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ENGL 352: Intermediate Fiction Writing—A Peer Review of Teaching Project Benchmark Portfolio

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Making an Apprentice of the Student Writer in the Teaching of ENGL 352 (Intermediate Fiction):
A Peer Review of Teaching Project Benchmark Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

Absent the elements of effective writing, there has been a strong debate on whether or not other aspects of creative writing can be taught. Many practicing writers like myself who teach have concluded that a student writer can be guided towards fully actualizing their talent, and this “guidance” is what mostly constitutes teaching. How then do we evaluate the effectiveness of this teaching, and to what extent do students’ individual talent help or stand in the way of effective instruction? How do we plan various learning outcomes and test the success of such strategies over the duration of the ENGL 352 course? And how do we more effectively assess creative writing? And, finally, how do we track students’ learning? These are the questions this enterprise sought to provide answers to. To do so, I reviewed my teaching materials, students’ works, grades, and other instructional materials to reflect on how effective my teaching of the ENGL 352 has been, and to offer ideas on how it can be more effectively designed.

Keywords: writers, individual talent, teaching, effectiveness, creative writing
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I. OBJECTIVES OF THE PEER REVIEW COURSE PORTFOLIO

A. GOALS OF THE PORTFOLIO

In creating the portfolio, I wanted to be able to better explore the goals for the class, and investigate ways in which I could better frame and articulate them in more expansive, yet reasonable and cogent, language. Also, I wanted to understand how I could adapt this class to be more beneficial to the students, especially those who have taken the ENGL 252 (Introduction to Fiction Writing) class as a prerequisite. I wanted to gain valuable knowledge about how both classes differ—given that it is difficult to distinguish between levels of understanding of the writing and learning of fiction. I want to also find a way to ensure that my students are able to grasp a general idea about what makes good fiction work—what, in essence, is the most concrete realization of aesthetic success? And, finally, I wanted them to acquire a cache of both vocabulary and the functional critical thinking skills necessary for them to be able to distinguish, at a very deep level, between successful and unsuccessful fiction.

With these in mind, I’d love to first address how to make the course different from the 252. I have had students complain in their evaluations that this course did not do more for them than what the 352 had already done. It is not often that they don’t learn anything new, they are rather often speaking in quantitative terms. Hence, they are wondering if what they have learned is worth the time devoted to the course. I myself have similar questions: I wonder, for instance, what is the nature of the 352’s “intermediacy”? What gaps do we—as teachers/planners of this course and its associates—envisage between the 252 and the 452 that the 352 intermediates? How might such gaps be reckoned. Are there particulars of craft or world building or prose mechanics that should pyramid from the introductory course to the “Advanced” one? What then is the proportionality of the 352 in this pyramid of knowledge?

Also, I would love to find better strategies for teaching creative writing generally. Are exams, such as the “craft exam” something one can expand upon? Are there ways in which the workshop could be better planned to incorporate other activities that can help generate feedback for students’ creative works? How can one best help students develop a critical and yet empathetic eye for the works of others? Also, I believe most creative writing teachers should be cognizant of the fact that students at this level will usually not have shown persuasive evidence of a strong desire for professionalization in the field of fiction writing. We must thus ensure that the course is designed in such a way that its points may be applied in other academic pursuits or professional spaces outside of the specific field of fiction writing.

Finally, I saw the Peer Review of Teaching Program as a way to truly think and reflect on my teaching as a junior faculty. I wanted this to also be a way to show my colleagues at the English department that I am committed to reaching the clime in my teaching. The portfolio will therefore form a part of my teaching file which I hope to present as part of my merit review and promotion file, and as part of my larger process towards satisfying the case for tenure.
My portfolio will aim to cover the entire course, in all its dimensions. I will evaluate the course intentions and goals, and the skill sets I had hoped to help the students develop through the instructional materials and class sessions. I will also hope to discover, through this deep introspection into my teaching practice, the best ways to impact these skills. I will also look at the possibility of finding new methods to improve evaluations and feedback on students’ works. What are the best ways to read and proffer helpful feedback that can help students improve their writing? What material or extra-textual activities can I employ to help students become better critics of their own works as well as the works of others? I will then hope to write recommendations based on this to my department regarding new possibilities in the teaching and design of the ENGL 352 - ‘Intermediate Fiction’ course as well as identifying areas for possible expansion/contraction of both this course, as well as its junior-level 252 course both here and in a future project.
II. DESCRIPTION OF COURSE

ENGL 352 or “Intermediate Fiction” is a creative writing course that emphasizes on the writing of fiction. It aims to improve on the skills already learned from the preliminary course—Introduction to Fiction (ENGL 252)—in ways that can help and enable students to craft better fiction and to acquire more advanced skills in aesthetic criticism and in proffering evaluative feedback on the works of others. Also, it is intended to equip students with the skills to make intelligent discourse on what they read. It is also a course that stands between the 252 and the 452, and thus serves as a prerequisite course for the ENGL 452.

Students often come to this course as English Majors in the Creative Writing concentration. They have already taken a handful of courses on Literature and a few on writing. This course provides this group of students with the space to hone their fiction writing skills. There are also students who may not be English majors but have artistic inclinations and have written in their spare time. These are mostly seniors from other departments who want to take a writing class before they graduate, or juniors who have similar inclinations. Most of these students come from a background of interest in fiction, and often have read some books that have moved them or that they admire.

This course is an essential course for students in the Creative Writing concentration. It gives them the space to write and workshop their stories and to learn from a professor who is also a published writer. It fits so well into the department’s goal of equipping the students with the skill of Imaginative Reasoning: a term the department has adopted to mean “the ability to use the imagination to think hypothetically about the world in all its diversity—the past, present, and future, the local and the global.” Developing a fiction-prone mind will invariably enable a person to better imagine new perspectives more easily, and to be able to articulate the resources produced from this effort of imagination.

A. COURSE GOALS

I desire for my students to learn first on how to read like a writer. I think it is essential for them to understand the importance and value of not just close-reading but evaluative/insightful reading. They should be able to tell, to identify and even understand what makes fiction work, and to be able to distinguish between good and bad writing, and even better: between execrable and great writing. Thus, I want them to approach writing as apprenticeship. This is why I approach the teaching of this course based on the method that best helped my own development as a writer, a method predicated on the quote: Read a hundred books, write one. I feel that this adage is especially relevant for undergraduate writing courses. We spend nearly half of the semester reading short stories from masters of the craft with an eye to learning an element of the craft or some writing technique from the texts. I focus on the following essential craft elements: characterization, setting, point of view, structure, style, and language. Then, in the second half, students write their own original stories, and workshopped them in the class.

I believe that even if students are avid readers who have read extensively already or have even read some of these works before, they stand to gain a lot from seeing themselves as apprentices who must now approach the texts again by looking at how they were created first before looking
at what they are. That is, learning can only really occur when the writer-reader is looking at the making of the story rather than the product (the story) itself. This is the skill that, if mastered, will drive their fiction in ways that would be very beneficial to their own writing and future careers as writers. And I think this is very beneficial especially for students who want to pursue creative writing as a potential career path.

B. CONTEXT

The ENGL 352 is itself a prerequisite course towards the 452, and it has its own prerequisite course, the 252. The course usually enrolls up to 18 students and can satisfies the ACE (Academic Achievement Education) learning objective 7 which is designed to help students “Use knowledge, theories, or methods appropriate to the arts to understand their context and significance.”

C. ENROLLMENT/ DEMOGRAPHICS

In the Spring 2017 iteration of this course which is a basis of this portfolio, the class number at the beginning of the semester was sixteen, of which two students withdrew leaving the number at fourteen. The table below gives a distribution of the students according to their levels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Level</th>
<th>Freshman</th>
<th>Junior</th>
<th>Sophomore</th>
<th>Senior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This group of students, having mostly already taken the ENGL 252, were already very much interested in writing and had become conversant with some of the rudimentary elements thereof. I often try to pitch the class to them at a slightly higher level than the close below them. I found that they still showed strong interest in learning, but their expectations had become somewhat graduated from basic tenets to “tips”—a term that reflects their view of themselves mainly in this for the tips they can get from an already published writer like myself.

A few of the students were in the Humanities, but others were in courses as diverse as Fishery, Criminology, amongst others, but a larger percentage (roughly 80%) had English as a minor. It is often difficult to gauge how many of them would continue on the path of Creative Writing, but I believe that quite a few in this particular class will. It is therefore safe to surmise that while there may be a tendency on the part of the students to treat the 252 as a supplement to course meant to satisfy an ACE requirement, the 352 is more often than not treated in complimentary terms—as something that could form a springboard to a future concentration in the art of creative writing.
III. TEACHING METHODS/COURSE MATERIALS/COURSE ACTIVITIES

A. TEACHING METHODS, COURSE MATERIALS, AND OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES USED

I have structured my teaching method by factoring in the *backward design method* in mind. This method felt especially expedient as I was teaching the same course again, and noticed certain defects in how I had taught in previous iterations. From this past semester, I began dividing the course into two separate sections: craft and workshop. In the first section, we discuss the various aspects of craft, topic-by-topic.

**THE CRAFT SECTION**

We use stories from a standard class textbook (*Writing Fiction: A Narrative Guide* by Janet Burroway et al) or ones I get from other sources and upload on canvas. During or after each class, we try to do some kind of exercise or practice that skill we have learned together. This section is predicated on the belief that we can not attempt to write until we have had a good sense of what constitutes good or successful writing. I try to make my students see these sessions as an apprentice work in which they observe, learn, and practice specific skills with an eye toward the independence of producing their own work. I have been using this book for sometime and I have found it to be one of the best resources out there for teaching undergraduate fiction. Its continued success, evident in its latest edition (the ninth one) attests to this conviction. Whenever and wherever I thought that a topic could not be best explored by any of the stories in the book’s mini anthology, I sourced stories from outside and uploaded those either on canvas or offered them to the students as handouts.

Broadly-speaking, I tailored individual topics to the texts that we read in the class that day. It is in this area that the textbook by Janet Burroway has been of utmost usefulness. Knowing full well that some of the students might be more interested in long-form fiction, I introduced a rather short novel, *Disgrace* by J.M Coetzee, the Booker-prize winning of the South African Nobel laureate. While the novel deals with hard subjects, the students were able to take much away from it by way of craft ideas, and a more hard-eyed look at the principles of constructing a novel.

**My Strategies/Activities:**

- I begin most of the classes with a twenty-minute lecture on a specific topic of craft with the aim to help the students take at least *one* new tip or skill away from the class.
- I supply writing prompts/assignments to enable students practice that tip or skill.
- At the end of the craft session (around the 7th week of class), I give the students a Craft Exam aimed at testing their knowledge of craft. The exam usually consists of five questions all of which they must answer. I test many aspects of craft during this exam i.e., characterization, empathy, setting, point-of-view, amongst others.
How Do I Measure Student Learning/ Outcome from these Methods?

- I ask students what I said about a certain topic or aspect of craft in the class following the one in which I said that, or even towards the end of that session. And in subsequent classes, I make frequent references to that same thing until I am certain they have understood it.
- I look out for how they are incorporating these tips and skills into their writing and responses to prompts, exercises, etc.
- I use the craft exam as a way to gauge their comprehension on the ideas and craft topics. It also helps me to cover any loopholes or any aspect of craft that I realize have not been fully understood so that the anticipated students’ original stories can be better.
- I try to compare their writings when they revise to see what has improved in a kind of continuum of works/assignments they submit over the course of the semester.

THE WORKSHOP SECTION

This is the practical section, which comes after the craft part of the semester. Here, we put into practice what we have learned regarding the mechanism of fiction, or rather, how fiction works. We will now take the various material knowledge into the development of our own stories. I run two sessions of workshop for two students’ stories: one the full class workshop in which everyone reads everybody’s stories. And the group workshops in which students read only a number of peer stories. In the writing workshops, the students will have pre-read stories from their peers, and then written the writers letters which are then discussed in the class as a group. I also give them letters on each story.

My Strategies/Activities:

- I proffer feedback on original writing aimed at giving direct instruction tailored to the specific needs of individual students.
- I lead the full-class workshops. Here I direct students to give plaudits for the work of others. I challenge them that the central goal of the workshop is to help other writers better their writing through feedback from peers and me. This begins by first finding something that the writer has done well.
- I also use the feedback as an extra teaching session when I run the “Matter’s Arising” sessions in which I scoop up common issues in their writings and spend the first ten or fifteen minutes before workshops to discuss these issues. This is the place where I teach, or rather reinforce basic grammar or punctuation techniques among other things.
- Finally, the workshop process itself shows the students that their writing is not completed at the first draft stage. By propping their work up for discussion rather than just simply treating it as finished material means they are recognizing that initial output does not constitute good writing. Their writing has to go through various stages of revisions before it can be refined enough for publication. As students who are often used to giving direct, one-time answers to questions in exams, this is usually a new thing for them.
How Do I Measure Student Learning/Outcome from these Methods?

- Since I emphasize revision after the workshop, I look to how they revise to see if the individual instruction generated in the feedback letters and workshop discussions have helped them understand what to change in their stories, and how to write better. I try to see if the students have taken to heart the elements of writing we dwelt on in the craft section in their writing. Through their stories and revised drafts, I find how much they have learned.

B. RATIONALE FOR TEACHING METHODS

I offer the following rationale as ways in which I expect the method to aide students in achieving my course goals:

**CRAFT SECTION**

- I expect the lectures to at least prop up a particular matter in their minds, even one they are already familiar with. I hope that it will be re-enforced in a way that would provoke their curiosity and engender better understanding of that the topic.
- I expect that the assignments I give them and prompts would further drive home the points we had discussed in the class. And assignments will keep the topic ever fresh in their minds. They will at least be thinking about that topic by the time they come to the next class with their submissions. Just like anything else in life, the more students engage with something, the more they get better at it. So, any amount of time a teacher can spend having students think or focus on an idea is a victory.
- I expect that students would benefit from the personal instruction that is the feedback letter. It addresses their specific needs, and meets them personally where they are at in their writing. It helps them refocus their energy on the areas where their writing might be feeble, and helps them better incorporate certain skills that I re-enforce into their writing. In my experience, this is the greatest asset in the hand of the Creative Writing teacher.

**WORKSHOP SESSION**

- I expect students to revise their stories in ways that will reflect that they have paid attention to the critical reviews of their peers and I, and have taken into consideration the resources of the writing workshop.
- I expect that the students will find ways to better appreciate the idea that a work is not complete until it has been revised many times, and that this is the only way in which one can reach a certain aesthetic success in fiction writing.
- I expect that the workshop structure—which obligates students to learn to find something working in every story regardless of their value judgement on it—will force students to develop the skill of objective judgement. That is, even if they may not like a particular student’s writing, story, or style, they must be able to objectively recognize that what that writer is doing well. This is an important skill in
critical studies that will help the students separate between their emotional response to something and the critical judgement that the work itself deserves regardless of personal taste. It is a needed training, something that forces them to reassess their initial response to a text e.g., “I don’t want to read *Lolita!*” to “While I am disgusted by the pedophilic content of this novel, I can see the intimate character sketch Nabokov so wonderfully created in the character of Humbert Humbert.”

C. ILLUSTRATION OF CHANGES FROM ITERATIONS OF THE COURSE

I have taught this course two times before—in Spring and Fall 2016. I taught the first one during a very hectic semester when my novel, *The Fishermen (2015)*, then recently published, was getting attention that required me to travel a lot. Hence, the course was hastily arranged and not well-composed. I made massive changes in the semester after that. Firstly, I had the summer to prepare most of my teaching notes and plan the courses way ahead of time, which proved to be very helpful. I was able to face the task of teaching the students without fear of inadequate preparation.

There was also a complaint from a student in the spring iteration of the course that he would have loved to write more, since he had already been exposed to very much essential reading in the prerequisite course, the 252. I thought this made some sense, and to better distinguish the 252 experience from the 352 one, I added a third original story to the number of stories they were to write during the course. This one preceded the workshops, and was read by me alone. In it, I flagged areas of weaknesses that might come up during the workshops ahead of time, and the result was that students brought much stronger works into the workshops.

Also, to be able to better test their craft abilities, I added the Craft Exam. This is an exam that tests the students’ abilities and acquired skills in the areas concerning the mechanics of writing. It tested rudimentary skills around scene construction, character building, effective writing patterns, effective plotting, crafting of strong descriptions amongst others. My sense is that this was very helpful, and was a way for me to test before hand what the students have learned from the craft section of the course, and to be able to make notes towards helping fill those knowledge/skill gaps as the semester progresses.

I believe these were some of the reasons why an overwhelming number of students in the Fall 2016 course liked the class, and many of them echo the sentiment of one of the students in that semester’s evaluations that “there are no ways in which this course may be modified.” I have also seen an uptick in the number of students wanting to retake my class, and I have, right now, three former students. One more from this class is now doing an Independent Directed Reading with me, and many of them have requested feedback for stories they submitted in the previous semester.

This semester, I added one layer of major writing project by asking the students to submit an exclusive story to me early on—by the fifth or so week. I alone read this story and proffered feedback to the students. I redesigned the syllabus to reflect certain changes in the topics we covered in the semester. I also changed the long-form fiction text from *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck to *Disgrace* by J.M Coetzee, because I found that most of the students had
extensively read and studied the former text in their pre-college years. This was a fact that was unbeknownst to me until I came to UNL. This book was also more contemporary and had some craft patterns that was specific to some of the new topics added. (see the differences between this semester’s syllabus[found in Appendix 1] and the fall 2016 syllabus [found in Appendix 2]).

Finally, I focused more on the revision process, where I reiterated many times over that the real writing actually happens. I brought in a rough draft of a story I had written many years ago, feigning anonymous authorship, I projected the material on the board and worked through the revision with the students. I found that this was an engaging process, and the students were happy to actually see me approach revision in practice in their presence. I also requested a “Revision Reflection” from them for each of the stories they revised in their portfolio. This was a one-page paper that had them thinking aloud about the revision process and actually articulating what they did, and how they responded to the feedback they got from the workshop. I found it very useful for the students. One of the things we discussed in the revision class was that simply writing a kind of reflection about what the writer wanted to achieve with a story can do a lot to help them see if they actually have been able to achieve that, where they strayed, and what they still need to remove/include. In essence, the reflection acts as a marker to measure authorial drift; a revisionary compass. Examples of these reflection letters may be found in Appendix 3 and Appendix 5.
IV. THE COURSE AND THE BROADER CURRICULUM

A. ENG 352 AS AN ESSENTIAL COURSE FOR THE ENGLISH MINOR IN CREATIVE WRITING CONCENTRATION

Every college knows that effective writing is a skill that all students are required to learn. This is why writing courses like Composition, College Writing, are often compulsory in schools across the United States. In fact, in many places, this kind of writing course is code-named “Freshman Composition.” What is not commonly discussed is that to be able to write well is not only to be able to make strong argumentation. To be able to write imaginatively is, in a broader sense, to be able to equip argumentation with some artistry. An Igbo proverb says that if gold is to be handed to someone wrapped in shit, then one may reject it because of its smell. This means that presentation—or representation—matters. In fact, on the other hand, feces could be offered in gold wrapping and it would be more acceptable to the unknowing recipient.

Learning the skills that make good creative writing possible is a more efficient way to teach writing to students. This is why courses offered in the English department on creative writing like the ENGL 170 (Beginning Creative Writing), ENGL 252 (Intro to Fiction Writing), ENGL 253 (Intro to Poetry Writing) and the 352 amongst others are extremely important. A Law student may know how to argue a case, but how about giving a convincing narrative about a witness’ testimony. How do they know when to use a detail, or when to show rather than tell? How can they paint a graphic image of the event? What should they leave out and what should be kept in the narrative? These are skills learned in the Creative Writing classes.

To the English major, at least one of these creative writing courses is necessary. And for the Creative Writing Concentration student, most of them are essential. This is a class that emphasizes reading, how first to read effectively, and then to write using the skills acquired through reading. In my teaching of it, we plumb deeper into the craft of fiction, and try to understand why certain works have succeeded, or moved us the way they have done. But even more so, it helps the students write more. It is an Aristotelian idea that “practice makes perfect.” The idea of the workshop in which student work is treated by peers not only enable students to produce more work, it also helps them to become more conscious of an audience for their work. As a practicing writer myself, I can say that this is one of the most efficient motivation to write well. The writing they would have done for pleasure at their leisure will now be graded by a professor. And in some cases, this professor may be a writer whose work they may have already read and who may have had some kind of influence on them.

Furthermore, the analytical skill that is necessary for most academic writing is honed even better in the creative writing workshop. Here the students become a captive audience for each others’ works, and they try to analyze the aesthetics and mechanics of the writing to try to see what the writer has done, and to suggest and proffer ideas on how the writing could be made better. Thusly, the writing workshop can be seen as a supplement to the freshman writing course, or even an advanced, more sophisticated iteration of it. Literary criticism requires an intuitive understanding of the mechanics of good writing and effective narration. It deals with
analyzing text, sometimes even occult rhetorical issues such as the tone of a story amongst other aspects of a work.

Furthermore, for the students who aim to become professional fiction writers, this course offers an early introduction to the profession. They are taught to understand what to expect when they write stories. They get, first hand, what reviews may look like, and how to understand the prevalent, critical goal of literary feedback. In fact, I often offer, at the end of the semester, a class on publishing, in which we discuss the intricacies of becoming a professional fiction writer.

Lastly, the course also prepares students who may want to go on to get Graduate Creative Writing degrees like the MFA or PhD (the latter which we offer at the department) for Graduate studies in this field. When I arrived at the top-rated Creative Writing program at Michigan in 2012, I had never been in a Creative Writing workshop before. The difficulty I experienced at the time would not be experienced by any of the students who take the ENGL 352.
V. ANALYSIS OF STUDENT LEARNING

A. ANALYSIS OF PARTICULAR STUDENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS

A course like the Intermediate Fiction which requires a prerequisite course is usually tough when it comes to initially seeking to understand what students already know and what they don’t. To this end, I ask students to write a short profile of who raised them in the first day of class. This often produces candid explorations into other characters in a narrative way. And this piece of writing not only lays bare to me much of what might be lacking in their writing, but also builds a convergence between residual knowledge and creative will. It also fulfils one of the basic writing advices that beginning writers are often given: to write what they know. I get an understanding through this exercise of what their literary capabilities. I then try to make a quick tweak to my syllabus and rid it of anything that might come off as redundant, or to include whatever I feel may be lacking, generally, in their writing. This pre-emptive action has often proven to be very useful in understanding students’ learning.

I then subsequently track their learning throughout the semester trajectorially: by trying to understand what has been improved upon, and what they have learned. I always tell them at the beginning of the semester to treat the class not as a normal college class, but as an apprenticeship. And that what I am most concerned about is to see what their writing was in the first week of the semester and compare it to what it has become in the last week. In these differences lie the teaching and the learning.

In this section, I will document the evidences of how successful—if at all it can be said to be—my teaching practices have been in relation to my goals and strategies adopted in teaching this semester’s iteration of ENGL 352. A recap of my strategies, teaching activities, and teaching questions I have chosen to study. In summary the strategies for measuring students’ learning outcome is as follows:

- Writing prompts/ In-class Writing exercises
- Take-Home Assignments
- Classroom discussions Q & A sessions
- Craft Exam
- Original Stories
- Revised Versions of Original Stories

I will use the works of five students from this class who generously allowed me to use their class work to analyze overall student learning outcome. I will highlight the three major activities namely the last three: Craft exam and portfolio (which consists of their original stories, revised drafts of original stories, and critique letters to other students). My goal here would be to find a way to document how well my students have learned through these activities by using the evidence obtained from their submitted works. As a springboard, it is good to note that the grade distribution was distributed on the syllabus as follows:

- Attendance—10%
- Participation—10%
- Peer critique for Workshop 1 –5%
- Peer critique for Workshop 2–5%
- In-class Writing & Assignments–5%
- Craft Exam–20%
- Fiction Portfolio–40%
ENG 352-Spring 2017- CRAFT EXAM

Instructions: Please answer all 5 questions. Normal rules apply: (1.5 spacing, font 12, Times Roman or Calibri). This will go towards 20% of your total grade. Each question carries a five percent (5%) grade-point.

Question 1: "Show don't tell" and "write what you know" are the most common pieces of advice offered to young writers. Formulate the advice you might give a younger writer about any two of the following: Structure, Voice, Point-of-View, Setting, or Characterization. 1.b.) Illustrate the benefits of following this advice by using examples from any of the stories we have read so far.

Question 2: Imagine that you receive this story to critic. What would you say to the writer regarding the two main elements of a story (desire and conflict)? If you have any advice, can you illustrate how your ideas can work by writing an alternative version of this story using your ideas?

Story: The man rose up from his seat in the house near the valley and went down the road. It was cold, very cold. He walked with his pocket heavy, and this was because he had a loaded gun. He came up the alley, looked up but went on. He hummed a tune to himself, a tune that he suddenly remembered, something from his childhood. Some people were talking loudly in the neighborhood as he passed, and also some birds were flying over the sky.

He looked near the district cinema when he came there, but went on. The sun was shining on his face and he was starting to sweat. Then, an hour later, at the cross between the streets, he shot a man on the head, on the chest, and in the stomach. He took his gun, and went home.

Question 3: An amateur writer has sent you a story idea and wants some advice. Here is the plot summary of the story: A woman whose military son has died has gone to Afghanistan to find out what kind of life her son lived during his five-year post there. On arriving in Afghanistan, she finds a man who knew her son. The man had once hidden from Taliban fire. She falls in love with this man and he marries her, and she begins to live in Afghanistan.

What advice(s) would you give this writer regarding these points:
-Characterization
-Point-of-view
-Structure

Note that you may give any advice you want. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. This is simply meant to test your imaginative knowledge of craft.

Question 4: There has been a flooding in an area, and a High school has been affected. Write a description of the aftermath, paying attention to the many sense we bring to reading—sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound. (Your description should not be between 50-150 words).

Question 5: Rewrite this sentence by demonstration, making sure that all the properties of the character are intact: Asa is a girl who is weird. She likes to talk, but although she is short, I think she is smart.

Due Time: Please send me your papers by email by 2.pm tomorrow (Thursday) with the title "Craft Exam" in the Subject.
The above is a sample copy of the craft exam which the students had 48 hours to attempt and submit electronically. The exam was in general well-done by the students. Students attended the questions with sturdy grace, showing an understanding of the craft points we had extensively studied in the class. Essentially the exam tested students’ knowledge on various craft points. In summary, the exam tested student’s knowledge gained in the first seven weeks of the semester including craft elements like Characterization, Structure, Relevant detail, Conflict and Crisis, and Point-of-View amongst others.

The students answered most of the question in ways that implied a good understanding of craft. Student A, who scored lowest on the exam, struggled with one strong aspect of characterization intersecting relevant details: the question of “showing” instead of “telling” which is the core aspect of the number 5 question. Her answer was more “telling” instead of “showing,” a deficiency that would become more visible in her writing later on in the semester. Students like Katrina and Chelsie also struggled with that question. Many students in the class struggled with this particular question, but at least half of them were able to satisfy the requirements for an A grade in the exam. On the whole, though, the general success of the students with question 1 and 2 show that most of the class understood what we had discussed about characterization.

Grade distribution of the five students whose work I am using in this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Craft Exam (out of 20%)</th>
<th>Portfolio (Out of 40 %)</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
<th>Final Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Holly</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Chelsie</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>A+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Anthony</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>A+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Katrina</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Rebecca</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the portfolio, I emphasized that evaluating creative writing is almost impossible, and that what I would be grading for would be how well the students have been able to:

1. Learn how to write better stories using the techniques learned in the craft sessions
2. How well they have paid attention to defects in their writing revealed in low-skill writing exercises and in the first exclusive non-graded story
3. How well they put into context and use the gains made from the writing workshop
4. The effectiveness of their revisions

In summary, I asserted repeatedly to the students that I would be grading their effort, mostly. In general, the class seemed to have taken good note of this as there were 11 A grades, and the rest of the other 4 were B grades. As the table shows, student A was the lowest performer, and this was consistent throughout. Her effort in the original story was mild and weak. But her revision did not improve, either. The problem with her revision was that she did not understand the true
essence of the art, which is for a writer to re-vision, or see again, what they had written. I told them that this is where the actual writing happens. Not in the first draft. The workshop gives the writer a sense of what they can change to make their work better, but not exactly a comprehensive one. Perhaps, in the first workshop (a full-class one), she could have gathered a comprehensive and thus useful feedback. But this was not possible in the second workshop, which was group workshop model that had four or five students in each groups.

Student A’s poor grade results from a number of things, which can be summed up with the remark I scribbled on her paper “Mild revision” (see Appendix 3 and Appendix 4 for this student’s papers). While indeed she added a gun in response to the feedback point on her defective reliance on the “deus ex machina,” she failed to adjust the revision to accommodate this new change. Thus the new story feels in need for even more revision of that part. She states that “I once again followed the corrections of Mr. Obioma and changed any errors within and with grammar as best I could (Appendix 3).” But this was not reflected in the manuscript per se. While my feedback letter (Appendix 4) to the student suggests a well-written story that doesn’t need too much work in revision, I did do quite some mark-ups on the student’s manuscript. For most of these, the student followed, but neglected to use the knowledge gained from these markups to effect changes in other areas of the text. Thus, leaving some of the revised manuscript still in a rough shape.

Now, part of the instruction on revision was that I did not hope to clean up the student’s manuscripts as an editor, but rather to show them what was wrong in the mechanics of their prose. I simply sometimes identified an “editorial page” and then marked this up. I told them to take a look at the kind of changes I have effected therein and to learn how to make these in their writing. I added also that if I were to do everything for them, then they would not be able to know how to make these changes themselves. Hence, mistakes that I had already spoken about in story 1, I refrained from repeating in my feedback on story 2 if the same error recurred. Student A did not adhere to this advice, and her revision suffered for it. It must be noted, however, that this was not a poor student overall. Her other revision, for example, was good and so were her other outputs including her assignments, attendance, class participation, feedback writing, and others which earned her high grades, thereby earning a final grade of B+.

Student B, whose work received a total grade of 40 full points for the portfolio grade was, by contrast to student A, a slow starter and one whose work struggled at the beginning of the semester. Her work reflects, to me, the success of some aspects of the instruction, and the weakness of others. Her first original workshop story was rough, and very defective craft-wise and in the mechanics of writing. But she took these weaknesses to heart and tried to hone her skills the best she could. She also made good use of the feedback gathered in the writing workshop, and her revision was all the better for it. As shown on the first page of her second original story (Appendix 7), the student’s work was not well-realized. She still showed, for instance, feebleness in the area of character presentation through point-of-view which she struggled with in the craft exam. I wrote about the imprecision in my feedback letter to her, in these words:

“We need to know whose story this is. Is it Logan’s—it feels like it is so. So, if it is why is she the one telling the story? Why not give to Cesar what is his? If it is Abigail’s story, then you will have to let her acquire an arc too. Who is she? (She does not talk about herself in this draft). You
will use Logan’s story to develop her so that, by story’s end, we will see something in her that will have changed. Think of “In The Gloaming” as a model in this regard (Appendix 6)."

The student tried diligently to rework the characterization and point-of-view in the story by handing over the story to Logan. Instead of the wooly omniscience POV, we now have a first-person narrator who is in control of the self and emotionally alert to the feelings of the other. This is transformative to the story in that it also allows an arc to form in the story by setting a character as the identifiable center of the story, and whose life is changed by interaction with the other character in the story.

The student’s revision reflection also shows this new depth of understanding when she reflects that “My first draft did not make clear that they were in love, so I made sure by adding more gestures that would go beyond their friendships, such as the kiss on the lips.” She also took the advice to redraft the tense in which the story was couched. The original draft, as my feedback letter shows—and which was corroborated by some of her peers—argued that the tense switches weakened the story considerably. The student revised with this in mind, and reflects as follows: “…When rewriting the story in the past tense, I found it less of a struggle as for my first draft, there were so many switches between those two tenses because of the various flashbacks Gail had (sic).”

Student D, who scored very low on the portfolio (33) but managed to still get an A due to stellar performances in other areas of the course, is an example of a student whose writing did not improve very much. As mentioned earlier, she struggled with the last question of the craft exam which dealt with the intersection between character representation and sharpness of detail. The story excerpted in Appendix 8 is the third page of her second workshop story. By this time in the semester, I expected the students to have taken note of the defects in their writing, having written some twelve or so writing pieces including two stories, one of which was workshopped. But her writing still showed a deep weakness in character presentation. At the margin of that excerpt, I said repeatedly that she should opt for demonstration (showing) rather than simply giving information (telling). I wrote, for instance, under one of the significant lines that “Instead of simply say this was there, so-and-so was/were there, make the information into a narration.” A few lines down, I wrote again: “Show us how it was so.” Almost on the same line, circling another sentence, I wrote: “Describe what the dragon looks like. Don’t assume your reader knows.”

These lapses in the work of this student revealed a deficiency in understanding of craft. Her work as a whole also showed a lack of drive towards mastering the rudimentary mechanics of writing. Her story telling did not show much signs of improvement, either. Surprisingly, her other story was well-revised, which led me to surmise that this student probably was engaged in other projects and ran out of time. I think this may have resulted in her finishing work on only one aspect of the portfolio, which amounted to work on the first story and the revision.

B. ANALYSIS OF GRADES AND TRENDS

In the class as a whole, the students—as iterated earlier—showed an understanding of the course and its goals. Many of them showed clear signs of progress throughout the semester. They often would respond to something we discussed in the class, but will almost definitely respond when
something is mentioned to them in the individualized context of the personalized feedback letter or as remarks on their assignments or in-class exercises. Below is a breakdown of the complete class grades:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Scores</th>
<th>Craft Exam 20%</th>
<th>Portfolio 40%</th>
<th>Attendance 10%</th>
<th>Participation 10%</th>
<th>Assignments 10%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table reveals, this class was a fairly good one. I have been lucky at more easily connecting with students at this level and in this specific course so much so that, more often than not, the attendance is often very high. Hence, the attendance takes the highest average score as well as lowest score. The craft exam, however, had the lowest scores in general. I think this shows that something about the craft classes is inadequate right now, especially the class about relevant detail and character presentation. I will work towards changing using the backward design model to teach these topics. I will say more on this in the “planned changes” section.

The average of the portfolio was the lowest of all. I think is because the portfolio consists of so many documents all at once. I think, though, that the main reason some students seemed to have performed poorly in it is because of lack of attention paid to it. Some of the students did not attempt revising their stories. They simply put it off, and did very little to make use of the workshop. There could be several reasons for this. One of them could be, certainly, that some of these students did not feel their work was in need of revising. Such attitude, that one can have a complete draft at a first go, is something I hope to do more to talk to them about. But largely, convincing students with some kind of presumptuous attitude towards their craft might require more than classroom lecture.
VI. PLANNED CHANGES

While teaching every course, I make notes about how the class went and make suggestions to self about what I could do to make each session better when I teach the class again. Then, even more, whenever I get my evaluations, I carefully review the feedback the students give, and try to consider them when I approach the courses again. Thusly, over the four semesters I have been here, I have had to make various changes to the various syllabi of the courses I have taught. As you will see in the two syllabi of the ENGL 352 course in the appendices, there are stark differences.

But even more than the self-assessments and students’ assessments, the peer review benchmark portfolio has forced me to think very deeply about my teaching in ways that I have rarely done before. Looking closely at the student work outside the context of evaluation, but rather in the context of course reviewing, I saw a lot of loopholes. In their seminal book of pedagogical advisory, Making Teaching and Learning Visible, the authors counsel that teachers should not try to use the ideas we learned from the peer review program in the class we are currently teaching. So while I deterred from fully incorporating aspects of the “backward design model,” I did make use of it in certain aspects of my course-building. And in these places where I incorporated it, I saw the need to redesign my syllabus from the scratch in order to have this as an all- encompassing framework for the entire course. Therefore, with that in mind, here a few of the changes I will be making:

I will endeavor to design my courses with an eye toward achieving a material goal in each class. This will enable better tailor my syllabus and the teaching notes towards achieving a specific goal in each class. It will help me get rid of time consuming issues that do not add any substance to the students’ learning, but which envolume my syllabus nonetheless. To this end I will add more in-class exercises and assignments in the class. I will also better fine-tune the teaching notes by itemizing specific goals.

As I stated in my reflection on the grades and grade trends, I have to make changes in the craft exam. I think that I should introduce it later in the semester, perhaps by a week or two forward and refine how I teach the craft elements of characterization more. To this end, I have luckily found a book I think might help better streamline my ideas and help my impact the skills in building interiority in a character, and in their presentation by relevant detail. That book is Michael Kardos’s The Art and Craft of Fiction, which I will now use as a supplement to the textbook we already use in the class. I find in the book a perspective that feels more effective in teaching these specific aspects of craft by making the students approach it as a question of what is “newsworthy” in a character’s actions or individual scenes and events.

I have also modified the craft exam questions, making details clearer and adding more information here and there. I have also teased out the final question more, to give students even more questions to grapple with and by so doing have even more practice on character presentation. I have included the new craft exam question paper in this portfolio (see Appendix 9).
I plan to expand the classes on revision to include a full class on the mechanics of prose writing, in which I will teach all of the technical matters of grammar, punctuation, etc. This way, the students will not see the individualized notes in their feedback letters as too dogmatic. Rather, when taught as a full topic in the class, this will help them better understand that this aspect of revision is extremely crucial to the success of a story much like the global one effected in fixing infelicities in the plot and world-building of a story. Hence, I intend to increase the revision sessions from two classes to three.

I’m also hoping to explore certain other questions this portfolio raised for me, but which I do not readily have answers for at the time of completing the project. One of such questions is about the aspect of residual knowledge and to better understand how much students are learning from my class. I’m also thinking of better ways to understand what students think of the class at least by mid-point in a given semester. To this point, I’m hoping to bring in more assessment materials, like making a mid-semester survey, an example of which I will be borrowing from one of the benchmark portfolios on the Peer Review of Teaching website. I am also looking for better ways to evaluate their writing. How, for instance, might one make them understand that my goal is not to grade creativity per se, and that a pedestrian story would not elicit diminutive score-grade than anymore than a striking one if the necessary works of an artist, of a serious writer, is effected in the making of the work?
VII. SUMMARY AND OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF THE PORTFOLIO PROCESS

I have learned a lot from this process, and from the many meetings in which we were encouraged to think aloud about our teaching. I think the exercise has given me even more ideas as how to approach teaching, and how to see assessment as a key component of effective teaching. The benchmark portfolio offered me time to reflect on my teaching, my classes, the strategies, and more especially the students’ performances. To use the formulation of the authors of the book, *Making Teaching And Learning Visible*, the portfolio helped “make visible the intellectual work of teaching.” It was eye-opening to see where my students tend to perform poorly, and to return to the source material (i.e., my teaching notes, syllabus etc.) and see where my teaching had lapses.

More so, I found returning to their papers two weeks after reading the final ones and posting their grades very rewarding. The non-obligatory review of these materials, free from the constraint of grading, helped better see what aspects of their learning process could have been improved on. In all, I have learned that the work of teacher involves a lot of pragmatism and preemption. One must be able to always anticipate something before even attempting to teach, rather than simply teach and then wait for something. This preemption is a skill ingrained in the “backward design teaching model.”
VIII. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: ENGL 352 Course syllabus for spring 2017.
Appendix 2: ENGL 352 Course syllabus for Fall 2016
Appendix 3: Student A’s Reflection Letter
Appendix 4: Professor’s Feedback Letter to Student A
Appendix 5: Student B’s Reflection Letter
Appendix 6: Professor’s Feedback Letter to Student B
Appendix 7: First page of Student B’s Original draft of Story 1
Appendix 8: First Page of Student B’s Revised draft of Story 1
Appendix 9: Student D’s page 3 of original draft
Appendix 10: Student D’s Feedback Letter
Appendix 11: Modified Craft Exam Question Paper
A. APPENDIX 1: ENGL 352 COURSE SYLLABUS FOR SPRING 2017

INTERMEDIATE FICTION WRITING

ENG 352-SEC. 001 (Spring 2017)

Course Syllabus

T/Th 12:30 pm – 01:45 pm
Andrews Hall 118

Asst. Prof: Chigozie Obioma

Office: Andrews Hall 347
Email: cobioma2@unl.edu

Office Hours: Tue & Thurs 10:00 am - 12:00 pm (and by appointment)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was famous for his quote: If you don’t like another person’s story, write your own. Although disliking another’s story could inspire creative writing, we will try to tap our creative writing wells because of various reasons ranging from the basic human desire to tell a story down to the desire to respond to life issues through creative writing. We will read a range of short stories written for such reasons and more. Our reading list will tend to be diverse in scope, cutting across various continents. Using these works as discussion pieces, we will write at least three of our own stories.

The course is designed to help students gain skills in: writing fiction; recognizing the literary conventions of fiction; reading and critiquing published work from a writer’s perspective; making deliberate creative choices that can be explained to readers and critics; and revising their writing using workshop feedback from their peers and other writing strategies, and also developing and honing editorial skills gained through the discussion of the works of other student writers. Also, by passing this course, you will fulfill ACE (Academic Achievement Education) Learning objective 7: “Use knowledge, theories, or methods appropriate to the arts to understand their context and significance.” Your work will be evaluated by the instructor according to the specifications described in this syllabus. At the end of the term, you may be asked to provide samples of your work for ACE assessments as well.”

REQUIRED TEXTS AVAILABLE AT THE UNIVERSITY BOOKSTORE

2. Supplementary materials posted on canvas
4. A journal for class notes, writing exercises, daily observations, workshop responses, etc.

**Please note that the content of this syllabus might change during the course of the semester. Should that happen, I will promptly update it on Blackboard and notify you appropriately. It is, then, in your best interest to attend class regularly.

COURSE REGULATIONS

CLASS PATTERN: The class pattern will mostly be consistent. During the first part of the class (the “craft session”), we will talk about craft for about fifty (50) minutes, and then do some writing tasks for
the remainder of each class period. The workshop sessions will be held in accordance with the
distribution we have in the syllabus. During the second part, the workshop session, we will have—
separately—group and all-class workshops. See the section on “peer review” for a clue on how this will
go.

EVALUATIONS BREAKDOWN:
Attendance–10% Participation–10%
Peer critique for Workshop 1 –5%
Peer critique for Workshop 2 –5%
In-class Writing & Assignments–10%
Craft Exam–20%
Fiction Portfolio–40%

IN-CLASS WRITINGS AND PARTICIPATION: For each text we read in the class, bring two (2) discussion questions regarding what you find most surprising, unique, or compelling about the text. Bring these questions on the day we discuss each text. Your questions should be able to meet the principal aim of this course, which is to help students craft good arguments about their readings. They may be, simply, what you find most surprising, unique, or compelling about the works we read for that class.

CRAFT EXAM: You will have a writer’s exam, which, by the very connotation, denotes an unconventional exam. The exam will be a take-home writing exam that would be made to test your knowledge about craft. It would be, for all practical purposes, meant to help you practice on a scale bigger than the writing assignments the craft issues we have been tackling all semester.

FICTION PORTFOLIO: The portfolio will contain the first and revised drafts of the two stories workshopped (Stories I & II). Please include the original drafts you submitted to me, and which contain my appended edits/notes. Your revised papers will be judged based on the effort to not only rethink the initial draft, but to do your best to make it better. That would mean revising your ideas where you feel it is not effective, or where you have been advised—and are convinced—should be revised. Writing is not formulaic, and every piece is different in both form and aesthetics, and even style. So the best way to work through a productive piece of writing is to revisit our examples, samples in that essay and see how the writers wrote their essays. You can follow structure, form, anything in those. If you took notes during our talks, consult those notes and follow through. Make sure your writing is polished and edited, too. Don’t do one and leave the other. Do a close-reading of your drafts and critique them. See where you would have advised another writer to shape up and do the same to your own work. Read the writing out loud and catch up misspellings and infelicities in the prose, then polish them. In summary, your effort is what will convince here above all others. And I as your instructor have been fully trained to look out for this: substantial effort.

Original stories are open; you can write about anything. I try not to constrain you with page limits so I can allow you to write as freely as possible. But for formality sake, a story should not be less than 5 pages, and not more than 20. If you have a novel, or novella, we may have to workshop it over two workshop sessions. You will need to consult for this purpose. Please try to adhere strictly to the following formatting specifications: Font type: Times New roman or Calibri; Size: 11 or 12 (cannot be less!) Spacing:1.5 spacing (must be exact for the purpose of class uniformity).

Briefly, the portfolio should contain:
1. Author’s Reflection for both stories (See sample on blackboard/canvas)
2. My letters and original drafts of your manuscript with my margin notes and mark-ups
3. Three Feedback letters from your peers which reflect those feedbacks that were most useful to you.

PEER FEEDBACK IN WORKSHOP (OR RESPONDING TO THE WORK OF OTHERS):

Read the work at least twice: the first time without a pen, the second time making marginal comments directly on the hard copy (they will be returned to its author at the end of each workshop). Highlight lines/sections that work well and others that could be improved.

Write a summary on the last page. Discuss three things that work well in the piece (provide specific examples e.g. characterization of Ali). Discuss three things that could use improvement (provide specific examples, e.g. first paragraph needs more detail). What is your overall response to the work?

Come to workshop prepared to share your comments and suggestions, as well as to listen to others. It is important to be both honest and respectful during discussion.

Lastly, students must also upload their feedback letters on Canvas so I can have copies of them. If you hand-wrote the letters, then scan them and upload onto canvas. Upload anyway, perhaps through the “Conversation” link in “Interactions” with the teacher.

CONFERENCES: I will meet with you at least one time this term to talk one-on-one about your work and how things are going: once at the beginning of the semester and once at mid-semester after you have been workshopped. I also encourage you to see me at office hours to discuss craft elements, ask questions that we don’t have time to discuss in class, or just to chat about writing.

GRADING STANDARD: Because this is a creative writing class, it does not lend itself to the basic rudiments of “grading.” This is because writing is a function of taste, and judging it will almost always be biased. Thus, in a class situation as this one, I will be looking out mostly for your progress as writers from the time you came to the class to the time you leave. So, for the assignments and in-class exercises, I will not grade them by letters or numbers. There are two kinds of writing assignments and exercises: The High-stake and low-stake ones. For the High-stake, I put one of the following: Very Good; Good; Poor; or Bad. If you have "Very Good" or "Good" you're doing well. Your writing needs work, but not too much. If you have one of the either two, then you need to work harder on your writing. Nothing bad here either except that I will devote more time to helping you get there. So, if you are doing these assignments and exercises and submitting on time, it is likely that you will get the 20% grade allocated to them. What you want to do is make sure your work progresses and improves with each paper. If you are making mistake x in paper 1, make sure that it is not happening in paper 3—or at least, not with the rapidity of its occurrence in paper 1.

For the workshops, I will grade you based on the quality of your responses to the writings of your classmates. I will read your workshop letters to see if you are close-reading these stories and trying to get a better understanding of how fiction works. I will also grade you based on the quality of your response(s) to the seminar as evidenced in your class attendance, in-class engagement of the stories on the reading schedule, and in your creative works. Attendance in the first and second classes is compulsory.

For your portfolio, I will grade you based on your revision. What has the “craft session” and the practical session (or “section B”) taught you. Is your view of plot different? How about the observed and acknowledged weaknesses of your writing? This means that I am persuaded there has to be improvements in your writing. Thus, your revision must reflect this. If you do not revise the story, or change anything at all, then it would be difficult to evaluate your received knowledge. Knowledge received is reflected in practice, and thus, as apprentices of fiction, you will be evaluated by your “practice.” Also, when you submit your portfolio, make sure you label revised stories “Revised Story.”
For your portfolio, I will grade you based on your revision. What has the “craft session” and the practical session (or “section B”) taught you. Is your view of plot different? How about the observed and acknowledged weaknesses of your writing? This means that I am persuaded there has to be improvements in your writing. Thus, your revision must reflect this. If you do not revise the story, or change anything at all, then it would be difficult to evaluate your received knowledge. Knowledge received is reflected in practice, and thus, as apprentices of fiction, you will be evaluated by your “practice.” Also, when you submit your portfolio, make sure you label revised stories “Revised Story.”

The grading standard for the course will be as follows: the letter “C” designates “average” work, “B” designates “good” work, and “A” designates “excellent” work. You will need to perform work that is consistently above average in order to receive a letter grade of “B” or “A” in the course. I will be using numbers that can easily be added up cumulatively so it will be easier for you to know how well you are doing and how many points more you need to have by the time we have the fourth essay revised papers to be able to get an overall ‘A’ in your final grade.

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<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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ATTENDANCE POLICY:
Because our course foregrounds discussion and close engagement with the readings, attending class is crucial for your own success and for the success of the course.

- You may miss two class sessions unexcused without penalty.
- I will excuse your absence if you bring me a note from a doctor or health professional, a signed letter from a University team or program, or documentation of a family emergency.
- Once you have reached your limit of two unexcused and three excused absences, I will lower your grade by one letter for each additional absence (i.e., an “A” grade will become a “B”).
- If you miss class, please ask another student to share his/her notes and tell you about what you missed. Please make sure to arrive on time for class. Arriving late causes you to miss important material and is disruptive to others. I will count three late arrivals as one absence.

**USE OF ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT IN CLASS:** Please do not use laptops in class. We are a fairly small group, and it is important for us to maintain face-to-face contact during class sessions (and avoid the temptations of Facebook, Twitter etcetera). All cell phone use in class, including text messaging, is strictly prohibited. Please be courteous and turn off your phones during class time.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the instructor for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation. It is the policy of the university of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities, or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY.

**FINALLY, EASY STEPS TO SUCCEED IN THE CLASS:**
* Submit all writing assignments, and submit them on time
* Attend the classes, listen attentively, ask questions when unclear, and attend them on time
* Read and respond to all assigned readings
* Participate actively in class discussions
* Attempt to complete the craft exam as best as you can
* Revise your stories as thoroughly as possible
* Communicate with me if you have questions or problems

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**SYLLABUS**

**“CRAFT” SESSION**

**Week 1 (Tuesday 10 – Thursday 12 January)**

T: Introducing the Course & explanation of syllabus contents

Th: What is a story? Story vs. Tale
Lecture class in which I will distribute in-class handouts as I try to show what a ‘story’ entails.

**Week 2 (Tuesday 17 – Thursday 19 January)**

T: The Art of Close Reading (Handout)
Close-read practice on translations of “The Panther” by Rainer Maria Rilke

Th: What is Fiction?
Reference Texts: “A Perfect Day for Banana Fish” by J.D. Salinger (Canvas, PDF)
“Everybody’s Favorite” by Alfred Kazin (Handout)

Week 3 (Tuesday 24- Thursday 26 January)

T: Characterization
Topic: Constructing Characters: Appearances and Physical Features
Reference Text(s): “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff (p. 83, Writing fiction)
Reference Text(s): “No One’s a Mystery’ by Elizabeth Tallent (p.306, Writing Fiction)

Th: Characterization
Topic: Characters and their roles in a story
Reference Text(s): “Fiesta, 1980” by Junot Diaz (p.83, Writing Fiction)

Topic: The “Action of Characters (Differences between “Showing” and “Telling”)
Reference Text(s): “Binocular Vision” by Edith Pearlman (p.62, Writing Fiction)

Week 4 (Tuesday 31- Thursday 02 February)

T: Setting
Setting (Place and Time)
Topic: Setting as a Character in a story
Reference Text(s): “Poison” by Henrietta Innes (Canvas)

Topic: Flashbacks and Time in Characters’ past
Reference Text(s): Repeat of “You Are Ugly Too” by Lorrie Moore (p.207, Writing Fiction)

Th: Setting (Place)
Topic: Place and Character, and Emotion
Reference Text(s): “The Flowers” by Alice Walker (p.185)
‘Place and Character’ (p.161-164, Writing Fiction)

Topic: Spatial Description of Place in Time
Reference Text(s): Excerpt from The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (Canvas).
“Under Pressure” by David Lavelle (Handout, distributed in-class)

Week 5 (Tuesday 7- Thursday 9 February)

T: Point-of-View
Topic: Who Speaks?
Reference Text(s): “In The Gloaming” by Elliot Alice Dark” (Canvas)
“Who Speaks?” (p.276, Writing Fiction)

Topic: In What Form?
Reference Text(s): “Victory Lap” (p.288, Writing Fiction)

Th: Point-of-View and “Voice”
Topic: To Whom?
Reference Text(s): Repeat of “In The Gloaming” by Elliot Alice Dark” (Repeat)
“Who Speaks?” (p.284, Writing Fiction)

“Hills Like White Elephants,” by Ernest Hemingway (Canvas)
***Exclusive short story is due in class. Please bring them stapled***

**Week 6 (Tuesday 14- Thursday 16 February)**

T: Structure of Stories  
   Topic: Arc of the Story  
   Textual References: “Mud” by Geoffrey Forsyth (p.259, *Writing Fiction*)  
   Arc of the Story (p.232, *Writing Fiction*)

Th: Structure of Stories  
   Topic: Conflict, Crisis, and Resolution  
   Textual References: “Everything That Rises Must Converge” by Flannery O’Connor (p.259, *Writing Fiction*)  
   Conflict, Crisis, and Resolution (p.232, *Writing Fiction*)

**Week 7 (Tuesday 21–Thursday 23 February)**

T: Conflict and Crisis  
   Topic: Conflict and Crisis—the forces that drive fiction  
   Textual Reference: “Refresh, Refresh” by Benjamin Percy (Handout; Also on Canvas)  
   “A Visit of Charity” by Eudora Welty (p.186, *Writing Fiction*)

Th: Conferences (Wednesday and Thursday)  
   I will choose times over these two days to meet with students and discuss one-on-one, class activities and progress during the semester so far.

***Take home the Craft exam questions due on Tuesday the 28th***

**Week 8 (Tuesday 28- Thursday 2 March)**

T: Pacing and Momentum  
   Topic: Pacing, how do we move a story forward?  
   Reference Text: “The Paperhanger” by William Gay (Canvas)  
   Reference Text: “Under Pressure” by Lavalle (Handout, Repeat)

Th: Criticism and Feedback  
   Textual References: “Workshop is Not for You” (Handout, in-class)

**Week 9 (Tuesday 7- Thursday 9 March)**

T: All-class Workshop for Story I  
   (3 stories for 20 mins each)

Th: All-class Workshop for Story I (Continued)  
   (3 stories for 20 mins each)

**Week 10 (Tuesday 14- Thursday 16 March)**

T: All-class Workshop for Story I (Continued)

Th: All-class Workshop for Story I (Continued)
Week 11 (Tuesday 21-Thursday 23 March)

T-Th: **Spring Break (No Classes!)**

Week 12 (Tuesday 28- Thursday 30 March)

T: Study of Long-form Fiction
Topic: The Novel vs. Short Story
Reference Texts: Disgrace by J.M Coetzee (First 100 pages)
Repeat “You Are Ugly Too” by Lorrie Moore (p.207, Writing Fiction)

Th: Long-form Fiction
   Topic: Disgrace by JM Coetzee (p. 101-end)

Week 13 (Tuesday 4- Thursday 6 April)

T: Group Workshop for Story I
Th: Group Workshop for Story II

Week 14 (Tuesday 11 – Thursday 13 April)

T: Poetry for Fiction Writers
   Topic: How Can other forms of Literature help our fiction?
   Textual References: Four Poems (In-class Handout)

Th: Art and Images for Fiction
   Topic: How Can Art help our fiction?
   Textual Reference: Ways of Seeing by Edward Gibbons (First 10 pages)
   Visual Materials from Artists such as Yinka Shonibare, Hieronymus Bosch amongst others.

Week 15 (Tuesday 18 – Thursday 20 April)

T: The Art of Revision
   Topic: Executing Global Revisions
Textual Reference: “Re-Vision” (p.317, Writing Fiction)

Th: The Art of Revision II
   Topic: Executing Editorial Revisions
Textual Reference: “Revisionary Notes by C. Obioma” (Canvas)

Week 16 (Tuesday 25 – Thursday 27 April)

T: Writers and their inspirations
   Topic: We will discuss interviews with famous writers
   Textual Reference: Paris Review Interview with Vladimir Nabokov (Blackboard)

Th: Publishing
   Topic: This will be the class in which all your questions about publishing will be answered
Textual Reference: I will bring literary journals to the class
Week 17 (Tuesday 2 – Thursday 4 May)

T-Th: Dead Week (No classes). Work on your fiction portfolios which are due on Wednesday the 3rd at my office. During this week, I will also be open for optional conferences, so email if you want to swing by to discuss the course, expectations, questions etcetera.

**********
COURSE DESCRIPTION

The great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was famous for his quote: If you don't like another person's story, write your own. Although disliking another's story could inspire creative writing, we will try to tap our creative writing wells because of various reasons ranging from the basic human desire to tell a story down to the desire to respond to life issues through creative writing. We will read a range of short stories written for such reasons and more. Our reading list will tend to be diverse in scope, cutting across various continents. Using these works as discussion pieces, we will write at least three of our own stories.

The course is designed to help students gain skills in: writing fiction; recognizing the literary conventions of fiction; reading and critiquing published work from a writer’s perspective; making deliberate creative choices that can be explained to readers and critics; and revising their writing using workshop feedback from their peers and other writing strategies, and also developing and honing editorial skills gained through the discussion of the works of other student writers. Also, by passing this course, you will fulfill ACE (Academic Achievement Education) Learning objective 7: “Use knowledge, theories, or methods appropriate to the arts to understand their context and significance.” Your work will be evaluated by the instructor according to the specifications described in this syllabus. At the end of the term, you may be asked to provide samples of your work for ACE assessments as well.”

REQUIRED TEXTS AVAILABLE AT THE UNIVERSITY BOOKSTORE

- Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck, ISBN 0140177396
- A journal for class notes, writing exercises, daily observations, workshop responses, etc.
**Please note that the content of this syllabus might change during the course of the semester. Should that happen, I will promptly update it on Blackboard and notify you appropriately. It is, then, in your best interest to attend class regularly.**

**COURSE REGULATIONS**

**CLASS PATTERN:** The class pattern will mostly be consistent: thirty minutes of craft talk and one hour of writing workshop. The craft materials will mostly be geared towards showing students how certain mechanics of prose are employed in the works of these great writers. Since we are constrained with time, I will divide you into groups and assign each group a particular work to read, and a shared assignment, which would most often be in form of imitations, or direct questions about the effectiveness of each story. I will grade some of these assignments.

**EVALUATIONS BREAKDOWN:**
- Attendance and Participation –10%
- Peer critique for Workshop 1 –10%
- Peer critique for Workshop 2 –10%
- Craft Exam –10%
- In-class Writing & Assignments –20%
- Fiction Portfolio –50%

**IN-CLASS WRITINGS AND PARTICIPATION:** For each text, bring 2 discussion questions regarding what you find most surprising, unique, or compelling about the text. Bring a hard copy of these questions on the first day we discuss each text. Your questions should be able to meet the principal aim of this course, which is to help students craft good arguments about their readings.

**PRE-CLASS RESPONSES:** For each text, bring 2 discussion questions regarding what you find most surprising, unique, or compelling about the works we read for that class.

**CRAFT EXAM:** You will have a writer’s exam, which, by the very connotation, denotes an unconventional exam. The exam will be a take-home writing exam that would be made to test your knowledge about craft. It would be, for all practical purposes, meant to help you practice on a scale bigger than the writing assignments the craft issues we have been tackling all semester.

**FICTION PORTFOLIO:** The portfolio will contain the first and revised drafts of the two stories workshopped (Stories I & II). Please include the original drafts you submitted to me, and which contain my appended edits/notes. Your revised papers will be judged based on the effort to not only rethink the initial draft, but to do your best to make it better. That would mean revising your ideas where you feel it is not effective, or where you have been advised—and are convinced—should be revised. Writing is not formulaic, and every piece is different in both form and aesthetics, and even style. So the best way to work through a productive piece of writing is to revisit our examples, samples in that essay and see how the writers wrote their essays. You can follow structure, form, anything in those. If you took notes during our talks, consult those notes and follow through. Make sure your writing is polished and edited, too. Don’t do one and leave the other. Do a close-reading of your drafts and critique them. See where you would have advised another writer to shape up and do the same to your own work. Read the writing out loud and catch up misspellings and infelicities in the prose, then polish them. In summary, your effort is what will convince here above all others. And I as your instructor have been fully trained to look out for this: substantial effort.
PEER CRITIQUE IN WORKSHOP (OR RESPONDING TO THE WORK OF OTHERS):

Read the work at least twice: the first time without a pen, the second time making marginal comments directly on the hard copy (they will be returned to its author at the end of each workshop). Highlight lines/sections that work well and others that could be improved.

Write a summary on the last page. Discuss 3 things that work well in the piece (provide specific examples e.g. characterization of Ali). Discuss 3 things that could use improvement (provide specific examples, e.g. first paragraph needs more detail). What is your overall response to the work?

Come to workshop prepared to share your comments and suggestions, as well as to listen to others. It is important to be both honest and respectful during discussion.

CONFERENCES: I will meet with you at least one time this term to talk one-on-one about your work and how things are going: once at the beginning of the semester and once at mid-semester after you have been workshopped. I also encourage you to see me at office hours to discuss craft elements, ask questions that we don’t have time to discuss in class, or just to chat about writing.

GRADING STANDARD: Because this is a creative writing class, it does not lend itself to the basic rudiments of “grading.” This is because writing is a function of taste, and judging it will almost always be biased. Thus, in a class situation as this one, I will be looking out mostly for your progress as writers from the time you came to the class to the time you leave. For the workshops, I will grade you based on the quality of your responses to the writings of your classmates. I will read your workshop letters to see if you are close-reading these stories and trying to get a better of understanding of how fiction works. I will also grade you based on the quality of your response(s) to the seminar as evidenced in your class attendance, in-class engagement of the stories on the reading schedule, and in your creative works. Attendance in the first and second classes is compulsory.

The grading standard for the course will be as follows: the letter “C” designates “average” work, “B” designates “good” work, and “A” designates “excellent” work. You will need to perform work that is consistently above average in order to receive a letter grade of “B” or “A” in the course. I will be using numbers that can easily be added up cumulatively so it will be easier for you to know how well you are doing and how many points more you need to have by the time we have the fourth essay revised papers to be able to get an overall ‘A’ in your final grade. I believe this is easier than saying: paper 1 is ‘A’ grade. Paper 2 is ‘B’ grade. So how do I sum both up? A + B equals what? But when you have 18 out of 20 in essay 1 and 20 of 20 in essay 2, you easily know you now have 38 out of 40, which, of course is an A grade. Therefore, is you get 18-20, you have an ‘A’ grade (‘A’ or ‘-A’); between 16-18 constitutes a ‘B’ grade (‘B’ or ‘-B’) etc. On a table, the grades will look like this:

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<th>96+</th>
<th>A+</th>
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<td>93-95</td>
<td>A</td>
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* Submit all writing assignments, and submit them on time
* Attend the classes, listen attentively, ask questions when unclear, and attend them on time
* Read and respond to all assigned readings
* Participate actively in class discussions
* Attempt to complete the craft exam as best as you can
* Revise your stories as thoroughly as possible
* Communicate with me if you have questions or problems

SYLLABUS

Week 1 (Monday 22- Friday 26 August)

M: Introducing the Course & explanation of syllabus contents

W: What is a story? Story vs. Tale
Lecture class in which I will distribute in-class handouts as I try to show what a ‘story’ entails.

F: The Art of Close Reading
We take a close look at how to read closely, and between the lines in order to better understand a text and its interpretive implications. I will post the handout for this class, “The Art of Close Reading” by Meg Sweeney, on blackboard.

Week 2 (Monday 29- Friday 02 Sept)

M: Characterization
Topic: Constructing Characters: Appearances and Physical Features
Reference Text(s): “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff (p. 83, Writing fiction)

W: Characterization
Topic: Characters and their roles in a story
Reference Text(s): “Fiesta, 1980” by Junot Diaz (p.83, Writing Fiction)

F: Characterization
Topic: The “Voice” of Characters
Reference Text(s): “No One’s a Mystery” by Elizabeth Tallent (p.306, Writing Fiction)

Week 3 (Monday 5-Friday 9 Sept)

M: ***Labor day Holiday** (No Classes)

W: Characterization
Topic: The “Action of Characters (Differences between “Showing” and “Telling”)”
Reference Text(s): “Binocular Vision” by Edith Pearlman (p.62, Writing Fiction)
F: Setting (Place)
Topic: Setting as a Character in a story
Reference Text(s): “Poison” by Henrietta Innes (pdf, Blackboard)

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**Week 4 (Monday 12- Friday 16 Sept)**

M: Setting (Place)
Topic: Place and Atmosphere
Reference Text(s): Repeat of “Poison” by Henrietta Innes (pdf, Blackboard)

W: Setting (Place)
Topic: Place and Character, and Emotion
Reference Text(s): “The Flowers” by Alice Walker
‘Place and Character’ (p.161-164, Writing Fiction)

F: Setting (Place & Time meeting)
Topic: Spatial Description of Place in Time
Reference Text(s): Excerpt from The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (Blackboard).
“Under Pressure” by David Lavelle (Handout, distributed in-class)

***Take home the Craft exam questions due on Monday the 19th***

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**Week 5 (Monday 19- Friday 23 September)**

M: Setting (Time)
Topic: Summary and Scene
Reference Text(s): “You Are Ugly Too” by Lorrie Moore (p.207, Writing Fiction)
“Summary and Scene” (p.194-198, Writing Fiction)

W: Setting (Time)
Topic: Flashbacks and Time in Characters’ past
Reference Text(s): Repeat of “You Are Ugly Too” by Lorrie Moore (p.207, Writing Fiction)

F: Point-of-View
Topic: Who Speaks?
Reference Text(s): “In The Gloaming” by Elliot Alice Dark” (Blackboard)
“Who Speaks?” (p.276, Writing Fiction)

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**Week 6 (Monday 26- Friday 30 September)**

M: Point-of-View
Topic: In What Form?
Reference Text(s): “Victory Lap” (p.288, Writing Fiction)

W: Point-of-View
Topic: To Whom?
Reference Text(s): Repeat of “In The Gloaming” by Elliot Alice Dark” (Blackboard)
“Who Speaks?” (p.284, Writing Fiction)

F: Structure of Stories
Topic: Arc of the Story  
Textual References: “Mud” by Geoffrey Forsyth (p.259, *Writing Fiction*)  
Arc of the Story (p.232, *Writing Fiction*)

**Week 7 (Monday 3-Friday 7 October)**

M: Conferences (Monday and Tuesday)  
I will choose times over these two days to meet with students and discuss one-on-one, class activities and progress during the semester so far.

W: Structure of Stories  
Topic: Conflict, Crisis, and Resolution  
Textual References: “Everything That Rises Must Converge” by Flannery O’ Connor (p.259, *Writing Fiction*)  
Conflict, Crisis, and Resolution (p.232, *Writing Fiction*)

F: Style and Language  
Topic: The use of language in fiction (minimalism vs. “audacious” prose)  
Textual Reference: “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway (Blackboard)  
Excerpt from *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (Blackboard)  
Non-Required Textual Reference: “The Audacity of Prose” (my essay online)

**Week 8 (Monday 10- Friday 14 October)**

M: Learning Writing by Imitation  
Topic: Understanding the Concept of Imitation

W: Learning Writing by Imitation (Continued)  
Topic: Exercises in Imitation

F: Criticism and Feedback  
Textual References: “Workshop is Not for You” (Handout, in-class)

**Week 9 (Monday 17- Friday 21 October)**

M: **Fall Break (No Classes!)**

W: Critical Study of a Sample Short story  
We will do an in-class surgery on two short story samples

F: All-class Workshop for Story I

**Week 10 (Monday 24- Friday 28 Oct)**

M: All-class Workshop for Story I (Continued)

W: All-class Workshop for Story I (Continued)

F: All-class Workshop for Story I(Continued)

**Week 11 (Monday 31 Oct- Friday 4 Nov)**
M: All-class Workshop for Story I (Concluded)

W: Of Mice and Men
Students must have read, at least, up to page 25 for this class.

F: Of Mice and Men (Continued)
Students must have read, at least, up to page 50 for this class.

**Week 12 (Monday 7 - Friday 11 Nov)**

M: Of Mice and Men (Continued)
Students must have read, at least, up to page 80 for this class.

W: Of Mice and Men (Concluded)
Students must have read, at least, all of the novel for this class.

F: The Art of Revision
   Topic: Executing Global Revisions
   Textual Reference: “Re-Vision” (p.317, Writing Fiction)

**Week 13 (Monday 14 - Friday 18 Nov)**

M: The Art of Revision
   Topic: Executing Editorial Revisions
   Textual Reference: “Revisionary Notes by C. Obioma” (Blackboard)

W: Group Workshop for Story I

F: Group Workshop for Story II

**Week 14 (Monday 21 - Friday 25 Nov)**

M: Group Workshop for Story III

W: ***Thanksgiving Holiday (No Classes!)***

F: ***Thanksgiving Holiday (No Classes!)***

**Week 16 (Monday 5 - Friday 9 Dec)**

M: Post-Workshop Writing Notes
   Topic: We will discuss writing rules and ideas from issues raised during the sessions.

W: Writers and their inspirations
   Topic: We will discuss interviews with famous writers
   Textual Reference: Paris Review Interview with Vladimir Nabokov (Blackboard)

F: Publishing
   Topic: This will be the class in which all your questions about publishing will be answered
   Textual Reference: I will bring literary journals to the class

**Week 17 (Monday 12 - Friday 16 Dec)**
M-F: Dead Week (No classes). Work on your fiction portfolios which are due on Friday the 16th at my office. During this week, I will also be open for optional conferences, so email if you want to swing by to discuss the course, expectations, questions etcetera.

**********
C. APPENDIX 3: STUDENT A'S REFLECTION LETTER

Holly Dankowski
ENGL 352

Reflection Story 2

In my revisions for my second workshop story I took much of the same advice from the first story and incorporated it into this one. The few people in my workshop noted that I again should be clearer. While in some cases the vagueness of a story is essential, there were times where my audience wanted more. I strove to give them that in my revisions.

First, I once again followed the corrections of Mr. Obioma and changed any errors within and with grammar as best I could. Then I added what I hope would give readers a better understanding of the character of Max and the situation he finds himself in. For instance, the comments I received noted that the gun appeared randomly as well as his decision to rob the bank. For this, I added the presence of the gun at the very beginning with an explanation of how Max came to own it. Additionally, I made Max’s uncertainty more believable. He is a man acting on impulse because of all the bad stuff that has been happening to him. He is not certain of whether he will rob the bank or not even when he is inside. I think this confusion is typical human behavior and I hope my audience sees that in his character.

Most of my stories are third person and I want to try and capture other character’s feelings even though this is about Max. Overall, I know this is also not the end for this story, but I again wish it to be good enough for now.
Dear Holly—

There is a strong authorial presence in this third story of yours that is striking. It is formidable, almost, what you have done. It feels like you have thought about this story for a long time, or that this might be the twentieth iteration of it in your mind, and even probably on paper. There are some very good, steady gaze at setting here that results in some startling writing. I liked, for instance, the conceit of having Max be on the phone and not letting the reader in on the content of the conversation from the other side of the line.

There are times when you almost stray away from the POV of the character of and delve into the POVs of others. These moments are infrequent, but they jar the reader and take out a step in this march towards a highly rewarding work. I have marked out a few of those moments, and I will go ahead and show you how you might want to fix one of them—the portion towards the end of the story, on p.6. Let his mother’s actions be seen through his eyes in the section I circled. I would recast as:

“Max!” she said again. He could make out an urgent bitterness fruiting in her voice.

“Listen to it if it stops beeping!”

“I got it, ma!” he said as he pressed the play button he’d laid down on his head again.

See what I have done there?

I have told you in the class that when we insert something that is needed at the scene where the scene where it is needed, it often gives the reader the feeling of this being a deus ex machina. This is a concept gotten from ancient Greek plays in which a power from on high comes in to rescue a character who is in trouble. When used in modern fiction, in any form, it always feels contrived. So, be programmatic. Plan out all the details of your story, or at least most of it from early possible. So that, when you have a character needing to use a pistol, don’t write in that moment, oh and there was a pistol in her bag. Let it be there from the beginning so that when she uses it, we remember she already had it. This was well-done in the great movie, Thelma and Louise.

It is exactly because of this that I have troubles with the gun we suddenly—and conveniently—find in Max’s hands at the parking lot. You will have to mention it earlier, and even set it up. Also, I don’t quite buy that he just goes to the parking lot “unaware of his true intentions.” This is, to my mind, a convenent wrap to the story.

That said, the other parts of that section is good, e.g., your blanking Max out is a smart conceit that does pay off later. In all, this is a strong story that I believe doesn’t need too much before it arrives at its honored place. But I’m sure the workshop will tell you a few things. So I will let this work out.

I look forward to what you make of it when you revise,

Obioma.
Revision Reflection- “The Rock”

For my short story, The Rock, I did not get as many feedbacks as the first workshop, but I got to have a conversation with my classmates to get more in-depth opinions. On top of that, I found feedback given by Professor Obioma effective. A common reaction I found for this story was that readers want more on what happens between Logan and Gail.

Upon revising, one of the changes I made was my tense. I took Professor Obioma’s advise of changing present tense to past tense. When rewriting the story in past tense, I found it less of a struggle as for my first draft, there were so many switches between those two tenses because of the various flashbacks Gail had. I also added more details on the relationship between the two. They are not only best friends, but in this story, we could see that Gail realizes she has fallen in love with Logan. My first draft did not make it clear that they were in love, so I made sure by adding more gestures that would go beyond their friendships, such as the kiss on the lips. Lastly, I added more details on Devon because my peers wanted to know more about him and what he did to trigger Logan’s violence.

The aboutness of the story was the discovery of romance for the first time between the two. On top of that, Logan opens up to Gail and she sees his broken side for the first time when he talks about his father. She realizes then that he is a big part of her life and she wants to always be there for him, although she feels she had not been doing a good job at it. Aside from him showing her his hometown for the first time after thirteen years, he reveals his deepest secret too.
Dear Chelsie—

Your story is simple, one-scene story that unfolds through interlocutory exchange between a couple, but it works. It takes deep and beyond into the dark history of a man, Logan, who is fighting against the shadow of his father cast over him. The story is a meaningful, and forgiving one. It succeeds in how it makes us look at this two people, and hope for them, for their future. There seems to be a subterranean fire in them, one that slowly burns underneath their words, and we get the feel that by the end of the story their love for each other will have been deepened.

You work with subtlety here, and when you render ambiguity, it is purposeful and fruitful. The hint at a hotel for example gives the idea that the two will soon sleep together and consummate their relationship. But it is not delved into, even though the reader wants it to. Yet it feels enough. The father is not dwelt upon for much; only his actions is rendered inchoately on the canvas of their conversation, yet it feels enough. Since it is his influence, his shadow that concerns us, this inchoateness feels sufficient.

Yet, because you have chosen to cast the story in the present tense, things sometimes go wrong with the story’s structure. I will always advise that since stories are often told in retrospect, as is this one, there really isn’t a good rationale for couching a story in the present tense. This is partly why we have the inconsistencies that we have here. It is often difficult to know where we are in time, or what is happening. Sometimes the tenses collude, and today bleeds into tomorrow, and yesterday becomes indistinguishable from today. When you write “I now understood why he was so enthusiastic” just moments after “the night view of San Francisco is unexpectedly beautiful,” you trip the reader, and lapse into inconsistency. In many instances, if not all all, I simply scribble “tense shift” so you can notice.

We need to know whose story this is. Is it Logan’s—it feels like it is. So, if it is, why is she the one telling the story? Why not give to Cesar what is his? If it is Abigail’s story, then you will have to let her acquire an arc too. Who is she? (She does not talk about herself in this draft). You will use Logan’s story to develop her so that, by story’s end, we will see something in her that will have changed. Think of “In the Gloaming” as a model in this regard.

Also pay attention to times when I cross what you have written to show you how it could be better. Don’t simply effect these moments as changes in your revised version of this story, but look and think on them to see what you can learn from what I did there.

Finally, I would love to sit down with you and discuss your writing. So, please arrange it, or simply walk into my office and see me.

I look forward to the revision,
Obioma.

[Signature]
G. APPENDIX 7: FIRST PAGE OF STUDENT B’S ORIGINAL DRAFT OF STORY

Chelsie Chow Chet Sze
4 April 2017
Chigozie Obioma

The Rock

“Are you cold?” Logan asks as he takes his jacket off, revealing a plain white T-shirt that he is wearing underneath. His bare arms exposed to the cold breeze.

I shake my head, stretching out a hand to slowly push the jacket back towards him.

“No, thanks. I—I’m fine.” I say, clenching my teeth tight to hide my shivering movements. I shift my position on the mat that we are sitting on, pull my legs closer to my chest and wrap my arms tight around them. I rest my chin on my knees.

He raises an eyebrow and says with a giggle, “Even after 13 years, you still don’t think I know you?” He stretches his arm out once more, refusing to take the jacket back. I am tempted to just take it, but I do not.

“Um… yeah?” I say with a laugh, trying to ignore the jacket dangling from his hand. He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. “Well after 13 years of talking, this shouldn’t be the first time you bring me to your home town. Where was I for your past… I don’t know, fifteen visits?” I say, laughing and hoping to divert his attention elsewhere.

He laughs. “Yes, sensei. I am sorry to have failed you.” He says, and I lightly punched his arm.

“Please, don’t ever call me that. It’s weird.” I say with a chuckle. My body starts to reduce on the shivering. I feel relaxed now. It is a feeling I have never felt in a long time. It has been a long time since we are able to do something like this without grown-up matters getting in the way.

The night view of the city of San Francisco is unexpectedly beautiful. I now understood why he was so enthusiastic to take me up to Twin Peaks, and I now understand what a mistake I have made for initially saying no to the idea. For a commercialized city like San Francisco, it is not very brightly lit. There are not many stars visible if we were to stare at the sky is covered with a thick blanket of fog, but because the city is not brightly lit, the lights from the hills look like little stars.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, looking at the city lights line up like stars in the sky. It reminds me of something you see in films, where they start replacing the background with fake art.
Chelsie Chow Chet Sze
3 May 2017
Revision of Story 2

The Rock

"Are you cold?" Logan said as he took his jacket off, revealing a plain white T-shirt. His bare arms were exposed to the cold breeze.

I shook my head no, stretching out a hand to slowly push the jacket back towards him.

"No, thanks. I—I’m fine," I said, clenching my teeth tight to hide my shivering. I shifted my position on the old man that we sat on, pulled my legs closer to my chest and wrapped my arms tight around them and rested my chin on my knees.

"He raised an eyebrow and said with a giggle, “Even after thirteen years, you still don’t think I know you?” He stretched his arm out once more, refusing to take the jacket back. I was tempted to take it, but I did not.

"Um, yeah?" I said with a laugh, trying to ignore the jacket dangling from his hand. He opened his mouth to say something, but I swiftly cut him off. "Well, after thirteen years since we met, this shouldn’t be the first time you bring me to your hometown. Where was my invite for your past—I don’t know, fifteen visits?" I said, laughing and hoping to divert his attention elsewhere.

He laughed. "Yes, Sensei. I am sorry to have failed you."

"Please, don’t ever call me that. It’s weird,” I said with a chuckle. My arms that were tightly wrapped around my legs started to relax, the tension on my shoulders reduced, and so did the shivering. It had been a while since we were able to have carefree conversations, without classes or work getting in the way. For once, I encountered a summer break that felt like how it was supposed to feel.

I took a moment to catch a good glance at the view below us. I now understood why Logan was so enthusiastic to take me up to Twin Peaks, and how I made a mistake when I initially said no to the idea. I never thought I would have appreciated looking at sceneries, but there I sat, mesmerized by the unexpectedly beautiful night view of the city of San Francisco. For such a commercialized city, it was not very brightly lit. There were
I. APPENDIX 9: STUDENT D’S PAGE 3 OF ORIGINAL DRAFT

Arriving at the bottom of the waterfall, threw me for a loop. My sense told me to keep going forward but it was probably thirty feet high, too steep to climb and the trees too dense to follow the cliff around.

“What...” My throat suddenly clamped up leaving my voiceless. Okay message received. Talking isn’t a good idea right now.

I left Adiona a hundred yards downstream, thankfully downwind and hidden in the tree line. Following the tree line, I approached the bottom of the falls. Something was out of place. The bed of the falls didn’t look quite right. The rocks weren’t quite spread out the way they should be. Not to mention there were a lot more black rocks gathered there than anywhere else I had seen on the river. The trees nearest were bent slightly away.

Suddenly there was a grumble that shook the ground. I dove into a bush just as a massive scaled head and clawed foreleg parted the falls.

“Please don’t be a drake. Please don’t be a drake,” I mumbled under my breath and felt a weight lift off my chest as the tip of a wing also peeked out before it retreated into the cave behind the falls.

It’s a dragon. That means that it is a lot more likely to fly out rather than walk past and no doubt smell me. Not to mention that dragons are more curious and therefore easier to reason with. Drakes usually attack first and don’t leave survivors to ask questions later if startled.

Thankfully my sense was hinting that slaying it wouldn’t be necessary. The hardest part is going to be waiting until it leaves for me to sneak in and search for my gem. Dragons can go days without eating and I might have to chance sneaking in while it’s sleeping.

Fortune was on my side though. As night fell, the dark-scaled dragon pushed fully through the falls. I could only stare in awe as it stretched its wings. Not the biggest I’ve heard or even seen but this close it was hard to not admire such a creature. With a snort it blew small but intense flames clearing its nose. I could feel the heat warm my chilled skin from a hundred feet away and the steam from the water gave it an even more regal image. At least that explains the black rocks. Not natural but scorched.

Its hind legs bunched and almost feline like, bounded into the air with a sweep of its wings with a gust that would have knocked me down had I been standing. Before it could finish its climb to the clouds, I was on my feet bolting for the side of the falls. Skirting the freshly
Dear Katrina—

I think there is potential here. You have written a story that seems very familiar, but at the same time very refreshing. Your greatest moment is the scene in which you describe the dragon. You expand language there and in your hands, it takes in much, it swells, and the writing comes alive in ways that you should try to master replicating throughout the story—or any other writing of yours. I found the voice of the older woman believable—it has conviviality and compassion.

This might be one of the most mystifying stories I have ever read. I read it twice, and still could not figure out what it was that made it so hard to grasp. There are figments of events that could be connected. Apparently the narrator seems to be old (grandmother), and one of her granddaughters in coma (Aurora?). They visit the hospital, and muse about existential crisis and the algorithms of life. Then the scene shifts, and it is so obfuscating a shift that even now I can’t figure out what happens except that there is a dragon, and there is Adiona (who is she?).

You will have to ask yourself, when you revise, what story you really want to tell here. What am I concerned with as a writer that I want to reflect in this story? I think you should think in terms of thematic. Perhaps, what can or must a granny whose granddaughter is in coma be thinking? What must she be going through? Once you have that question, then proceed to find a character. Give her some characteristics—she could be, for instance, a seventy-year-old woman who winks a lot, or who snaps her fingers easily, and at everything. Then have her go visit her granddaughter. Use the visit, her musing about life, perhaps, to construct something about her person. What is that she has been struggling with for so long? Is it the memory of her long dead parents? Let something be explored within her life, so that by story’s end there may be a change, an epiphany, no matter how slight.

Intricate to this would be the question of fantastical stories. One thing: it is hard for people to give feedback. The reason is simple: the writer sets the parameters of this world because it is exclusive to their mind, and unique vision. This story is not necessarily predicated on humanity as we know it. I could have a say if you wrote about love, joy, brotherhood, sadness, etc., or about the known world. But here, you are the unique creator of this world, the god of this place, and thus readers must read this story and depend completely on the parameters you set. And, those parameters have to be clear for the story to work. And this demands extra work on the part of the writer. So, make sure that we understand this world as best as you, as this understanding is integral to our appreciation of the work. You do some of this work in the portion about the dragon, for example, when you try to intimate us about their properties and behavioral patterns. But more is needed. I commented on your manuscript that you might want to describe that dragoon. Don’t just assume your readers know what a dragon looks like.

Again, I have already taught most of the things wrong with your prose, or talked about them extensively in the class. I don’t want to belabor them nor repeat them needlessly. But just because I feel the need, I will ask you to read my margin comments closely. You have to believe when I say that “GOOD HEAVENS! (p.5)” is not good writing. It is redundant. The use of all blocks with an exclamation mark is indefensible.
K. APPENDIX 11: MODIFIED CRAFT EXAM QUESTION PAPER

ENG 352-Spring 2017- CRAFT EXAM

Instructions: Please answer all 5 questions. Normal rules apply: (1.5 spacing, font 12, Times Roman or Calibri). This will go towards 20% of your total grade. Each question carries a five percent (4%) grade-point. Again, the exam is due, typed, stapled, on Tuesday in class.

Question 1: "Show don't tell" and "write what you know" are the most common pieces of advice offered to young writers. Formulate the advice you might give a younger writer about any two of the following: Structure, Voice, Point-of-View, Setting, or Characterization. b.) Illustrate the benefits of following this advice by using examples from any of the stories we have read so far.

Question 2: Imagine that you receive this story to critic. What would you say to the writer regarding the two main elements of a story (desire and conflict)? If you have any advice, can you illustrate how your ideas can work by writing an alternative version of this story using your ideas? Alternate story may be up to 500 words.

Story

The man rose up from his seat in the house near the valley and went down the road. It was cold, very cold. He walked with his pocket heavy, and this was because he had a loaded gun. He came up the alley, looked up but went on. He hummed a tune to himself, a tune that he suddenly remembered, something from his childhood. Some people were talking loudly in the neighborhood as he passed, and also some birds were flying over the sky.

He looked near the district cinema when he came there, but went on. The sun was shining on his face and he was starting to sweat. Then, an hour later, at the cross between the streets, he shot a man on the head, on the chest, and in the stomach. He took his gun, and went home.

Question 3: An amateur writer has sent you a story idea and wants some advice. Here is the plot summary of the story:

A woman whose military son has died has gone to Afghanistan to find out what kind of life her son lived during his five-year post there. On arriving in Afghanistan, she finds a man who knew her son. The man had once hidden from Taliban fire. She falls in love with this man and he marries her, and she begins to live in Afghanistan.

What advice(s) would you give this writer regarding these points in relation to the story:
-Characterization
-Point-of-view
-Structure

Note that you may give any advice you want. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. This is simply meant to test your imaginative knowledge of craft. Please make sure that you give specific advice on the story rather than general notes on the above. If not, your answers will be the same as Question 1.
**Question 4:** There has been a flooding in an area, and a High school has been affected. Write a description of the aftermath, paying attention to the many sense we bring to reading—sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound. (Your description should be between 50-250 words).

**Question 5:** Rewrite this sentence by demonstration, making sure that all the properties of the character (in italics) are intact:

I.) Asa is a girl who is weird. She *likes to talk*, but although she is *short*, I think she is *smart*.

II.) He is the leader of the town. That is why he is *so proud, flamboyant, and bullish*.

III.) They *have not had a good education*, and so they are *ineloquent*.

IV.) His *grandfather was a veteran*. He is the kind of man who—even long after the war—remains a patriot.

V.) Eloka is *a good Christian*. He is the *kindest, most generous*, person in all of Herboken.