

Teaching Fiction Writing Online



“I love being a writer. What I can’t stand is the paperwork.”

—Peter De Vries

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As a professor of fiction writing, I have found that an online class provides a sustainable option to paper-consuming writing workshops. Other positive aspects have been enhanced student engagement and improved communication with the professor.

Students and their professor use less paper, making the writing class more sustainable:

- When a class of 20 students and their professor post work online, they collectively save a total of 1,500 pages or three reams of paper each semester.
- Students post their rough drafts, critiques, and revised short stories online.
- Students post six to ten writing exercises online.
- The professor posts course materials online: syllabus, handouts, links to Web sites.
- The professor grades students’ writing online.

Students write more during the semester:

- Analyzing the work of professional writers by posting written responses: 400-500 words each week
- Writing at least 15 workshop critiques on three major stories: 400-500 words each
- Keeping an online journal: may be used as extra credit
- Participating in live chats with each other and the instructor
- Participating in a blog

Students may communicate more effectively in the online environment:

- Shy students say they participate more than in an on-campus class because they can write what they would be reluctant to say face to face.
- Students can’t just “show up” to class—they must be actively engaged to participate in the online environment.

- Students have potentially fewer distractions than they would in the on-campus classroom and, therefore, focus on reading, writing, and responding to classmates' work.
- Students have a record of workshop critiques to refer to, eliminating the need to take copious notes during an oral discussion.

Suggestions:

- Require students to log in to class several times a week.
- Require students to participate in all discussions. (The lowest discussion grade can be dropped when grades are calculated.)
- Use the post-first feature for discussions so that students must show their own work before they can see what anyone else has written.
- Create the Class Chat Discussion, a location for students to ask and to answer questions about any aspect of the class. This feature saves time for the professor and for students. Also, students feel good about the course when they can help each other.
- Create small groups of four or five students as well as one large optional group for writing workshops. Small groups allow students to write critiques without feeling overwhelmed by the number of stories they have to read. The larger group encourages students who want more feedback to post their own work and to critique additional stories.
- Use Turnitin.com to avoid problems with plagiarism.
- Post announcements to update students on class work.
- Let students know when to expect an email or Class Chat response from their professor. For example, students must post questions on Thursday to have a response from the professor during office hours on Friday.

“Writing only leads to more writing.” –Sidonie Gabrielle Colette