

Elements of Fiction

Lecturer: Kate Heartfield

We tell stories to understand the world, and to change it. The skills in the fiction-writer's toolkit have many applications, as narrative forms the basis of most kinds of writing, from journalism to personal memoir and beyond. Regardless of length, format or genre, all storytellers need a grounding in core skills and concepts. Guided by award-winning author Kate Heartfield, each week you will focus on one of six elements of fiction (character, plot, narrative voice, dialogue and description, conflict and tension, prose style), through a combination of instruction, class discussion, in-class exercises and optional peer feedback.

Optional recommended resources:

The Art of Fiction, John Gardner

Week 1: Character

In this week's class, the instructor will provide remarks on what makes a compelling character, on motivation and backstory, and on representation in fiction. The class will include two brief in-class writing exercises (a character checklist and a backstory sketch.) There will be time for some optional peer feedback and questions.

Week 2: Plot

Using the concepts from the character class, the instructor will discuss how character motivation creates plot, how to weave several plotlines together, and the pros and cons of a few common plot templates. The class will include two brief writing exercises (an outline and a simple graph.) There will be time for some optional peer feedback and questions.

Week 3: Narrative Voice

Narrative distance is the secret weapon in the writer's arsenal: it helps us bring the reader closer to the character and control the emotion in the story. The instructor will explain what narrative distance is and how to use it. The class will include two brief writing exercises (moving the "camera" closer, and varying narrative distance.) There will be time for some optional peer feedback and questions.

Week 4: Dialogue and Description

The instructor will discuss the purposes behind dialogue and description, how to know when enough is enough and how to use them for plot and setting exposition. The class will include two brief exercises (a conversation and a descriptive passage) with optional peer feedback and time for questions.

Week 5: Conflict and Tension

Drawing on the previous weeks' material, the class will discuss how to put all the "beats" of a story together in a well-paced way and discuss how character motivation and narrative voice can create tension. The class will include one exercise: Writing the same story at two lengths, with optional peer feedback and time for questions.