Although stories are as old as human society, the “modern short story” is a distinct genre that emerged in the early nineteenth century out of a mélange of older types of short narrative (folktale, sketch, legend, parable, myth, fable, novella) and, over the next century and a half, developed into one of the most popular of literary forms. The short story was heavily influenced by the same historical genres through which the novel passed: the romance, realism, naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism. But although these two kinds of narrative matured at the same time, they are distinctly different. Because of its lack of space, the short story is closer to lyrical poetry than it is to the novel, and storywriters have developed many techniques for saying more with less. Among these are very compressed and suggestive language, indirection, and characterization through a few carefully selected details, the use of juxtaposition, and the omission of anything that does not directly contribute to the story's effect. Storywriters work with the episode that suggests the life; novelists address the life in all of its fullness. Storywriters work to a single main effect; novelists work with multiple plotlines and many effects. Storywriters focus on a significant moment in time; novelists treat change over time as one of their most important concerns. Focusing on the moment, doing more with less, storywriters can get closer than novelists to the pulse of life as felt, to the day-to-day moments of experience that, taken together, add up to life. As Flannery O'Connor has said, stories do not have less meaning than a novel, but the meaning they have is often implied rather than stated and, as a result, readers have to respond imaginatively and fill in the blanks.

Texts: Because all the current anthologies are badly flawed, I’ve assembled a multi-volume course pack that contains the right texts and the best available translations of foreign texts, as well as: an overview on the rise of the short story that provides historical/cultural contexts; examples of previous short narrative forms out of which the modern short story developed; a list of questions to consider when reading a story; and my own lengthy glossary of terms and techniques necessary for understanding the short story. For each author we read, there is also a biographical head note and, whenever possible, interviews/passages/essays by them discussing their own work, as well as criticism of their stories by other storywriters. We will read stories by Nikolai Gogol, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Stephen Crane, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, Franz Kafka, Katherine Mansfield, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Frank O'Connor, Isaac Babel, Ernest Hemingway, Elizabeth Bowen, Vladimir Nabokov, Eudora Welty, Bernard Malamud, Jorge Luis Borges, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Munro, Louise Erdrich, and others.

Requirements: Students are expected to do the reading on a timely basis and to participate in class discussions. There will be two take-home midterm exams; on each, students will do one-page close readings (explications) of 8 selected passages from the texts. A final exam, also a take-home, consists of three parts: 5 one-page explications; a 5-page essay analyzing a story that we haven’t explored in class (I’ll hand out a list and each student will choose their own story), and a 5-6 page essay on the short story from a list of topics.

Purpose of the Course: The main goal of this course is to explore the development of the modern short story as it emerged in the early nineteenth century in the works of Hawthorne, Gogol, and Poe, was transformed along two separate lines in the works of Maupassant and Chekhov, and then flowered into its present diverse state during the periods of high modernism and postmodern fiction. Our main concern will be with the genre: its development, its possibilities, and its achievements. There are three other purposes in this course: to introduce you to some of the finest storywriters and short stories ever written (I only wish we had time to do more of them); to help you become more sophisticated and satisfied readers of short fiction; and to learn, grow, and have fun doing so (which is sort of the whole point, after all).