Creative Writing

Lessons Package

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Creative Writing  
Preliminary Assignment

For this assignment, you are going to write a fictional scene that centers on a conflict between two characters. Your teacher will read this scene and make comments, but will not mark it except for completion. This is a preliminary assignment to see what you know about creative writing. Analyzing this writing sample will prepare you to learn some important lessons about creative writing.

Key details:

Fiction, not non-fiction

Scene, not a full story

Point of View: Third Person Limited Omniscient, not First Person please

Length: 1-2 pages typed (in Courier 10), double-spaced

Topic: your choice. There are some suggested examples below. Remember, it needs to revolve around a conflict between two characters.

Examples of topics:

Son comes home late after curfew and is confronted by his father.

Girlfriend tells her boyfriend that she is pregnant.

Customer in a diner gets upset at the waitress.

Teacher confronts a student about plagiarism

Worker at MacDonald’s notices a co-worker stealing from the till.

Expectations:

Your teacher will expect to see the following elements in your writing:

Description of the setting and the characters

Conflict between characters and ideally internal conflict as well

Dialogue between characters

There are three main points of view used in stories: first person, third person omniscient and third person limited (second person is used only in Choose Your Own Adventure books). Most stories today are written in third person limited and it is probably the easiest place to start for beginning writers. It is tempting to write in first person, because that is how we are used to telling stories to people. However, it is actually harder to write well in first person. A beginner is best to wait a while before trying stories in first person.

**Lesson 1:**

**Point of View**

**Third-person Omniscient**

Many people struggle to understand the difference between limited and omniscient points of view. An omniscient narrator can see everything that is happening. He can see the thoughts and feelings of all of the characters, but usually remains somewhat distant and doesn’t give us too much detail about these thoughts and feelings.

John pulled the gun out of his back pocket slowly. He lovingly caressed its barrel and pointed it at Mary, eager to see her reaction. She noticed him holding the gun and felt terror race through her. Every muscle tensed in fear and she found herself unable to move.

Omniscient point of view is not used very much in stories today because it sounds too distant and uninvolved. It also allows the reader to know too much, not keeping up suspense. Today, most stories are written in third person limited point of view. It focuses on only one character at a time. It is possible to switch to focusing solely on another character at a different point and this is often done in novels, though rarely in short stories or in a single scene.

**Limited Omniscient**

With limited omniscient point of view, the narrator is able to get deeply into the thoughts and emotions of the point-of-view character. This feels more immediate and increases the reader’s connection to the character. It also allows the writer to create more suspense.

The example above can be re-written from two perspectives. John’s point of view is shown below.

John pulled the gun out of his back pocket slowly. He lovingly caressed its barrel and pointed it at the girl, eager to see her reaction. He stared intently, waiting for her to notice him. There was no mistaking the moment she did. He could see her body tense as a look of terror crossed her face. He felt a rush of adrenalin course through him, the thrill he always experienced before a kill.

The biggest difficulty of writing in third person limited is that one has to restrict what one writes to what the character actually knows. In the above example, John does not know the victim’s name, nor can he know what she is thinking or feeling except by reading her bodily cues. The writer must be sure to show the reader how the character learns something and not just insert sentences like, “John could tell she was afraid.”

*Exercise 1:* Now try rewriting this example from Mary’s perspective in the space below. Be sure to only include information she can know. Try to focus on including her thoughts and feelings as well as her actions.

*Exercise 2:* Now create another character who observes the event. Pick someone who would be extremely interested in what is happening. Describe the event from this person’s perspective in the space below. Be sure to only include information he/she can know. Try to focus on including his/her thoughts and feelings as well as his/her actions.

One of the earliest lessons that every writer must learn is that most of his or her story should be written so that it shows what is happening, rather than tells what is happening. One way of thinking of this is to think of the writer taking the place of the movie camera. The words must be as rich a dramatization as the camera would show.

**Lesson 2:**

**Show, Don’t Tell**

Writing can be viewed as existing on a spectrum from exposition to dramatization, as shown on the diagram above. Most people are used to writing expository and narrative text, but are not used to dramatizing a story.

Exposition Narrative Dramatization

**Exposition** = telling information plainly, often as a series of facts. It sounds like a grocery list, a personal ad, or scientific observations. Often people write more information than the story actually needs, especially when describing characters.

Jane was 52 years old. She was tall and thin, and starting to go grey. She was a police officer. She worked for the bomb squad. She was very good at her job.

**Narrative** = telling events in simple sequential form with little detail or colour. It sounds like a newspaper report or a journal entry.

Jane got a call to go to work early that morning. She went to a building where a man was tied to a chair with a bomb wrapped around his chest. He asked her to take it off. She started to remove it, but it was more complex than she thought. It blew up before she could disarm it. Jane and the man both died.

**Dramatization** = showing what is happening and who is involved through the use of detail and dialogue.

Most beginning writers write a lot of narrative with a fair amount of exposition tossed in. They do not include much dramatization. In other words, they tell rather than showing. This robs the story of its power.

Dramatization gives a story richness and flavour. It draws the reader into the story. It is more effective to dramatize, with occasional use of narrative or exposition. In other words, show, don’t tell.

Dramatization takes more time to write and takes up more space because it slows the story down and focuses on the details. Doing so builds up the tension.

The following example does not tell the full story of Jane and the bomb. It just shows a part of the story, to illustrate how much slower and how much more detailed dramatization is.

The man sat in a wing-backed chair, tightly gripping its arms. She could see ropes lashing him to the chair and what looked like plumbing pipes around his neck. The bomb. His eyes swung towards Jane when she entered the office, but he made no other movement. She could see terror in his eyes, the same terror she had been seeing in people’s eyes for the last fifteen years.

“So,” she said calmly as she walked across the carpet towards him. “I’m Jane and I’m here to remove the bomb around your neck. Noneed to worry now. I know what I’m doing.”

He didn’t say anything, just stared at her in panic. He was young, younger than she’d expected. When the Captain had told her the C.E.O. of a stock trading company had been found in his office with a bomb around his neck, she had expected someone around her age. Not someone who looked like he should be taking college classes with her kid.

“Listen, son. I need you to tell me as much as you can about what happened today. The more you can tell me the better.”

*Exercise 1:*  What do we learn about Jane and the man with the bomb around his neck in this passage that we don’t in previous examples?

*Exercise 2*: Try continuing a bit of the story of Jane. Don’t try to finish the story or even get very far. Remember that your goal is to show the reader what is happening.

**Key Elements of Dramatization**

* + slow the story down to build up the tension
  + describe the setting with enough detail to create a pretty good picture.
  + break the major events down into a series of smaller events
  + describe what the main character is thinking and feeling
  + use dialogue to show thoughts and emotions
  + describe what other characters seem to be thinking and feeling through descriptions of their physical responses

**Lesson 3:**

**How to Structure a Scene**

Before trying to write a whole story, it is important to realize that every story is actually made up of scenes. A novel might have dozens of scenes, a short story only a few. As a beginning writer, it is important to work on writing scenes before trying to write full stories.

All scenes can be planned by focusing on some key concepts.

**The Character’s Goal**

A scene is driven by the main character’s needs or desires. He must have a goal that he is trying to accomplish. This goal does not have to be directly stated, but it must be obvious to the reader. The character’s goals will change from scene to scene, though he will also usually have a story goal that stays fairly constant through the story. Scene goals can also be written as questions.

Examples from Fellowship of the Ring (Book 1 of Lord of the Rings):

*Will Frodo avoid the attention of the Nazgul and reach the town of Bree?*

*Will Frodo reach Rivendell before the Nazgul catch him?*

*Will Frodo reach safety in Rivendell?*

*Will Frodo and the Fellowship of the Ring reach Mordor safely?*

**Conflict**

A scene does not become meaningful until there is conflict. Conflict can be internal (protagonist vs. himself) or external (protagonist vs. antagonist or protagonist vs. nature). The conflict should prevent the character from achieving his goal. Scenes should not end in success, but disaster. The scene question should always be answered “No” or “Yes, but.” When the scene ends in disaster the stakes are raised and the tension increases. As soon as the character accomplishes his scene goal, the story loses its drive. Therefore, the character should only fully achieve his goal at the end of the story.

*Will Frodo avoid the attention of the Nazgul and reach the town of Bree?*

No. Frodo reaches Bree, but the Nazgul have “scented” him and are on the trail. Now he has much less chance of reaching Rivendell safely.

*Will Frodo reach Rivendell before the Nazgul catch him?*

No. Frodo is found and stabbed by a Nazgul knife that poisons him. Now he will probably die before reaching safety.

*Will Frodo reach safety in Rivendell?*

Yes, Frodo does reach safety, but then must embark on an even more dangerous journey to take the ring to Mordor.

*Will Frodo and the Fellowship of the Ring reach Mordor safely?*

No. Frodo is forced to go on with only Sam when Boromir betrays him. Now the trip to Mordor becomes much more difficult because the stronger members of the fellowship can no longer be there to help.

One of the real secrets of writing a good story is that as a writer you cannot be nice to your characters. In fact, you almost need to be intentionally mean. Make life difficult for your character. If she succeeds against small obstacles, give her harder ones. If she still feels confident and happy, put her into situations that will fill her with despair and destroy her self-confidence. By doing so, you will make the story more interesting and will help the reader to identify more closely with the character.

One final note about conflict is needed. A scene only needs two people for conflict and as much as possible it is best to limit your scenes to only two people. Of course there will be time in scenes when other characters are there and you can’t get rid of them. In those situations try to focus on as few characters as possible during the conflict. A very good example of this is the fight between Boromir and Frodo. It is much more effective with just two characters than it would be if others were present.

**Change**

When characters go through conflict, they change. The main character should undergo a change in a key value each scene. A character that remains exactly the same throughout the story is not dynamic and is therefore not believable or interesting. Some scenes will result in a positive change in a key value, others in a negative change.

Examples of key value changes:

Despair Hope

Love Hate

Trust Distrust

Confidence Fear

Sorrow Joy

**Scene Beginning and Ending**

Begin a scene at an exciting point, after the action has already begun, to get the reader involved. This is especially important with the first scene. Don’t start with all the background or feel that you need to show all of the steps leading up to the exciting point. Many things that a character does during a story don’t actually need to be written about. For example, don’t bother writing about what she ate for breakfast or what she brought with her in the car on her way to work, start with the moment a man pulls his car up behind her and rams her bumper.

End the scene when the disaster happens. Don’t try to keep going at this point; the character’s response to the disaster will be part of the beginning of the next scene. Ending a scene this way will make the reader want to read the next scene to see how the character copes with the disaster.

*Exercise 1:* Examine the writing of another person and see if you can identify the goal, the conflict and the change. Then do the same for your own work.

*Exercise 2*: Use the scene outline template to plan a new scene. Write a rough copy and get it edited by a classmate before completing your good copy.

**Lesson 4:**

**How to Craft a Setting**

Whether you are writing a novel or a short story or even a single scene, it is important to take time to think about the setting and then to show that setting to the reader. In this lesson you will learn how to enrich a story with a well-described setting.

**Don’t Overdo It**

Beginning writers tend to make one of two major mistakes in regard to setting. Either they ignore it completely or they overdo it, such as in the example below.

The verdant forest was a land of deep shadow. Gigantic redwoods with thick trunks stretched towards to sky creating a tall arching canopy. Thin streams of pale light filtered through those majestic trees to illuminate a forest floor covered with a thick carpet of spongy moss and a plethora of ferns fighting each other for space. Except for the babbling of a brook that wound its way along an indented path in the forest floor, an unnatural silence filled the space and created a sense of haunting.

The goal is not to bludgeon the reader with as many fancy words as possible or bore them to tears with long, flowery descriptions. Rather than stringing overly dramatic descriptive phrases together, try to think of shorter, more powerful ways to say things. Don’t use lots of adjectives and adverbs; try to focus on using nouns and verbs (the real power words). Don’t use cliché phrases or tired metaphors.

**Sprinkle, Don’t Dump**

The second problem with the description above is that it is an expository information dump. In a novel, a writer has time for longer descriptions of the setting. In a short story or a scene, the setting needs be described more quickly. Usually there is a little bit of information about the setting when the character first encounters it, but the story must move on without waiting for an expository dump. So, sprinkle additional information as it is needed, such as when the character looks in that direction, or when she thinks about something she is seeing. Describe the setting as the story unfolds.

Pale light filtered through the trees, but most of the light that had filled the forest earlier that day was gone. Shadow was replacing it everywhere, shadow that fought Jacob’s attempts to figure out where he was. He could hear water splashing against rock, but didn’t remember having seen a brook as he went into the forest. Did that mean he was completely lost or just that he hadn’t noticed the brook the first time? He pushed forward, brushing aside the fronds of ferns, feeling the spongy moss give beneath his feet. Gone were the dirt and gravel of the path he had trod not long ago. How had he managed to leave the path?

**Utilize All of the Senses**

Don’t forget that humans have five senses. Describe not only what is seen, but what is heard, smelled, touched, or yes, even tasted. Sight descriptions will definitely be the majority of what you describe, but don’t forget the others.

**Choose Fresh Settings**

Limiting yourself to overly familiar setting can also limit your story. Settings like a kitchen, a classroom, or the inside of a car are too common. A character is more likely to notice his setting if it is somewhere different and far more likely to be affected by that setting as well. Choose instead the subway station, the junkyard, the forest clear-cut, or the bridge where the car has stalled. If you have to use a familiar setting because your plot demands it, try to see the setting in a new way. For example, is it possible that the characters meet at the smoke hole, rather than inside the halls?

Keep in mind also that setting includes both place and time. Think about both season and era. The time in which you set your story will drastically alter the events.

**See Through the Character’s Eyes**

Probably the most important aspect of creating a good setting is to focus on how the setting affects the character. How does being in a forest at twilight make this character feel? Frightened or at peace? What responses (physical, emotional, mental) does having to meet her old friend at the smoke pit elicit in the teenage girl who is going to the smoke pit for the first time? Showing how a setting affects a character enables the writer to reveal more about the character’s personality. It is often an effective catalyst for change in the character. A setting needs to be a true part of the story, impacting the character in important ways, not just a backdrop that could be easily interchanged with any other.

The smoke pit was the one part of the school Cynthia had never visited. It had always existed at the periphery of her world, a place not to be visited because of its dangers, a stepping stone to even less savoury locations. Now, she stood before it for the first and questioned the sanity of her decision to track Allison down to confront her. The concrete walls of the school and the ramp to the upper parking lot framed a box in which a group of boys and girls stood smoking on their sin sticks. The smoke wafted into the air, drifting past walls which were decorated with graffiti, spray-painted in a rainbow of colours that contrasted bizarrely with the otherwise dismal setting.

It was cold; a sheet of ice covered the pavement and snow was falling briskly upon it. She was glad she wore her thick coat and winter boots. The smokers didn’t seem nearly so well dressed, seemingly trying to make a statement that their black clothes were protection enough from all the world could throw at them. As she walked towards them, trying not to slip on the ice, they turned to look at her. She saw Allison in their midst and headed straight for her. She could smell the smoke all around her now and felt her stomach twist in revolt.

*Exercise 1:* Pick a setting (time and place) that you would like to describe. Make a few notes on it first and then begin writing a description.

*Exercise 2*: Look at the scene that you are currently writing. Have you included a description of the setting? How could it be improved? Revise your story as needed.

**Lesson 5:**

**Dynamic**

**Characters**

Creating a dynamic character is an essential element of writing good fiction. An interesting character makes it worth reading a story. A boring character will sink your story, no matter how great the other elements are.

**Larger Than Life**

Fictional characters are by nature larger than life. Few real humans are so interesting. So don’t try to write a story using a real person as a model for each of your characters. Instead use exaggeration to make your characters fascinating.

*Exercise 1: Think of three fictional characters and explain how they are larger than life. How large is your protagonist?*

**Strong, but not too Strong**

Your protagonist must be strong. That strength might be physical, emotional, mental, or it might be strength of character. In fact it is often a combination of all four. No-one wants to read a story about a wimp who is too afraid to ever take action. Action in the face of conflict is what drives a story. Your character must be strong enough to take action.

Conversely, do not make your character so strong that he gets through every problem without any trouble. A character like this is not as interesting. For example, Superman is not as interesting as Batman.

*Exercise 2: Think of three fictional characters and explain their strengths. What are your protagonist’s strengths?*

**Motivation**

Think about your character’s motivation. Why does she choose certain actions? Do her actions make sense from what we know of her? If you don’t think of a realistic motivation for your character’s actions ahead of time and make that motivation apparent to the reader, her actions will seem unbelievable.

*Exercise 3: Think of three fictional characters and explain their inner motivations. What is your protagonist’s motivation?*

**Inner Conflict**

One of the most important ways to weaken your character is to give her an inner conflict. This inner conflict will be a flaw that makes it hard for her to succeed.

*Exercise 4: Think of three fictional characters and explain their inner conflicts. What are your protagonist’s inner conflicts?*

*Exercise 5: Write a description of your character now. Try revising your story to make your characters more dynamic.*

Writing to a scene that relates to a prompt can be a difficult task. However, it can become easier if you practice following a series of basic steps. The more thorough you are in following these steps when planning your scene, the better the result will be. Taking time to plan, even while writing an exam, will result in a much better mark.

**Lesson 7:**

**Writing to an Exam Prompt**

1. **Choose a prompt.** Prompts on English exams tend to be general philosophical statements. They often express an idea about how to live one’s life.

Examples:

* Keeping an open mind allows for growth
* Taking charge of your own life is worthwhile.
* People can be influenced by their environment
* Being sincere is important.

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* Sometimes people are unable to control the directions their lives take.

1. **Decide whether you want to agree or disagree with the prompt.** Either position is acceptable. Your goal should be to create a scene that shows your point of view.

Position: Agree Disagree

1. **Think of a conflict that illustrates the idea of the prompt.** Start by with a brainstorming web. Write down several possible conflicts.

1. **Think of a character that might experience that conflict.** Make the character larger than life, exaggerated to be more interesting than real people. The character should be strong, but not too strong or the challenges will not be great enough.
2. **Think of a setting in which that conflict might take place.** Choose fresh settings rather than predictable ones. Sprinkle description into the scene; don’t dump it in all at once. See and describe the setting through your character’s eyes and other senses as well.
3. **Think of a goal that your character might have.** Remember that the goal should be based on the needs or desires of your character. It should make sense based on the character you have created.
4. **Think of the change that your character will undergo.** Remember that they should change in a key value. Write down the opening and closing values. Think about how the events are going to lead to this change.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Characters (Include brief descriptions of protagonist and antagonist) | Setting (Time & Place) |
| Character’s Goal & Conflict | Opening Value  Closing Value |

1. **Think of a beginning to your scene – an exciting incident.** Start with action or an interesting event and continue on from there. Don’t start with background.
2. **Think of an end to your scene – a disastrous end.** Remember to end by answering the scene goal question with a *no* or a *yes, but*.
3. **Map out the events of your scene.** Plan the events as actions and counteractions. The protagonist should take actions that are then counteracted by the antagonist.

|  |
| --- |
| Scene Beginning – Exciting Incident (Where the scene goal is introduced) |
| Events (Action and counteraction by main characters) |
| Disaster (What is the answer to the character’s scene goal?) |

1. **Write!**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Scene | |
| Characters (Include brief descriptions of protagonist and antagonist) | Setting (Time & Place) |
| Character’s Goal & Conflict | Opening Value  Closing Value |
| Events (Action and counteraction by main characters) | |
| Disaster (What is the answer to the character’s scene goal?) | |

**Creative Writing Assignment**

**Evaluation Form**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** |
| **Mechanics** | | | | | | |
| Spelling and grammar |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dialogue written correctly |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Point of View** | | | | | | |
| Consistent |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Shows thoughts and emotions |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Show, Don’t Tell** | | | | | | |
| Limited exposition |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Effective dramatization |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Detailed description |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dialogue reveals character |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Dialogue drives plot |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Scene structure** | | | | | | |
| Clear character goal |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Conflict |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Change in key values |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Starts “in the action” |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ends with a disaster |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Setting** | | | | | | |
| Realistic, not overdone |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sprinkled, not dumped |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Fresh and interesting |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Seen through the character |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Character** | | | | | | |
| Strong, but not too strong |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Realistic motivation |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Has an inner conflict |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Teacher Comments:

Overall Grade: