

Fiction Writing I

Time: Sat 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Location: 1-277

Teacher: Susan Shepherd

Email: H8192-teachers@esp.mit.edu

Class Description

Interested in writing stories or novels, but unsure how to begin? Or have you been writing fiction for a while, and want feedback on your writing? Then this is the writing class for you.

This course will divide its time between practical instruction and writing exercises. Students will learn a great deal about the craft of writing, including plot structures, genre distinctions, scenes & sequels, conflict, worldbuilding techniques, ways to integrate several plot threads into one cohesive story, and ways to develop a strong narrative voice for your focus character.

Students will then apply these techniques with in-class writing exercises and out-of-class homework assignments. The intent is for students who are very new to fiction writing to get a general introduction to the craft, while students who have been writing for several years can learn more about techniques they may already be using. They can then use feedback from written assignments to improve their fiction writing in general.

Additionally, students who wish to receive detailed feedback on up to two pieces of previously-written work may submit stories or sections of longer stories along with a description of what sort of feedback they're looking for, and they'll receive feedback at the end of class a week later.

Overview of the Course

This course is a compressed introduction to fiction writing. It is meant to be equally practical for writers who have already written their first novel and students who are interested but aren't sure where to begin. Newer writers will get more immediate use out of the first five classes, but some of the ideas presented will likely be unfamiliar to experienced students as well. The last three classes in particular will cover some ideas and techniques that are entirely new, but which will be very useful to you if you want a wide readership.

Since these ideas and techniques are used extensively by modern authors, I will frequently cite examples from popular works. There is no specific suggested reading list for this class, but some of the works that will come up are the Culture novels of Iain M. Banks, The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins, the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, the Dresden Files series by Jim Butcher, and the Grimnoir Chronicles, a somewhat lesser-known trilogy written by Larry Correia. The intention is to reference books from a variety of categories—science fiction, adventure, dystopian fiction, Young Adult, mystery, fantasy, alternate history, and thriller—to show that these techniques can be applied to a wide variety of story types.

This course will divide its time between lecture, in-class exercises, and out-of-class writing assignments. Class time has been organized into seven units, shown below.

Class Schedule

March 1, 2014

Class 1: Intro to the Class
Writing Basics

In-Class Assignment:
The Stories That Grab You

March 8, 2014

Class 2: What Makes a Story?

Take-Home Assignment due March 22 – 600 words or more:

Choose a Prompt

- A. Your character inexplicably ends up in an unfamiliar world, and writes a guide explaining the rules of this world to anyone who might end up in the same situation.
- B. Your character has been looking forward to a conflict (fight, ambush, debate, game) with their enemy for a long time. Why does it matter, what happens, and what are the long-term results (if applicable)?
- C. Your character has just discovered a secret that may change their life, but someone else wants to keep that information hidden. What happens?

March 15, 2014

No Class

Reminder: Assignment due March 22

March 22, 2014

Class 3: Characters & Conflict, part I

Take-Home Assignment:
Character Creation

March 29, 2014

Class 4: Characters & Conflict, part II

In-Class Assignment:
Character Analysis

April 5, 2014

Class 5: Story Structure
Genre Conventions, Part I

Optional Assignment:
One Scene, Two Genres

April 12, 2014

No Class

April 19

Class 6: Genre Conventions, Part II
Worldbuilding Intro (if there's time)

No Assignment

April 26

Class 7: Worldbuilding
Freeform (if there's time left over)