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The Silver Current Writing Workshop Handbook

A Twelve-Week Curriculum for the Workshop or the Writer Working Alone

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This handbook is built to be used. Every reading is a work in the United States public domain; every exercise is original to the author; every workshop protocol has been tested in real rooms, in writing programs and in community workshops. The intended user is a teacher who needs a twelve-week curriculum ready by Sunday night, or a self-taught writer who wants the same twelve weeks alone or with one trusted reader.

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All literary example texts used in this volume are in the public domain in the United States. Citations follow MLA style and appear in the bibliography at the back.

Preface



This is the curriculum I have taught, in versions, for many years. It is the version I would hand to a colleague who asked, on a Friday afternoon, what they should do with twelve weeks of creative-writing students who arrived expecting transformation.

Transformation, when it comes, comes from doing the work, not from being told that the work matters. So this handbook does not spend time on inspiration. It spends time on what you read, what you write, and how you and a small group of other writers talk about what you have written, so that the talking is useful and the next draft is better than the last one.

Each week has a reading, a craft principle, two exercises, a workshop protocol, and a closing reflection. The reading is short — a story, a poem, an essay — and always in the public domain so that any teacher can hand the class a photocopy without permission anxiety. The exercises are timed: one in-class, one between sessions. The protocol is what the room does with the work. The reflection is what each writer writes, alone, after the workshop is over.

Three appendices close the handbook. A workshop charter — the rules the room operates by — for the first session. A manuscript-evaluation rubric for the teacher who wants to grade. A reading list of additional public-domain texts the curriculum can be extended with for a longer course.

— J. F. M., Philadelphia, 2026

How the Twelve Weeks Are Arranged



The first four weeks build the foundation: paying attention, writing what you see, beginning a piece, and ending one. The middle four weeks address the four moves of fiction: character, scene, dialogue, voice. The final four weeks build a single piece from draft through revision to a publishable manuscript.

A teacher may compress the twelve weeks into eight, or extend them to sixteen by giving each unit two sessions. A solo writer may move at their own pace. The order matters; the speed does not.

Week 1 · Attention



Assigned reading

Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown" (1835). Read for what the narrator notices — every detail, in order.

Craft principle

A writer's first job is to see. Not to feel, not to remember, not to explain. To see. Every other move of fiction depends on the precision of what the writer has noticed and the honesty with which she has reported it.

Exercise A

In class, twenty minutes. Look out the nearest window. List, in order, every thing your eye lands on. Do not interpret. Do not name your feelings. Just the things. Two pages, minimum.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Sit somewhere you go often — a kitchen, a bus stop, a desk. Watch one person for thirty minutes. Write a one-page description of what you noticed. No interpretation. Just the catalog.

Workshop protocol

In session two, read the in-class lists aloud — three writers, three minutes each. The room's job is to listen and then describe, in two sentences each, what they heard. The reading writer says nothing during the response. The reflection is on the gap between what the writer noticed and what the listeners noticed.

Closing reflection

What did you not see, the first time, that the room saw? What did the room miss?

Week 2 · The Sentence



Assigned reading

Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928). Read aloud. Then again, marking every sentence longer than fifteen words and every sentence shorter than seven.

Craft principle

Sentences carry the writer's breath. A page of sentences that are all the same length is a page that has stopped breathing. A skilled writer varies length and shape; an unskilled one does not. The variation is not random; it is calibrated to the work the sentence is being asked to do.

Exercise A

In class, fifteen minutes. Write a paragraph in which no two consecutive sentences are the same length. Aim for a long sentence, a short one, a fragment, a question, a declarative landing.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Take a paragraph you wrote last week and revise it for sentence variety. The content should not change. Only the rhythm.

Workshop protocol

Read three revised paragraphs aloud. The room listens with eyes closed and reports, in three words each, what the rhythm did. The writer of the paragraph remains silent during the listening response.

Closing reflection

Whose rhythm do you most envy in the readings? Whose rhythm is closest to yours?

Week 3 · Beginnings



Assigned reading

Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" (1894), opening sentence. Henry James, "The Real Thing" (1892), opening paragraph. Joyce, "Araby" (1914), opening paragraph.

Craft principle

A first sentence is a contract. It tells the reader what kind of attention the writer is going to ask for. The good first sentence does not announce its subject; it begins to enact it. The reader is already inside the story before they have time to refuse.

Exercise A

In class, twenty minutes. Write five first sentences, in five different registers, for five different stories you might write. Choose your favorite. Defend the choice in one sentence.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Write the first paragraph of a story whose first sentence you chose in class. The paragraph should keep the contract the sentence made.

Workshop protocol

Each writer reads only their first paragraph aloud. The room's response: what story have you just been promised? Two sentences each. The writer remains silent.

Closing reflection

What contract did you actually make? Is it a contract you can keep across a full story?

Week 4 · Endings



Assigned reading

Chopin, closing line. Joyce, closing line of "Araby." Dickinson, "Because I could not stop for Death," final stanza.

Craft principle

An ending is not a conclusion. It is the last gesture a piece makes; the gesture should be smaller than the piece around it. The strongest endings tend to land on a concrete image, a small action, or a flat sentence whose flatness lets the reader carry the rest of the piece home.

Exercise A

In class, fifteen minutes. Write three possible endings to the story you began last week. Each ending should be a single sentence. Each should land on something different.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Choose one ending. Write the closing paragraph that leads to it.

Workshop protocol

Read closing paragraphs in pairs. Each pair offers each other one observation about whether the ending fulfills the contract made by the opening. The teacher rotates among the pairs to listen.

Closing reflection

Which of your three possible endings was hardest to write? Why?

Week 5 · Character: Want, Action, Notice



Assigned reading

Joyce, "Araby" in full. Then Mansfield, "Miss Brill" (1920) in full.

Craft principle

A character is built from three things: what they want, what they do to get it, and what they notice. The third is often the most revealing. A character is not their interior monologue; a character is what their attention lands on when they are not narrating themselves.

Exercise A

In class, twenty-five minutes. Take the protagonist of a story you have been drafting. Write a list of ten things they notice in a single ordinary scene. Do not explain. Just the list.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Write a scene of five hundred words in which a character moves through a room. Reveal their desire through what they notice, not through what they say.

Workshop protocol

Three writers read scenes aloud. The room's response: what does this character want? Two sentences each. The writer waits.

Closing reflection

Where did the room see a want you had not consciously written? Where did the room miss a want you had?

Week 6 · Scene



Assigned reading

Crane, "The Open Boat" (1897), the opening pages of the first encounter with the boat. Joyce, "The Dead," the opening dinner scene.

Craft principle

A scene is a unit of action with a beginning, a middle, and a change. The change need not be large; it need only be real. A scene without a change is a description that has overstayed its welcome.

Exercise A

In class, twenty minutes. Sketch a scene on the page, in note form, with three columns: setting, characters present, what changes.

Exercise B

Between sessions, ninety minutes. Write the scene you sketched. The scene should run six hundred to a thousand words. The change should be visible in the last paragraph.

Workshop protocol

Workshop in groups of four. Each writer reads their scene aloud. The group identifies the change. If the group cannot find a change, the writer notes the absence and revises next week.

Closing reflection

What change did your scene make? Was it the change you set out to make, or a different one?

Week 7 · Dialogue



Assigned reading

Chopin, the exchange between Louise and Josephine in "The Story of an Hour." Mansfield, the dialogue at the bandstand in "Miss Brill."

Craft principle

Dialogue does two things: it conveys information, and it does work the narrator cannot do. The second is more important. Lines of dialogue are choices made by characters; what they choose to say, and what they choose not to say, reveals them more honestly than any narrator can.

Exercise A

In class, twenty minutes. Write a short scene — two characters, four exchanges. Each line must do work the narrator could not do.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Take a scene you have already drafted and revise the dialogue. Cut every line that conveys information the narrator could deliver. Add one line that withholds something.

Workshop protocol

Pairs read their revised dialogue aloud. The partner reads back, in one sentence each, what the line revealed that the narrator could not have said. The writer waits.

Closing reflection

Which of your characters is hardest to write in dialogue? Why?

Week 8 · Voice



Assigned reading

Two passages — Twain, opening of *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and Henry James, opening of "The Real Thing" (1892). Read both aloud.

Craft principle

Voice is not personality. Voice is the writer's habit of attention, made audible in the rhythm of the sentence and the angle of the diction. Voice is the part of writing that cannot be faked, only learned by writing.

Exercise A

In class, twenty minutes. Choose a writer whose voice you admire. Type out a paragraph of theirs by hand. Then write a paragraph of your own in the same syntactic shape, on a subject of your choosing.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Take the paragraph you wrote in class and revise it until the voice is unmistakably yours, not the admired writer's. Note what changed.

Workshop protocol

Read both versions, the imitation and the revised. The room's response: where did the voice become yours? Three writers; three minutes each. The reading writer remains silent.

Closing reflection

What in your voice did you find by imitating someone else's?

Week 9 · Drafting



Assigned reading

A short essay of your choosing on the practice of drafting. The Hurston essay from week two is one option; an Annie Dillard chapter (in print, choose any chapter) is another.

Craft principle

A first draft is permission to be wrong. The work of a first draft is to get the piece on the page, in any form, so that the work of the second draft can begin. Most writers who never finish anything are stuck in revising a paragraph they have not yet permitted themselves to write the next paragraph after.

Exercise A

In class, twenty-five minutes. Begin a new story. Aim for one thousand words. Stop only at the bell.

Exercise B

Between sessions, two hours. Bring the story to a complete first draft of three thousand to five thousand words. The draft will be bad. That is the point.

Workshop protocol

In session, the room reads no drafts. The session is for the report: each writer says, in three minutes, what surprised them about the draft. The room asks questions only about the surprise.

Closing reflection

What surprised you in the writing? What did you find that you did not know you knew?

Week 10 · Revision One: Structure



Assigned reading

Joyce, "The Dead" — first half. Pay attention to the proportions of each scene.

Craft principle

Revision is not editing. Editing is line-level work; revision is structural work. The first pass of revision should ask the largest questions: is this the right beginning, is this the right ending, are these the right scenes, in this order.

Exercise A

In class, twenty minutes. Map the structure of the draft you finished last week. One phrase per scene. Estimate the page count of each.

Exercise B

Between sessions, two hours. Move one scene. Cut one scene. Add one scene that was missing. Do not work line-level; work structural-level.

Workshop protocol

Pairs exchange before-and-after maps. Each writer explains the three structural changes in three sentences. The partner asks one question.

Closing reflection

Which of the three structural changes was hardest to make? Why?

Week 11 · Revision Two: Voice and Sentence



Assigned reading

Read your own draft from week ten, aloud, slowly. Mark every sentence that does not sound like you.

Craft principle

After structure, revise voice. Every sentence in the draft has to sound like the writer; every sentence that does not sounds like the writer trying to be heard. Cut those, or rewrite them in the writer's own breath.

Exercise A

In class, thirty minutes. Take the first page of your revised draft and rewrite every sentence that does not sound like you. Keep the meaning; change the rhythm.

Exercise B

Between sessions, two hours. Do the same for the rest of the draft.

Workshop protocol

Three writers read the opening page of the twice-revised draft. The room's response: where, on the page, does the voice settle into itself? The writer remains silent.

Closing reflection

Which sentences were hardest to rewrite in your own voice? What were they imitating?

Week 12 · Submission and the Long Practice



Assigned reading

Read *The Submitter's Companion* (Mulhern, 2026), or any equivalent guide. Read the closing paragraphs of three published stories whose authors you respect.

Craft principle

The work of a writer is not the work of any one piece; it is the work of returning to the desk for thirty years. The submission of a finished piece is the moment when the work of one piece becomes the work of the next.

Exercise A

In class, twenty minutes. Write a one-paragraph cover letter for the piece you have revised over weeks ten and eleven. Address it to a real journal you have read.

Exercise B

Between sessions, one hour. Submit the piece, or schedule the submission. Begin the next piece.

Workshop protocol

The final session is a reading. Each writer reads three minutes of their twice-revised work. The room responds with the practice of attention that began in week one: what did we notice, in order? The writer listens.

Closing reflection

Where do you go from here? What does the next twelve weeks of your writing life look like?

Appendix A · Workshop Charter



A workshop is a small society. Its terms should be written down and agreed to by every member on the first day. The terms below are the ones I have found work; a workshop is welcome to revise them, but the revision should happen openly, not by drift.

- The writer of the work being discussed remains silent during the discussion. The writer's job is to listen, not to defend.
- The room responds to what is on the page, not to what the writer intended. If the room's response is far from the writer's intention, the writer will know that the page did not carry the intention. The room's response is data; the writer chooses what to do with it.
- The room offers craft observations, not life advice. "This scene moves slowly" is a craft observation. "I would not have made this choice in my own life" is not.
- No one says "I liked it" or "I didn't like it." The room is past taste. The room is in craft.
- No one apologizes for their own writing before they read. The apology trains the room to listen for what is wrong.
- Confidentiality. Drafts shared in the workshop do not leave the workshop without the writer's permission.
- The teacher participates in the workshop as a writer. The teacher's authority is not aesthetic; it is procedural. The teacher keeps the room's practice intact.

Appendix B · Manuscript-Evaluation Rubric



A rubric is a teaching tool, not a verdict. Use it to make the conversation about a draft more useful, not to determine whether the draft is good.

Each manuscript can be evaluated along six dimensions, on a one-to-five scale.

- Attention to detail. Does the draft show evidence of close noticing? Are the details precise, or generic?
- Sentence variety. Is the rhythm of the prose varied to match the work each sentence is asked to do?
- Character. Are the people on the page distinguishable from each other, with desires and a field of consciousness?
- Scene. Do the scenes change something? Is the change visible by the end of the scene?
- Voice. Is the writer's habit of attention audible in the rhythm and the diction of the prose?
- Form. Has the writer chosen a form that fits the material, and engaged that form's conventions thoughtfully?

Appendix C · Extended Reading List



All texts below are in the United States public domain and may be photocopied for classroom use without permission.

Bibliography of Example Texts



Every literary example quoted in this volume is drawn from a work in the United States public domain. Below, the full citation for each source, in MLA format.

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About the Author



James F. Mulhern is the author of three novels and three story collections. He has taught creative writing and literature at the undergraduate and graduate levels for over two decades. Silver Current Press is his imprint.