

San José State University Department of English and Comparative Literature
English 130: Writing Fiction (Section 01) – Spring 2026

Prof. Keenan Norris
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Class Days/Time: T/TH 4:30-5:45PM
Room: Clark 243
Office and Office Hours: TH 11:30AM-1:30PM

“I keep turning this scene in my mind like a Rubik’s Cube, wondering at the author’s attitude toward his character. Machado plays the scene lightly. He does not linger, and he remains conspicuously fond of Brás Cubas. But I feel Machado wondering, too, as he peers through the eyes of Brás Cubas. He has not created this man to condemn or reform him but to inhabit his consciousness, and he inhabits him so fully that we see the mechanics of ordinary barbarism, the condescension and reflexive self-absolution.”— Parul Sehgal, “A Playful Masterpiece that Expanded the Novel’s Possibilities”

Course Description

In the fiction workshop, students will examine how literary fiction works. Some questions students will begin to uncover include the following: What makes a character unforgettable? What makes for a musical sentence? What makes a scene transport the reader in such a way that they forget that they are reading? What is it about a story that evokes an emotional response in the reader? How do writers create and reinvent these moments? Through lecture, discussion, assigned reading, writing exercises, writing workshop and peer feedback, students will investigate elements of craft including plot and story structure, characterization, point of view, and voice among other topics to write and revise three stories.

Prerequisites: ENGL 71 (or equivalent) or instructor consent. Upper division standing.

Learning Outcomes and Course Goals

This course addresses the following Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) approved for the BA in English. Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- SLO #1: Read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, or rhetoric.
- SLO #3: Write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and nature of the subject.

Required Texts

Best American Short Stories 2024 edited by Heidi Pitlor and Lauren Groff

Course Requirements and Assignments

SJSU classes are designed such that in order to be successful, it is expected that students will spend a minimum of forty-five hours for each unit of credit (normally three hours per unit per week), including preparing for class, participating in course activities,

completing assignments, and so on. More details about student workload can be found in [University Policy S12-3](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S12-3.pdf) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S12-3.pdf>.

Grading Information

Creative writing can be evaluated according to general standards used to determine how well a piece of writing works. These include:

1. Textual and/or technical competence and eloquence.
2. Imaginative risk.
3. Energy and freshness of language.
4. Effective use of metaphor and other forms of figurative language.
5. Clarity and precision of detail.
6. Capacity for mixed feelings and uncertainty.
7. Effective use of grammar, syntax, and rhythm.
8. Naturalness and believability.
9. Appropriateness of style to subject.
10. Compelling audience interest.

*Student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs. Grades will be based on the quality and quantity of writing you do as well as the quality and constructiveness of the criticism offered during the workshops. Please be courteous and team-oriented when it comes to submitting your work on time and within the page count (going way over will result in point deduction).

Final grades will be the product of the following factors:

- 2 Short stories, 2000-5000 words: 20% each

Assignment example: Original short story: 2000-5000 words, double-spaced,
Times New Roman 12" font; due date: TBD

- Peer commentaries 10%
- Response papers on three literary readings 10%
- 1 Major Revision of a Short Story: 20%
- Writing Exercises: 10%
- Participation 10%
- The maximum values of the above assignments total 100% that gradates, in accordance with University policy as follows: 100-98=A+; 97-94=A; 93-90=A-; 89-87=B+; 86-84=B; 83-80=B-; 79-77=C+; 76-74=C; 73- 70=C-; 69-67=D+; 66-64=D; 63-60=D-; 59-0=F.

Determination of Grades

The Department of English and Comparative Literature reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A- = excellent; B+/B/B- = above average; C+/C/C- = average; D+/D/D- = below average; F = failure. Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

Grade	Percentage
A+	97 to 100%
A	93 to 96%
A-	90 to 92%
B+	87 to 89 %
B	83 to 86%
B-	80 to 82%
C+	77 to 79%
C	73 to 76%
C-	70 to 72%
D+	67 to 69%
D	63 to 66%
D-	60 to 62%

This course must be passed with a C or better as a CSU graduation requirement. Note that “All students have the right, within a reasonable time, to know their academic scores, to review their grade-dependent work, and to be provided with explanations for the determination of their course grades.” See University Policy F13-1 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/F13-1.pdf> for more details.

Attendance at Literary Events

You are required to view/attend three literary events held by poets or prose writers. The Bay Area is one of the world's great literary regions, where seven days a week one can view/attend a reading by a renowned writer at a bookstore, college, community center, or library. Readings are listed on [litseen](#) and in the Sunday editions of the *San Jose Mercury News* and *San Francisco Chronicle*, and in *Metro*. Readings and writer talks the world over are now available to us 24/7 via Zoom. In your response papers, you may respond to any aspect of the reading, for example the speaker, the venue, the material performed, or the Q&A with the audience.

Participation

Students are expected to attend regularly and thoughtfully engage in class discussion. Be open to relating to the stories in various ways. This includes through your lived experience, previous reading, the way you respond to a character, like-able or not, or a particular, unexpected turn of phrase—all of which you can adapt to your own writing. Allow your work (and yourself) to undergo a positive change. Thoughtful peer feedback and self-reflection is vital to succeeding in the course.

Late Assignment Policy:

It is important that you turn in your stories when you say you're going to. This is your most important responsibility. If you need to change your workshop date, it is your responsibility to find someone willing to trade dates with you, and to tell me that you've switched prior to the date when your work was scheduled to be workshopped.

Attendance

Students are required to attend class regularly and to come prepared and ready to work. More than three absences will negatively affect your grade. Skipping the class when your story is going up for workshop will be an automatic F for that assignment. Make a friend in the class. If you happen to miss a class meeting, get notes from that friend. After you've caught up on the reading and consulted your friend's notes, feel free to ask me specific questions should you need clarification.

Course Procedure

A large aspect of the course is conducted in workshop format, which requires active student participation. You are expected to prepare written commentary before class and engage in discussion with your peers about a) your understanding/interpretation of a given piece and b) your suggestions for improvement.

Manuscript Prep and Procedure

All student work is to be typed (12pt. font, Times New Roman, double-spaced, one-inch margins, with page numbers present somewhere on the page and stapled). Failure to follow directions will negatively impact your grade. Your name and the work's title (even if it is untitled) are to always appear on the first page of the work's final draft. If in doubt, just follow MLA guidelines: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/24/>

Workshop Etiquette

Workshop is a place for respectful and constructive criticism. It is also a place where students practice articulating what makes creative writing distinctive, interesting, and fun to read. The author should take notes and remain silent as their work is being discussed. Spoken and written commentary from peers must always be directed at the work, not the writer. Personal attacks and offensive or inappropriate language will not be tolerated. Students who cannot follow these guidelines will be dismissed from the course. If you receive any offensive comments on your work, please let me know as soon as possible so I can address the problem.

Student code of conduct (SJSU and classroom policies)

Students are responsible for maintaining a respectful environment in the classroom. San Jose State is committed to maintaining a safe education and working environment free of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence. Policies are available online at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/policies/> http://notalone.sjsu.edu/policy_information/index.html

Per Title 5, the university prohibits “[activities] that substantially and materially disrupts the normal operations of the University” and “conduct that threatens or endangers the health or safety of any person within or related to the University community, including physical abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, or sexual misconduct.” Please keep this in mind as you submit work for this course. The work you create in this class should aspire to resemble in quality the work we read. The work should be literary and character driven (this class is not the place for cat poems, fan-fiction, and the like.) I will not tolerate any work that is gratuitously violent or pornographic. If you aren’t sure about your work, see me before distributing it to your classmates.

Academic Integrity

Your commitment, as a student, to learning is evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University. The University Academic Integrity Policy S07-2 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S07-2.pdf> requires you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development. The Student Conduct and Ethical Development website is available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

*Any student caught plagiarizing any assignment will face appropriate disciplinary action. This includes the uncited use of ChatGPT and any other language learning model (LLM). You can use language learning models (i.e., ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, etc.) as assistive to your learning process, but not as generative of your work for the class. Generative AI actually produces new content and is prohibited; assistive AI, which is not prohibited, but still generally discouraged in a Creative Writing class, simply aids in the refinement of content without creation of new content. You can learn more about the important technical and legal differences between the use of assistive versus generative AI by listening to this [informational lecture by bestselling author K.M. Robinson](#). If you elect to use an LLM in any way to craft the work that you submit for this class, you need to properly cite your use of the specific LLM the same as you would any other source that you use. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity. Moreover, student writers should be aware that the current LLMs were created via the outright theft of the intellectual property of countless writers, including the work of the professor who is teaching this class. The [lawsuit settled by Anthropic](#), which created Claude, wherein Anthropic was forced to pay \$1.5 billion in damages, is direct evidence of this violation.

Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need to make special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please

make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. [Presidential Directive 97-03](http://www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/directives/PD_1997-03.pdf) at http://www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/directives/PD_1997-03.pdf requires that students with disabilities requesting accommodations must register with the [Accessible Education Center \(AEC\)](http://www.sjsu.edu/aec) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/aec> to establish a record of their disability.

Accommodation to Students' Religious Holidays

San José State University shall provide accommodation on any graded class work or activities for students wishing to observe religious holidays when such observances require students to be absent from class. It is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor, in writing, about such holidays before the add deadline at the start of each semester. If such holidays occur before the add deadline, the student must notify the instructor, in writing, at least three days before the date that he/she will be absent. It is the responsibility of the instructor to make every reasonable effort to honor the student request without penalty, and of the student to make up the work missed. See [University Policy S14-7](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S14-7.pdf) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S14-7.pdf>.

Student Technology Resources

Computer labs for student use are available in the [Academic Success Center](http://www.sjsu.edu/at/asc/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/at/asc/> located on the 1st floor of Clark Hall and in the Associated Students Lab on the 2nd floor of the Student Union. Additional computer labs may be available in your department/college. Computers are also available in the Martin Luther King Library. A wide variety of audio-visual equipment is available for student checkout from Media Services located in IRC 112. These items include DV and HD digital camcorders; digital still cameras; video, slide and overhead projectors; DVD, CD, and audiotape players; sound systems, wireless microphones, projection screens and monitors.

SJSU Peer Connections

Peer Connections, a campus-wide resource for mentoring and tutoring, strives to inspire students to develop their potential as independent learners while they learn to successfully navigate through their university experience. You are encouraged to take advantage of their services which include course-content based tutoring, enhanced study and time management skills, more effective critical thinking strategies, decision making and problem-solving abilities, and campus resource referrals. In addition to offering small group, individual, and drop-in tutoring for a number of undergraduate courses, consultation with mentors is available on a drop-in or by appointment basis. Workshops are offered on a wide variety of topics including preparing for the Writing Skills Test (WST), improving your learning and memory, alleviating procrastination, surviving your first semester at SJSU, and other related topics. A computer lab and study space are also available for student use in Room 600 of Student Services Center (SSC). Peer Connections is located in three locations: SSC, Room 600 (10th Street Garage on the corner of 10th and San Fernando Street), at the 1st floor entrance of Clark Hall, and in the Living Learning Center (LLC) in Campus Village Housing Building B. Visit [Peer Connections website](http://peerconnections.sjsu.edu) at <http://peerconnections.sjsu.edu> for more information.

SJSU Counseling Services

The SJSU Counseling Services is located on the corner of 7th Street and San Fernando Street, in Room 201, Administration Building. Professional psychologists, social workers, and counselors are available to provide consultations on issues of student mental health, campus climate or psychological and academic issues on an individual, couple, or group basis. To schedule an appointment or learn more information, visit [Counseling Services website](http://www.sjsu.edu/counseling) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/counseling>.

Final Examination/Evaluation:

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop submissions. Examples of changes that might be included in a substantial revision include adding or deleting a character, changing the point of view, inserting a new scene, and altering the ending of the story. It is not enough simply to correct the spelling and grammatical errors of the first draft. To earn a high grade on the revision, you must alter the story in some significant way. The revision is due the last day of class, but can be submitted earlier if the student wishes to workshop the piece and can find space in the class schedule for that.

University Policies:

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs 'Syllabus Information web page.

Class Schedule *subject to change

- Week 1: Introductions...
- -Writing exercise: Introducing Your Writer Self
- -Reading: "In Praise of Doubt and Uselessness" and "Love and honour..."
- Week 2: Reading: "The Suitcase" and "The Glass Wife"
- Craft work: Understanding famous first lines
- -Writing exercise: Introducing Your Characters
- -Workshop: Small group introductions
- Week 3: Reading: "After I Was Thrown in the River and Before I Drowned" and "My House is Smarter than Yours"

- -Writing exercise: Triptych
- -Craft work: Show, Don't Tell; Goals & Motivations; What's At Stake?
- -Workshop: Small group workshopping
- Week 4: Reading: "Harris Gonna Code Switch" and "Consistency of Tone"
 - -Writing exercise: Dialogue Games
 - -Workshop: Small group workshopping
- Week 5: Reading: Browse Future Tense Fiction and read "The Era"
 - -Craft work: Speculative fiction discussion
 - -Writing exercises: Writing with New Eyes
 - -Workshop: Small group workshopping
 - -Story 1 due
- Week 6: Reading: *Best American Short Stories* TBD
 - -Writing exercises: The Autobiography of My Other
 - -Workshop: Introducing All-Class Workshop
- Week 7: AWP Baltimore
 - -Reading: "Godmother Tea" and "New Sisters"
 - -Writing exercises: All Complaints Must Be Made in Writing
 - -Workshop: Small group workshopping; signing up for All-Class Workshops
- Week 8: Reading: *Best American Short Stories* TBD
 - -Writing exercises: Elevator Pitching
 - -Workshop: Small group workshopping/All-Class Workshopping
- Week 9: Reading: "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"

- -Writing exercises: Exercises from John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*
- -Workshop: Small group workshopping/All-Class Workshopping
- -Author Visit: TBD

SPRING BREAK

-Story 2 due

- Week 11: Reading: "The Shape of the Sword"
- -Craft work: On revising our work
- -Writing exercise: Gardner (choose second prompt)
- -Workshop: Discuss revisions
- Week 12: Reading: *Best American Short Stories* TBD
- -Writing exercise: Writing Anti-Heroes
- -Workshop: Small group workshopping/All-Class Workshopping
- Week 13: Reading: "The Aleph" and "Shitty First Drafts"
- -Writing exercise: Epiphanic writing
- -Workshop: Small group workshopping/All-Class Workshopping
- Week 14: Reading: *Best American Short Stories* TBD
- -Writing exercise: Opposites Game
- -Workshop: Small group workshopping/All-Class Workshopping
- Week 15-16: Reading: TBD
- -Writing exercises: TBD

- -Craft work: TBD
- -Workshop: Small group workshopping/All-Class Workshopping
 - -Revision/Story 3 due

-Literary Event Response Papers 1-3 due