syllabus

description. From one perspective, all narrativity save for those most acutely cookie-cutter varieties (Harlequin romance, pulp science fiction, potboiler porn, etc.) is “experimental” in that it involves countless acts of exploration and discovery on the part of author and reader. From another, however, such a statement is devoid of theoretical nuance, a sense of the larger conversation across time and space called literary history, and an understanding of the (ir)realities concerning the pragmatics of the current publishing industry. Perhaps closer to the point might be some provisional statement suggesting “experimental” narrativity—or “innovative,” “avant-garde,” “modern,” “a-modern,” “meta-modern,” “digi-modern,” “postmodern,” “alternative,” or whatever other troubled and troubling term we might choose to deploy and interrogate in this situation—is that which asks such questions as: what is narrative? what are its assumptions? what are its politics and social dynamics? its limits? how does narrative engage with the problematics of representation? identity? temporality? gender? genre? ideas of “literature” and “the literary”? authorship? readership and the act of reading? In other words, perhaps another way of approaching a tentative definition of “experimental” narrativity might be to suggest it is the sort that includes a self-reflective awareness of and engagement with theoretical inquiry, concerns, obsessions. In this seminar, which weekly will be roughly divided in half between an experimental forms workshop and a literary-theoretical discussion, we shall explore various 20th- and 21st-century theoretical texts and creative prose that have been labeled experimental in order to investigate the above questions, better understand both more and less conventional narrativity, and help place our own writing—critical, creative, amphibious—within the context of current colloquies concerning narrative theory and practice.

grading. Final grades will be calculated on a 100-point system:

25 experimental narrative work
25 critifictional ars poetica
25 weekly discussion board posts
25 attendance, participation, responses
content warning. Texts in this course may include material that some students find offensive. All the texts in this course will be dense and highly demanding.

requirements. At least two postings a week on our seminar’s discussion board (one in the form of a carefully thought-out question, one in the form of a carefully thought-out comment); one critifictional ars poetica 8-12 pages, double-spaced, or the equivalent in a medium other than or in conjunction with writing); one experimental narrative in conversation with this course (10-12 pages, double-spaced, or the equivalent in a medium other than or in conjunction with writing); remarkably active class participation; reading, listening, and responding thoughtfully and respectfully to your fellow students’ work and to that of established writers and critics.

letter grade values.

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<th>Percentage Range</th>
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attendance. You are expected to attend all class sessions, to arrive on time and stay for the entire class session, to bring along any texts under discussion, and to participate actively in our discussions.

participation. This course is discussion-based and highly interactive. You are required to be present in all senses of the word—i.e., genuinely involved. While active participation is essential, it is also essential that you respond respectfully, expressing differences of opinion without silencing, excluding, interrupting, or monopolizing. Failure to participate will hurt your grade considerably.

absences. Each unexcused absence after the first will lower your final grade for the course by one letter grade. Two late arrivals or early departures will count as one absence.

late assignments. No late assignments will be accepted.

success in the course. Successful students in this course typically demonstrate a high degree of intellectual/creative curiosity, as well as an ability to respond positively to feedback from their instructor and peers. An “A” student not only does well on written assignments, but is prepared (not only has read the material, but actively brings insights and questions to the class), turns in assignments on time, and contributes meaningfully and consistently to discussion.

experimental narrative work. When your piece is up in a workshop, please make enough copies for everyone in the class and distribute those copies in class one week in advance of the workshop.
critifictional ars poetica. A critification is a work that performs the hybridization of theoretical and creative imaginations. An ars poetica is a treatise that sets forth one’s precepts for one’s own poetics. A critifictional ars poetica is an as-yet undefined possibility space that will attempt to erase the artificial distinction between primary and secondary discourses in our post-genre moment while setting forth your perspectives on narrative theory and practice. That is, it is a form you will invent as you engage with it, an authentic literary experiment, and so it may take myriad approaches with respect to its shape and subject—an examination of specific narrative techniques in a work or works we will have studied; an argument for or against a certain narrative technique or techniques; an investigation of a technique or techniques in your own work; an interaction with your own fiction/criticism or an appropriation/manipulation of someone else’s—something, in any case, that we simply can’t imagine yet. Please okay your topic and approach(es) with me before becoming wholly invested in it/them.


classes & readings.


Mar. 04 No Class.

11 Spring Break.


08 No Class.


further readings.


Aristotle. *Poetics*. The Ur-text on the question in the Western tradition.


Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. One of the sharpest, most gorgeous critical minds of the twentieth century meticulously analyzing the primary narrative structures within a very short story by Balzac.

Chatman, Seymour. *Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Still one of the best overviews of narratology.


McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. An excellent introduction to the codes by which comics are generated.

Prince, Gerald. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. History, literature, religion, myth, film, psychology, theory, and daily conversation all rely heavily on narrative. Cutting across many disciplines, narratology describes and analyzes the language of narrative with its regularly recurring patterns, deeply established conventions for transmission, and interpretive codes, whether in novels, cartoons, or case studies.

Richardson, Brian. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Offers a model of narrative voice that is both supple enough to attend to the dizzying variety of innovations in fiction and precise enough not to add to the confusion such works often produce.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Addresses key approaches to narrative fiction, from New Criticism to Phenomenology, but also offers views on and modifications to these theories.

Ryan, Marie-Laure, ed. *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. Essays on how narrative migrates, mutates, and expresses meaning as it is expressed in different media.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. Still one of the most important sociohistorical accounts of the novel’s development.