University of Colorado at Boulder
Program for Writing and Rhetoric
WRTG 3020: Short Stories: Best American Short Stories
MWF 10:00-10:50, Sec. 007, Fall 2005

Instructor: Tobin von der Nuell  Office: Temporary Building #1 (TB1), Room 02A

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Call me with questions; DO NOT E-mail me unless you have my okay to do so. Call my
office only during my office hours; all other times, call me at home—leave a message and I
will return your call as quickly as I can. Please feel free to call me at home between 8:00 a.m.
and 8:00 p.m.

Office Hours:  Before and after class each day, and by appointment  MW 10:51 - 12:30 and by appointment.

Required Texts:  Your papers, with copies for classmates as assigned. (Be sure to budget for copying.)
Course Packet (Bring to class each day)
Miscellaneous handouts (Bring all of them, each day)
*How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Thomas C. Foster
A "college-level" dictionary and thesaurus
A "college-level" writing handbook, such as *The Brief Penguin Handbook*, Lester Faigley

Overview: Please understand this is neither a course in literary criticism, nor one solely in the study of the
short story. The purpose of this course is to help you develop your ability to critically read;
critically think; and write clear, interesting, persuasive, logically organized, and thesis-driven
essays. The intent of the course, in fact, is to sharpen your skills of communicating, in writing, a
thought from your head into the heads of others. We will accomplish these tasks by focusing on
the three modes of academic rhetoric: description, analysis, and argument. Developing these
skills is not easy. It takes practice, often in the form of several revisions. You will write at least
one short assignment and two full essays of roughly 3-5 pages each. You will not be writing
short stories for this class.

Side note to English majors: Please do not lose focus of the fact that this is a critical
reading/thinking, writing class, not an English course (PWR has no direct affiliation with the
English Department). You likely come to this class with some skills in reading/interpreting
literature that some of your classmates lack. While I appreciate your insights to enrich
discussions of the stories, you must remember that I am ultimately grading you on your
writing—your presentation of a clear analysis/argument from your ability to read well the
material. Experience has shown that though English majors have an ability to read and write
(stylistically) well, there is still room for growth in the shaping of an argument/analysis to
persuade a reader to your ideas. Please do me the courtesy of not comparing this workshop with
the work you have done in other English courses because the intended outcomes are (and should
be) different. Furthermore, I treat all students in this course the same, and therefore you will
have to engage yourself in all readings and discussions about dissecting contemporary American
Short Stories, no matter what you already know.

Course Format: This course will be taught as a workshop. This means that much of our class time will be spent
analyzing and discussing your essays. The goal of the workshop approach is threefold: to teach
you how to analyze and critique the work of others; to give you the kind of criticism you need to
improve your essays; and, ultimately, to model for you the type of critical analysis you should
subject your writing to after you leave this class. Students are expected to come to class
prepared to join in class discussions (without being called on) and to offer helpful analyses that demonstrate insightful, close readings of their peers’ papers.

Course Material: The course will deal in contemporary short stories from such sources as the Best American Short Stories series, The New Yorker, Harper’s Magazine, and The Atlantic. The stories often contain a realistic portrayal of the world around us, and since stories are created through conflict, some of them will contain graphic yet honest insight into a variety of sometimes uncomfortable subject matter, including substance abuse; emotional, physical, sexual abuse; depression; violence; death; sexuality; infidelity; family dysfunction; and the like.

There is the chance that this material might not sit well with everyone intending to take the course. On the matter, my position fits well with Tobias Wolff’s, and his introduction to The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Stories. In it, he writes:

As it happens, many of the stories in this book confront difficult material: violence, sickness, alcoholism, sexual exploitation, marital breakup. Well, so do we. I have never been able to understand the complaint that a story is “depressing” because of its subject matter. What depresses me are stories that don’t seem to know these things go on, or hide them in resolute chipperness; “witty” stories that flog you with transcendence. Please. We’re grown-ups now, we get to stay in the kitchen when the other grown-ups talk.

Far from being depressed, my own reaction to stories like these is exhilaration, both at the honesty and the art. The art gives shape to what the honesty discovers, and allows us to face what in truth we were already afraid of anyway. It lets us know we aren’t alone.

These are serious stories, but hardly grave.

I would hope no one would drop the course because of the material, but that is a decision you will each have to make.

Attendance: Because this course is structured as a writing workshop, it is imperative that you consistently attend class (always arriving on time with a positive attitude) to make the class worthwhile for yourself and others. More than three absences and your grade suffers. More than four is cause for a failing grade. I DO NOT distinguish between unexcused and excused absences—if you are here, you’re here; if not, not. Recognize that this class begins sharply on the hour; excessive tardies will add up to absences. Being absent does not entitle you to be non-active in the next session’s workshop; therefore, it is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY to approach me, at least a few minutes before class starts, to gather papers and a general sense of what we did in your absence.

Class Participation: If you expect to learn from the course, you must attend class and participate in the critiquing of student work. You will need to prepare for class and take part in class discussions consistently. Be prepared to talk!

Paper Formats/Formalities: We will establish a schedule for reviewing your papers. Unless otherwise instructed, you must submit copies of all drafts so that each class member receives a copy. All papers are due the
class period before their scheduled review dates. If your paper is not distributed to
the class at that time, it will not be reviewed until your turn comes up again in the next rotation.
Any exception to this rule shall be made at my discretion.

All papers must be typed, double-spaced, and must include a one inch margin all around. Please
use black ink and no smaller than a 10pt. font (I prefer 12 pt.). Please number your drafts so
we can distinguish between various versions. To my copy, please attach a copy of the
previous draft with my comments.

Workshops:

Rules of the Game:
1. Arrive on time to class, especially on the days that you are handing out a draft. I want to
spend no more than five minutes setting up for the next session’s workshop. Please keep in
mind that the unfortunate can and will happen—lost and broken discs, printer problems, long
lines for printer use, so on. Do not gamble: print your copies the night before, if you must.
2. Do not skip workshops; no paper has ever improved by missed workshops.
3. Although I will not intentionally down grade you for a missed workshop, I will not accept a
“final draft” of a paper that I have seen few, if any, drafts.
4. If you distribute a draft but fail to attend the day of the workshop, your paper will go to the
bottom of the pile. If time permits, we will workshop the paper in your absence; however, I
tend to want to give more time to the authors who attend class.
5. Office hours are a supplement to, not a replacement of, workshops; DO NOT expect me to
give you a private workshop because you missed class.

Your Obligations:
1. A bit of common sense: the workshop will not function if the players do not engage
themselves deeply into it; cursory, half-hearted work will help no one.
2. You must come to class prepared; I will not allow you to “prep” papers during the
workshops. Guilty parties will be asked to leave, marked absent for the day, and required to
justify in writing why they were ill-prepared (1-2 page letter). Bottom line: DON’T COME
to class ill-prepared—it’s a slap in the face to me and every student who comes
prepared each time with comments for your drafts.
3. You will prepare ALL papers assigned to you to be workshopped. You will spend greater
time on the papers for which you are a primary critic, but you will prep them all with written
comments. Your goal will be to offer at least one useful comment for each paper. Note:
Occasionally, I will randomly collect all of the copies of one student author’s workshop draft
to see the quality of your comments; if the work is cursory, careless, or missing, I will pull
privately aside those responsible, to discover the reason for it.
4. You will print your name at the bottom of each draft you return to an author.

Grade Distribution:
Semester grades will be based on performance in the following areas; approximate percentage
breakdown will be as follows:
  85% -- Graded essays, short writing assignments, quizzes
  15% -- Quality and consistency of oral critiques and general participation

Grading Criteria: Grading in the PWR is rigorous. You are certainly not predestined to receive a C, but neither are
you guaranteed a B- or better for “improvement” or “effort” or for merely completing
assignments. Good papers require, at a minimum, effort, and papers that are diligently revised
usually improve; but each paper is graded on its final quality. While grading of written work can
never be as objective as that of a SCANTRON, remember that I am on your side. My goal is to
help those that are serious about wanting to improve your writing, your thinking on paper. I can do that only through honest feedback. I encourage you to focus not on a grade, but on what you can learn about writing. I do not grade on a curve; I grade you individually against the following criteria and scale.

Criteria for evaluating papers include clarity, logic, substance, originality, mechanical correctness, and stylistic grace. Preliminary drafts will not be graded.

All papers will be graded by letter:

A=Excellent; outstanding
B=Good; superior
C=Average
D=Below average, but passing
F=Not passing

- A paper needn’t be perfect to warrant an ‘A.’ In fact, there’s probably no such thing as a perfect argument/analysis or perfect paper. However, some papers are beautifully written and force the reader to change his mind, to reconsider his position on an issue, or accept a new insight as sound. Those papers will receive an ‘A.’ (Excellent in content, form and style; unusually substantive and original; imaginative; resourceful in supporting evidence; logically sound; persuasive; stylistically clear and free from mechanical errors.)

- A ‘B’ paper will be superior work. The essay needs to be quite persuasive, but if it contains problems with grammar, mechanics, and sentence-structure, it doesn’t merit an ‘A.’ A B-paper may be an A-paper in need of some polishing, or it may lack a key component. (Good with no major flaws; interesting, sharply focused, solidly supported, marked by above average thought and expression; smooth and clear style, and clearly directed at a particular audience; generally clean in grammar.)

- I consider a ‘C’ to be a commendable grade. ‘C’ means average; it does not mean “poor.” You will get a ‘C’ if your paper has numerous problems with grammar, mechanics, and sentence structure. A C-paper needs to have a clear structure, though, and it needs to take a clear position and offer some support. (Reasonably competent; formally complete, focused, developed, and balanced; lacking in originality or significance of effective development of ideas, or marred by distracting errors in grammar; may contain a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. In this class, “descriptive” papers will earn a ‘C.’)

- A ‘D’ paper contains even more mechanical problems and makes little attempt to deal with the issue and thesis at hand. (Substantially incomplete in content, form or proof; disorganized, illogical, confusing, unfocused; marked by pervasive errors or burdened with irrelevancies that impair readability.)

- An ‘F’ paper contains so many errors that it can’t be understood. A paper will receive an F if it does not fulfill the assignment guidelines or deadlines. (Incoherent or disastrously flawed; unfocused and formless, devoid of proof or rendered unreadable by elementary errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, or mechanics; or plagiarized* in whole or in part; NEVER TURNED IN, OR LATE.)
• I often tell students that papers are graded by the Lapsang Souchang method. After reading an A-paper, I say, “That paper deserves a glass of fine Lapsang.” After reading a B-paper, I nod my head approvingly, but do not feel that celebration is called for. While reading a C-paper, I wonder if I need a glass of Lapsang in order to get through the paper. While reading a D-paper, I go for the Souchang by the time I’ve completed the first paragraph. An F-paper can be read only after one has some really strong Souchang; otherwise, the reader develops nervous tics.

• Grading writing assignments is always a tricky business. It’s not like math tests. In the latter, everyone agrees that 2+2=4 (in base 10, at any rate), but in the former, not everyone agrees about what constitutes good writing. If everyone agreed, we wouldn’t have so many excellent manuscripts being rejected by one publisher after another before finally being accepted. I make every attempt to grade fairly, and in the end I will stand by my judgments. On the other hand, discussion about your grade(s) can be a fruitful process as it forces both of us to think carefully about how we are evaluating written work. Grades reflect evaluation, and evaluation is central to the writing process. One of the goals of the course is to enable you to evaluate your own writing accurately and honestly. Hopefully we can use the grading process to help us achieve this goal.

*Plagiarism: Papers that fail to provide full documentation of information taken from outside sources, unless that material is considered common knowledge, will receive an ‘F.’ In cases of flagrant plagiarism where there is obvious intent to deceive, I reserve the right to fail the student in the class and to refer any such case to the Committee in Academic Ethics in order to petition that the student be expelled from the university. A fervent plea—do not plagiarize. Even if the deed goes undetected, you lose!

Disability Statement: If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities (303-492-8671, Willard 322, www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices).

Disclaimer: I reserve the right to alter this syllabus (and any agreement implied herein) in any manner I believe will contribute to the quality of the course.
WRTG 3020
Fall 2005 (Tentative) Syllabus

Week 1
8/22—Introductions; Homework (HW): Buy Books; Read HT LIT Intro-p. 21; Read
“A&P” x 2; Read intro section of course packet
8/24—Discuss “Form and the Essay” and questions course policy; HW: Read “A&P”
one more time; Read HT LIT pp. 28-73; Read intro section of course packet (for
vocabulary); Read paragraphs of Wuthering Heights and Othello.
8/26—Quiz and apply “Form and the Essay” to WH and O; HW: Re-read what you must
and HT LIT pp. 74-116.

Week 2
8/29—Inferences; Read HT LIT pp. 117-124; “A&P” prep.
9/2—Set up “A&P” workshop (review course policies for workshop rules); thesis do’s
and don’ts; HW: Read Descriptive Traps sheet; Prepare workshop sheets; Read
HT LIT pp. 162-225.

Week 3
9/5—Labor Day Holiday, No Classes
9/7—Workshop (WS) “A&P” Group 1; Set up Group 2; HW: Read HT LIT pp. 226-244.
9/9—WS “A&P” Group 2; HW: Read “White Angel” (WA) and “Some Say the
World” (SStW) x2.

Week 4
9/12—Discuss “WA” and “SStW”; HW: “WA” and “SStW” paragraph assignments;
Read HT LIT pp. 245-281.
9/14—Set up WS for “WA” group; Discuss HT Lit Two interludes and “A Test Case”;
Finish “SStW”; HW: Prep “WA” group.
9/16—WS “WA” group; set up “SStW” group; HW: Prep papers for “SStW” group;
“WA” part 2 thesis statement.

Week 5
9/19—WS “SStW” group; set up “WA” part 2; HW: Prep papers for next class.
9/21—WS “WA” part 2; Short Assignment sheet—Assertions (Closed vs. Intro
paragraphs); Read four stories for Longer Paper 1 (titles TBA).
9/23—Assertions, part 2; Discuss stories 1 and 2

Week 6
9/26—Discuss stories 3 and 4
9/28—Finish Story Discussions; DUE: 9:00 Class Short Assignment, Part 2.
9/30—Fall Break, No Classes.

Week 7
10/3—Set up workshop for Full Paper 1 (P1); GSP quiz; HW: Prep Group 1 (G1); DUE:
10:00 Class Short Assignment, Part 2.
10/5—WS: G1 (intro paragraph +); Handout (HO): G2
10/7—WS: G2; HO: G3

Week 8
10/10—WS: G3; No Handout
10/12—Thesis sheets; Paramedic Method
10/14—HO: G1A (last round of workshop); GSP Quiz