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The Art of Telling a Story

A Six-Lesson Creative Writing Course for the High-School or Community Classroom

James F. Mulhern

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This bundle is designed for the teacher who wants a coherent six-lesson unit on the fundamentals of narrative — character, scene, dialogue, voice, structure, and revision. The course can be delivered in six class periods, or extended across six weeks with student writing assignments between sessions.

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Teacher's Introduction



This six-lesson course teaches the fundamentals of narrative through six classroom-ready packages. Each lesson contains a one-page craft note, a model passage drawn from the public-domain literary canon, three or four student exercises, a discussion guide for the room, and an assessment rubric.

The model passages are from Hawthorne, Chopin, Joyce, Mansfield, Crane, and Hurston. Every passage is in the United States public domain and can be reproduced for student photocopying under the classroom license granted with the purchase of this bundle.

A typical class period is forty-five to fifty minutes. The lesson is built to run in that time: ten minutes opening, ten minutes reading and discussion of the model, twenty minutes student writing, ten minutes sharing. Extended versions add a writing assignment between sessions, lengthening each lesson into a week of work.

LESSON 1

Character

Opening

A character is a pattern of choices, gestures, dialogue, and attention. To write character, the writer must first see character. Today we practice seeing.

Craft principle

Authors reveal character by what their characters see and what they walk past. The first move of character writing is paying attention to attention.

Model passage

North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.

— James Joyce, "Araby" (1914) — public domain in the United States

Student exercises

1. In the model passage, list every detail Joyce gives. What is the narrator paying attention to? What does the attention reveal?

2. Pick a person you see often — a family member, a teacher, a person at a corner store. Write a paragraph that reveals them entirely through what they notice. No description of their face or clothes.

3. Exchange paragraphs with a partner. Without your partner's help, write three sentences about who you think their person is. Compare notes.

Discussion guide

Open the room's discussion by asking: what did your partner's paragraph reveal that a list of descriptions could not have revealed? What did the room learn through attention that it could not have learned otherwise?

Assessment rubric

Five points each: detail (specific or generic), attention (consistent or scattered), character revealed (visible by the end), voice (sounds like the writer), and length (paragraph completed).

Total: 25 points.

LESSON 2

Scene

Opening

A scene is a unit of action with a beginning, a middle, and a change. Today we practice writing scenes that change.

Craft principle

Scenes do not have to be dramatic to change. A small change — a recognition, a refusal, a shift in attention — is a change. A scene without any change is a description that has overstayed its welcome.

Model passage

A blue jay lapped the greenish water of a fluted cement birdbath, then shook its wings, cawed, and flew away. Along one side of the patio, potted plants softened the brick wall. Rita returned with the tea, two thick white cups on saucers, the steam rising into the morning air.

— In the manner of James Mulhern, original passage, used by permission

Student exercises

1. Sketch a scene on the page. Three columns: setting (where), characters present (who), what changes (the action of the scene).
2. Write the scene. Five hundred words. The change must be visible by the last paragraph.
3. Read your scene to a partner. The partner identifies the change in one sentence. Discuss whether the partner found the change you intended.

Discussion guide

Discuss: where in the scene did the change actually happen? Was it where you planned, or somewhere else? Why?

Assessment rubric

Five points each: opening clarity, character placement, sensory detail, the change (visible or implied), the ending (lands or drifts). Total: 25 points.

LESSON 3

Dialogue

Opening

Dialogue is the act of one character choosing what to say to another. What they choose, and what they refuse to say, reveals them.

Craft principle

Dialogue does two things: it conveys information, and it does work the narrator cannot do. The second is more important. Cut any line of dialogue whose only function is to deliver information the narrator could have delivered.

Model passage

"What is it, Louise?" asked her sister Josephine. "Open the door — you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door." "Go away. I am not making myself ill."

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" (1894) — public domain

Student exercises

1. In the model, what does each line of dialogue tell you that the narrator could not? Why does Chopin choose dialogue here instead of summary?
2. Write a four-line exchange between two characters. Each line must do work the narrator could not do.
3. Cut one line from your exchange. Read it aloud with the line missing. Does the scene still work? What does the missing line reveal about what dialogue is for?

Discussion guide

Open: what is the strongest line of dialogue you wrote, and why? What makes a line of dialogue strong?

Assessment rubric

Five points each: each line earns its place, gestures and pauses indicated where needed, voice distinct between characters, conflict implicit, the ending settles or unsettles intentionally. Total: 25 points.

LESSON 4

Voice

Opening

Voice is the writer's way of looking at the world made audible in the rhythm of the sentences. Today we listen to two writers and find our own.

Craft principle

Voice is not personality. Voice is the writer's habit of attention made into sound. Voice is recognizable across pages because it is built from real choices a real writer makes.

Model passage

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.

— Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928) — public domain in the U.S. as of 2024

Student exercises

1. Describe Hurston's voice in three adjectives. Defend each choice with a phrase from the passage.
2. Pick a writer whose voice you admire. Type out a paragraph of theirs by hand. Then write your own paragraph on the same subject in the same syntactic shape.
3. Read both aloud. Where did your voice settle into itself, and where did it imitate? Mark the moment of difference.

Discussion guide

Discuss: what did imitating someone else's voice teach you about your own?

Assessment rubric

Five points each: imitation accurate, original paragraph distinct, sentence variety present, attention to rhythm, awareness of own voice. Total: 25 points.

LESSON 5

Structure

Opening

Structure is the architecture of a story. Today we practice mapping it.

Craft principle

Every story has a shape. The shape is a series of decisions the writer made about order, proportion, and the location of the turn. Reading for structure makes the shape visible; writing with structure in mind makes the shape work.

Model passage

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease — of the joy that kills.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour," closing sentence (1894)

Student exercises

1. Recall a story you have read. Map its structure on a single page — major scenes in order, with one phrase each. Estimate the proportion of pages given to each scene.
2. Locate the turn. Mark the sentence where the trajectory of the story changes direction.
3. Imagine the same story without the turn. What is the story then? What does the structure add to the meaning?

Discussion guide

Open: where, in your map, is the turn? What is the work the turn is doing?

Assessment rubric

Five points each: map clear and legible, proportions estimated, turn correctly located, analysis of turn's function, defense of structural choice. Total: 25 points.

LESSON 6

Revision

Opening

A draft is permission to be wrong. Revision is the work of being right.

Craft principle

Revision is not editing. Editing fixes sentences; revision fixes structures and voices. Three passes work for most writers: first pass for structure, second for voice and rhythm, third for the line.

Model passage

Read aloud. Slowly. Stop at every sentence that does not sound like you. Mark it. Then go back and rewrite the marked sentences in your own breath. Keep the meaning; change the rhythm.

— The revision protocol, in plain instructions

Student exercises

1. Take any draft you have written in the past month. Read it aloud, slowly. Mark every sentence that does not sound like you.
2. Rewrite the marked sentences. Keep the meaning; change the rhythm. Compare before and after.
3. Identify one structural change you would make if you returned to this draft. One scene to cut, move, or add. Why?

Discussion guide

Discuss: where in your draft did the voice settle into itself? Where is the voice still trying to be heard?

Assessment rubric

Five points each: draft revised aloud, sentences marked and rewritten, structural change identified, defense of choice, reflection on the practice. Total: 25 points.

Final Assessment



After the six lessons, students complete a final assignment: a 1,500-word short story that demonstrates all six moves — character, scene, dialogue, voice, structure, and revision. Use the assessment rubric below for the final.

Final rubric. Each dimension scored 1-5. Total: 30 points.

- Character: the protagonist has visible desires, takes action, and notices the world in a way that reveals them.
- Scene: scenes change something. The change is visible.
- Dialogue: dialogue does work the narrator cannot do.
- Voice: the writer's voice is consistent and audible across the story.
- Structure: the story has a shape; the turn is located and works.
- Revision: the story shows evidence of having been revised.

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, including *Give Them Unquiet Dreams* (a Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2019). He has taught creative writing and literature for over two decades. Silver Current Press is his imprint.