Let’s start with craft. What role does instinct play? When it’s not enough (sometimes it won’t be!), you need to acquire skill with the tools of your craft—and the ability to operate those tools without stifling your energy and originality.

Character follows. It’s the foundation for everything else, because dynamic characters are the best tool ever. If they’re complex enough and forced to endure believable conflict, they’ll let you progress when every other tool feels cumbersome or unsuitable. But characters (even in first person) need a narrator to filter their fumbling. Characters act and emote; narrators supply the context that coheres the character’s journey. CP (Character Presence) identifies input from either narrator or character. Are the balance and timing of these contributions optimal?

These seven Cs facilitate assessment of what does and doesn’t work about your manuscript. That’s step one in completing deep rather than surface revision. You’ll revise with an eye on the current marketplace, discover techniques to make every page dazzle, and depart inspired about polishing the novel you always dreamed you could write.

Fee includes detailed critique of twenty pages of your novel and its synopsis. You’ll also receive feedback and support from nine other highly qualified participants—all, like you, serious about polishing a novel and landing an agent.

Limited Enrollment

10 participants will be jointly chosen by the director and instructor, announced before April 1.

Who should apply?
Novelists with strong writing and critiquing skills who write mainstream, literary, historical, women's fiction, science fiction/fantasy, or young adult.

**How do you apply?**

Email a.), b.), and c.) (in ONE attachment) to Laurel Yourke (lyourke@dcs.wisc.edu):

a.) The first page of your novel (maximum one .12 double-spaced page).

b.) Your synopsis (maximum one .12 single-spaced page).

c.) A critique of *The Subway* (maximum one .12 double-spaced page).

In evaluating the novel opening below, begin with its strengths, then assess its weaknesses. A strong critique briefly summarizes surface problems, instead focusing on comprehensive observations. Comment on both this first page and its story promise.

**Novel opening**

The short, blading man shoved the stragglers out of his way and headed for the last car, the one guards tended to ignore. Despite the many empty seats, he positioned himself directly in front of the map. Black and red graffiti all over it, anyhow. Not that anyone could read the thing. Or, after he was done, would need to.

A blue-haired woman watched him, trying to do so surreptitiously. She’d heard that the first car was safest. The engineer was there, even if the guard wasn’t. Now where had she heard that? Probably Tiffany. Her lovely granddaughter was a little angel, and a wise one, even though Oscar and his emasculating Cheryl chose such a distasteful name for the poor child.

Oscar met Cheryl at a low point in his life. That Marilyn hadn’t appreciated him, and disappeared so soon after he popped the question, well, no wonder he wound up with the first thing that expressed an interest. The blue-haired woman opened her enormous white plastic purse, her neatly manicured hand foraging through its depths for her precisely ironed, lavender-scented hankie. That Cheryl. And her ruination of Tiffany was only the start. The endless ways that Cheryl disappointed. She could list them all! But it wasn’t good for the heart. She emitted a small snicker. No, not good for the heart. In any way.

Why would that stupid man stand right in front of the map? So thoughtless. And he looked so angry. So many people on the IRT did. She thought that every time she found herself with no choice but the subway. At least it wasn’t crowded today. Maybe that
wasn’t so good? She began checking the car, determined to identify at least one
consoling middle-class person.

The man reading “The Wall Street Journal” looked okay. Seemed to be a fast reader. A
good sign. Along with his very smart-looking watch. Someone who could save her, if
needed. People like Cheryl, and, yes, even Tiffany, constantly reminded not to judge
people by their looks. Just what else would you judge them by? This summoned such
an audible snicker that the woman had to lift her hand and cover her mouth as if
muffling a cough.

She felt someone’s eyes. There weren’t so many people in the car, but still all of them
were looking at her, she felt. Except the nasty man in front of the map.

The teenager straight across, with the long black fingernails and maroon & green hair,
glared and glowered as she smacked her gum. The girl’s poor mother. Did she waken
each day to assess her lack of parenting skills?

The teenager in question despised the purple-haired dipstick even more than the loser
blocking the map. Who the hell did he think he was? And why did he keep stroking his
pocket. Probably wanted purple-creep’s purse. Only plastic, though. Not likely to have
much inside except pills. Maybe good ones, though? Score, and she’d have a shot at
convincing Tony she had lots to offer. That he’d made a mistake.

Laurel Yourke, UW-Madison Department of Liberal Studies and the Arts Emeritus, is
the author of Take Your Characters to Dinner: Creating the Illusion of Reality in Fiction.
This text forms the backbone of credit and noncredit courses offered in print and online
to writers all over the world. She is a recipient of the UW-Madison Chancellor’s Award
for Teaching Excellence and the Council of Wisconsin Writers Award for
Encouragement of Wisconsin Writers. Her critique workshops for intermediate and
advanced fiction writers and poets have existed since 1995. Her poetry collection,
Her poetry has appeared in university presses, Wisconsin Academy Proceedings, and
other periodicals and has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her articles
have appeared in the magazines Anew and the Wisconsin Academy Review. She has a
short story in the 2008 Cup of Comfort for Cat Lovers and is currently completing a book
on revising the novel.
Monday: Craft—not the adversary of instinct

Open awareness

The open system

Craft + creativity = revision energy

Theory and practice
Constraint versus constriction

The weave of fiction

The narrator and character realms
Balancing the narrator and character realms

On critiquing

Manuscript critique

Homework:

Use our exploration of character versus narrator pro’s and con’s to revise a significant page: The first or last one, the climax, a crucial scene, etc.

Or

Revise your synopsis.

Or

Draft or revise your query letter.

Looking Ahead: How can awareness of character versus narrator contributions affect how you handle these in real and collapsed fictional time?

Tuesday: The character realm—crashing, crying, and cringing

Immediacy
Opportunities
Limitations

Complexity
Predictability versus surprise
Depth versus improbability
Arc

Impetus for change
Credibility, physicality, and consistency

Plot and theme

Characters in scene and summary

Real time
Collapsed time

Applying character and narrator balance

Manuscript critique

Homework:

Analyze character arc in your manuscript. Is there sufficient impetus for change? Are the characters mutually influential? Do the characters drive the plot, and does the plot deliver the theme?

Or

Shift time using a combination of character and narrator.

Or

Revise the initial entrance of any significant character.

Looking Ahead: Who guides your readers en route to your novel’s climax?

Wednesday: The narrator realm—roadmaps, traffic lights, and speed limits

The world surrounding your characters

Narrator responsibilities

Context
Foreshadowing
Clues

The narrator and voice
Where does “telling” end and voice begin?

Character and narrator balance revisited
Pacing the journey

Manuscript critique

Homework:

Use today’s discussion to liberate your narrator by revising a passage where the narrator is either overly constricted or entirely absent.

Looking Ahead: The narrator guides, but what keeps readers turning pages?

**Thursday: Conflict—the name of the game**

Character conflict

What “tension on every page” really means.

Scene goals
Arc goals

Inertia versus motivation

Character versus narrator conflict

What balancing narrator and character contributions really means.

Plot versus theme conflict?

What role does genre play in your aspirations for your novel?

Manuscript critique

Homework:

Analyze the layers of conflict in your novel. Where could you add more?

Or
Use today’s discussion to intensify conflict at a crucial moment in your novel.

Looking Ahead: If a novel equals more than the sum of its parts, how can you integrate scene and summary, character and narrator?

**Friday: Coherence—the art of synthesis**

Craft as the handmaiden of creativity

  Understanding your process

    Tweaking to capitalize on your process

Credibility versus tension

  Thoughts on what trumps what

    Universal conclusions
    Personal conclusions

Balancing narrator and character contributions

Balancing narrator and character voices

Balancing creativity and marketing

Balancing dreams and realities

Manuscript critique

**Credit Option**: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others’ work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.