misconception. They are deeply different things made out of the same material—a car, an airplane and a boat are all made of the same materials and they all travel, and while they are related they are very distinct things. The same is true of the four forms. They are all made of words, they all express and convey experience/emotion.

Every writer has a “natural” form. What do you like to read? What you like most to read may tell you what you are most inspired to write.

Novel vs. short story

Short story length—50—8K words

Novella-10-45K words

Novel—over 60K, but today’s preference is more to 100-150K, sometimes longer

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