

# Exercises from Novel Workshop – Spring 2007

## Week One: Introduction

1.

Give me a number between 12 and 17.

Write about something that happened to you around that year that you didn't understand. Once you start writing, don't stop. Try to remember concrete details about characters, emotions, etcetera. Don't write from today; write either in 1<sup>st</sup> person or in a 3<sup>rd</sup> person that doesn't have the luxury of looking back.

2.

Questions for you to think about, can choose one or multiple questions. Goal is for you to find out what you don't know, expand your knowledge, and start making ties between small things and big things.

*How much do you know about your novel?*

Do you:

- Have a list of all chapters?
- Know something about all your characters?
- Have a list of all major plot points?
- Know how the book starts?
- Know how the book ends?
- What are the stakes for your main character?
- Know what drives your main characters most in this world?
- Can you tell your story in: 1 page/100 words?

How much do you know about your main characters?

- Provide a brief physical description of your character in a way you haven't before.
- Where did you character grow up, and what do they think of their childhood when they look back?
- What is the most recent lie your main character told?
- When was the last time your character cried, and why?
- What is your character's biggest secret? How does this secret come out in subtle ways?
- In this room, write about three things one of your characters is drawn to. Describe them interacting with them.
- What don't you know about your main characters? Write down five things (big or small) and answer them.

## Week Two: Plot/Story

1.

- Take out a piece of paper.
- Write on the piece of paper the single thing that your main character fears most. (death, snakes, fire, falling)
- Write on the piece of paper the single thing that your main character loves most. (trees, purple, chocolate, sex with identical twins, success)
- Fold the paper and give it to the person on your right.

Exercise: Write a scene where one of your main characters has to confront the fear on the piece of paper. It does not necessarily have to be their fear. They do not have to necessarily succeed in dealing, but they must be confronted with it.

This scene has to have action – not necessarily things blowing up, but places where decisions have to be made because things are happening.

2.

Exercise on plotting: combination of actions and character traits that let up to an event.  
Get into groups of 2-3.

Take the following scene:

- Main character is reading their poetry publicly for the first time (why, why now, what occasion?). He/she is terrified (why?). Person who introduces him/her used to be their mentor. For a reason known or unknown to the poetry reader, the mentor is deliberately rude in their opening remarks, making up their biography, possibly drunk, mispronouncing (on purpose?) their difficult name.

Go backwards and plot the action that led up to this point. If you come across character traits, express them in a scene/action.

Samples:

How do they know each other?

Where does this story start? At their birth, when they met each other, five minutes ago?

What changed their relationship?

What could set them off in this environment?

Again, look for places where people make choices. Often a third person helps with this, as then a dialogue is not made of polar opposites.

3.

*working forwards*

A roadside vendor's pickup is struck by a trans-continental tractor-trailer Tractor trailer

Owner of tractor and semi-driver wind up sharing the same hospital room.

Plot from point a to point b

### **Week Three: Tension/Conflict**

1.

Write down something your character wants: it can be physical, like chocolate, sex, or even yellow, or it can be mental: they want to give a good speech without stuttering, they want to live unencumbered of human responsibility, they want to get home and their car has broken down.

Write a scene in which your main character (or a secondary character) tries (or does not try to) achieve their goal.

The something you have written down on the page is almost achievable, but your character can't get it. Maybe someone else is preventing them from getting it, maybe it's unreachable (on a cliff edge), or perhaps the character restrains him/herself (like a person in a bar who has just had a liver transplant).

The goal of this exercise is to create tension. This tension can be with him/her self, with their environment, or with another person.

**Tip:** Create obstacles in their way. Common obstacles: weather, police, family members, big dogs. Uncommon obstacles?

**Tip:** Pick a location (at random)– a restaurant, a movie theater, a bathroom at a highway rest stop. As with a play, take an inventory of the objects available to your character and use them in creative ways. Or, as with a movie, where the hero(ine) must improvise in their surroundings to find an instrument with which they can defend themselves, use all the tools available to them – mental or physical. Perhaps something in their past that allows them to succeed (or fail) – how do you dramatize this?

**Tip:** Nothing says they have to succeed. A book in which success follows success is not very interesting.

**Tip:** What is it about the object of affection that is so special to your character? Try to register the intensity of their desire, if not its origin.

**Bonus points:** If your novel is written in first person (I), write this in third person (he/she/it), or vice versa.

As with all of our “first thing in the morning” exercises, you can do a little bit of plotting in advance, but once you start writing, try not to stop or edit. Let your mind dream, lead you to places you wouldn't normally get to with your super-rational mind.

2.

1. List conflicts of your major character
2. List how these conflicts relate to each other - philosophically, emotionally.  
Example: how might a character's need for love from father figure (person vs person) relate to the character's shoplifting or their involvement in an organization to support political prisoners
3. Repeat the process for 1-2 minor characters
4. Describe briefly (in bullet points) how the conflicts of the main character **come into conflict** with the conflicts of the minor character(s)

3.

Taken From John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*:

Write the paragraph that would appear in a piece of fiction just before the discovery of a body. You might perhaps describe the character's approach to the body he/she will find, or the location, or both. The purpose of the exercise is to develop the technique of at once attracting the reader toward the paragraph to follow, making him/her want to skip ahead, and holding him/her on this paragraph by virtue of its interest.

#### **Alternative: Line Editing**

Go through sentences (Jacek, Laura, Dan). Ask about common mistakes

Vividness, detail (but not too much)

#### **Week Four: Voice/Point of View**

1.

Choose an event that was important to a character in your book:

- You have not yet written this event
- This event was something small (helping a calf being born, getting Chicken Pox, embarrassment at not having enough change to get on the tram) rather than huge (a parent died, etc)

Write this event from the 1<sup>st</sup> person (I). What you write does not have to be finished (tied off), as you will continue with this later.

**Tip:** Who is this "I"? What do they know? Are they writing in the present tense, as the event happened, or are they writing from the future, writing in hindsight? If writing from hindsight, what do they know now that helps them understand that moment?

**Tip:** If you know how this event changed them, this doesn't mean you have to say it outright. Try to prepare us for this change in the details of the event itself.

**Tip:** Think about the voice of this “I”. You could write in a conversational voice (informal), a more formal voice, a journal entry, a voice full of longing, of excitement. You could write from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the 16<sup>th</sup>. This affects your word choice. Make a conscious choice as to voice, even if you don’t know what that voice will sound like, and run with it in this exercise. How close is this “I”? Think of our conversation on psychic distance last week and make a conscious decision how close this voice will be.

2.

Take the same event that you just wrote about and, using the **2<sup>nd</sup> person**, either rewrite the scene or write the scene before or after it.

3.

Take the same event that you just wrote about and, using the **3<sup>rd</sup> person**, either rewrite the scene or write the scene before or after it. Especially in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, you should start to play with voice and narrative location. Is the narrator limited or omniscient? If limited, how? Can they switch POV from one person to the next? Are there things they do or don’t know? Before starting this exercise, write down a few notes on what they do or don’t know.

## **Week Five: Character Development (Show and Tell)**

1.

You are at a carnival with one parent, your spouse, and one or more of your children. Your parent wants you to go on the ferris wheel.

Reveal character through this scene, starting with the parent telling you what they want. Use the 1<sup>st</sup> person, but do not use the word “I” except in dialogue. Try to reveal character through speech, thought, action, and observation. What, if you go up on the ferris wheel, does it feel like?

Do not “tell” in this exercise. Thoughts count as “show”. Everything you need should be in the time frame of the scene.

2.

A)

10 questions:

Write down 10 questions you don’t know about your main character. On a separate piece of paper, try to answer them. Questions can be as simple as “what is their favorite color?” or “were they brought up religiously?” or they can be complicated, like “who did they vote for in the last

election and why?” or “why are they so afraid of crying babies?” It can even be about your book, like “what does your character learn during the course of this novel?”

B)

Split into groups of 2. Ask your questions to your partner. Your partner has 15 seconds to jot down intuitive answers.

3.

Write a scene with your main character that involves some of the things you have learned. Again, use voice (if 1<sup>st</sup> person), observation, thought, and action to convey character. This could be a scene you’ve already written, or a scene that you haven’t written – maybe it’s something unusual that is prompted by a question.