

All the Rules Broken: An Introduction to Short Fiction

There is no formula for writing a good short story — no magical instruction booklet that could guide you to a well-written story that came to you effortlessly. Writing is an experience and writers are born of little more than their own experience. But as with everything, there are guidelines and rules that can guide a writer into a deeper sense of control. In this one-semester course, we will explore the fundamentals of writing short fiction, while at the same time sowing the seeds of dissent that are necessary to good writing.

The following books are required for this course:

- The Oak Meadow Intro to Short Fiction Syllabus
- *The Norton Book of American Short Stories*, Ed. Prescott, Peter S., W. W. Norton & Company, New York, London. 1988.

Outline of the Intro to Short Fiction Syllabus:

Lesson 1: Introduction	Lesson 10: Dialogue <i>What We Talk About When We Talk About Love</i> by Raymond Carver
Lesson 2: Setting <i>The Yellow Wallpaper</i> by Charlotte Stetson	Lesson 11: Revision <i>Gimpel the Fool</i> by Isaac Bashevis Singer
Lesson 3: Character <i>Revelation</i> by Flannery O'Connor	Lesson 12: Tension, Suspense, and Irony <i>Young Goodman Brown</i> by Nathaniel Hawthorne
Lesson 4: Voice and Narrator <i>Why I Live at the P.O.</i> by Eudora Welty	Lesson 13: Sources and Senses <i>Hills Like White Elephants</i> by Ernest Hemingway
Lesson 5: Plot <i>The Bridal Party</i> by F. Scott Fitzgerald	Lesson 14: Symbolism and Building the Illusory World
Lesson 6: Time, Pace, and Flashbacks	Lesson 15: Second Short Story Criticism
Lesson 7: Write First Short Story	Lesson 16: Genres, Motifs, and Epiphanies
Lesson 8: Detail <i>The Eatonville Anthology</i> by Zora Neal Hurston	Lesson 17: Submitting and Publishing Your Work <i>Idiots First</i> by Bernard Malamud
Lesson 9: Thought and Tense <i>Wash</i> by William Faulkner	Lesson 18: Mock Submission

Lesson 10: Dialogue

Dialogue can be a welcome source of vibrancy and life in fiction. When used correctly, it serves multiple purposes and brings our characters further into the human realm. There are various approaches, and believable dialogue is not easy to pull off, so go with what makes you most comfortable, and focus on writing conversations how you hear them.

Diction is word choice. Oftentimes there are many options for different words that can mean the same thing. Different words carry subtleties of mood, as well as different connotations and sounds. Paying attention to diction is something every writer should do.

Syntax is word order. Sentences are free to be structured in various ways. Tone and mood play in to how the sentences should be arranged for certain desired effects. Experiment with your sentences when you're revising work to find the types of things that work best.

Pay special attention to the diction and syntax of dialogue, as far as writing believably and remaining honest to who your characters are.

Phonetics

Zora Neale Hurston, writing about the rural South, takes the colloquial approach to dialogue, spelling the words people are saying phonetically. From her story *The Eatonville Anthology*:

“Ah don't keer if you don't treat me. What's a dirty lil nickel?” She flung this at Walter Thomas. “The everloving Mister Crooms will gimme anthing atall Ah wants.”

Hurston was not only a writer, but also an anthropologist who was intent on capturing the culture and language of the South. She did a lot of research listening to how people spoke and said things to be able to reproduce it as naturally as possible. When using this approach, it's important not to dumb down or make fun of your characters, especially if the vernacular you're capturing isn't your own. It may sound funny or foreign to you, but it's important to convey the way a person speaks as just that, the way they speak. Don't rely on it as the sole conveyor of who they are, or use it to illustrate a point.

Slang

When Eudora Welty writes about rural people, it is the diction and syntax of the narrator that conveys the accents of the characters, rather than phonetic spellings of what is said:

“You would not,” I says.

“Don't contradict me, I would,” says Mama.

But I said she couldn't convince me though she talked till she was blue in the face. Then I said, “Besides, you know as well as I do that that child is not adopted.”

“She most certainly is adopted,” says Mama, stiff as a poker.

I says, “Why, Mama, Stella-Rondo had her just as sure as anything in this world, and just too stuck up to admit it.”

With the narrator’s own use of slang (“I says;” “Mama;” “stiff as a poker”), we are welcomed to hear the accent coming right out of the character’s mouths, even though it’s not conveyed with phonetic spelling. Simple word omissions in speech and colloquialisms in narration are enough to help us hear the way things sound between the narrator and her Mama. If we’re going to use slang, it’s important that it’s on a level that is understandable. Personally, I don’t know what a poker is. But because of the context of what’s being said, and the fact that Welty says “stiff as a poker,” I know enough to figure out how her mother is speaking to her.

Paraphrasing

In the third paragraph, Welty uses the technique of paraphrasing a section of the dialogue:

But I said she couldn’t convince me though she talked till she was blue in the face.

This is a good way to speed along to the interesting parts of a conversation without getting lost in every little word that’s exchanged. It also offers a nice change of pace and varies the way in which we receive information, so that our attention might be better sustained.

Rhythm of Speech

Diction, syntax, and grammar play very important roles in dialogue. They are the tools with which a writer captures the breaths, imperfections, and rhythms of speech that aren’t found in prose (the exception is stream-of-consciousness writing, when the narrator follows their thought pattern wherever it leads them). When used wisely, punctuation should be unnoticeable and the word choice should flow believably out of characters’ mouths. (Keep in mind, dialogue is not the only time punctuation should be invisible. In whatever you’re writing, it should be the silent and unnoticeable mover of the words.) Note, in the following passage from *The Bridal Party*, how naturally F. Scott Fitzgerald gets away with his distressed characters speaking in a way that is very articulate, even to the point of sounding poetic, while remaining totally believable:

“I didn’t know what to do at first, Michael. I told Hamilton about you — that I’d cared for you an awful lot — but it didn’t worry him, and he was right. Because I’m over you now — yes, I am. And you’ll wake up some sunny morning and be over me just like that.”

He shook his head stubbornly.

“Oh, yes. We weren’t for each other. I’m pretty flighty, and I need somebody like Hamilton to decide things. It was that more than the question of — of —”

“Of money.” Again he was on the point of telling her what had happened, but again something told him it was not the time.

“Then how do you account for what happened when we met the other day,” he demanded helplessly — “what happened just now? When we just pour toward each other like we used to — as if we were one person, as if the same blood was flowing through both of us?”

“Oh, don’t,” she begged him. “You mustn’t talk like that; everything’s decided now.”

In *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, Raymond Carver, the great precisionist, can’t be bothered with the dashes Fitzgerald uses so brilliantly. Carver prefers the period to mimic life:

Mel said, “The kind of love I’m talking about is. The kind of love I’m talking about, you don’t try to kill people.”

As the characters continue drinking throughout the story, their level of intoxication becomes evident in their speech:

Mel said, “I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point. You see, this happened a few months ago, but it’s still going on right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we’re talking about when we talk about love.”

While the last sentence isn’t exactly inarticulate, the repetition of the words “we” and “talk” convey the state of mind of the speaker, as well as the friendly, informal atmosphere the characters are in.

Remember to embrace whatever you’re writing about with your full imagination, especially when writing dialogue. You will have to break into the minds of numerous characters spontaneously; know them well. If you find yourself sitting and pondering the right word combination to come out of someone’s mouth, maybe you need to develop that character a little more. Not necessarily on the page, but in your head, so that their words become yours, and yours theirs. Try to get into a conversational flow with the writing of dialogue that is natural and not forced.

You can also use the space between what is said to further the reader’s understanding of the scene or situation. Describing details, body language, and what a person is thinking, or putting what’s being said into a larger context of events than what is being referred to in the conversation all help to allow the dialogue to carry its proper weight. Of course, sometimes it’s more important to focus on what is being said. Let the situation your story presents dictate the flow of what you write; give in to what it demands, and rise to the challenges it presents.

The artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place; from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider’s web.

— Pablo Picasso

Here is a list of some of the many elements of a short story that can be conveyed, in various combinations, through dialogue:

- **Mood:** Comes out in the way words are said, and is driven by the central emotion or combination of emotions behind them: love, anger, anxiety, strength, confusion, determination...
- **Character development:** Conveyed through tone of voice and body language, the personality of a person carried by how a person chooses to speak about things (or not speak about them), as well as their honesty, dishonesty, focus of attention, lightness/heaviness of words, politeness, and other character traits.
- **Plot:** Moving the story through dialogue, explaining the events that have happened, or displaying events as they happen. Relaying how the characters relate to the chain of events in the story in dialogue can bring the reader's attention to them in a demanding, active way, where they are forced to form opinions and take sides.
- **Information:** Stating key elements through conversation, pieces of the story we may not already know can come out tactfully in dialogue, instead of the reader feeling like things are being spoon-fed.
- **Relationships:** How people relate differently to different characters can illustrate the level of trust, love, or affiliation between them.
- **Feelings:** The notions of a character's heart can struggle to find words, and when staged in human interaction, they are usually either protected or vulnerable, safe or attacked, or both, when there are more than two people involved.
- **Thoughts:** What a person says inevitably translates what they think to some extent. Like feelings, the thoughts are out in the open once spoken and so may need to be defended, retracted, debated, or answered.
- **Strengths and weaknesses:** A person of bold spirit can find it crushing to have to put things into words, likewise a person of meager heart may use their inner disconnectedness to ruthlessly express themselves. A person's strengths and weaknesses play into what they say in thick and layered ways that are not always easy to decipher.
- **Reality:** When the characters speak we are brought closer to the fact that they are people, capable of expressing themselves and listening to others.
- **Subconscious:** What is being thought about what is being said, and why? Does it matter? Is there more going on in the course of a conversation than what seems to be?

These elements play into any conversation to varying levels of intensity. The level of complexity of dialogue will naturally refer back to life. Get in touch with what you're writing and you'll know where to take it, because you've been speaking and listening to people talk for years and years, and already have more experience than you know.

Pay closer attention to how people around you speak this week, and how they often are saying something other than what can obviously be heard coming from their mouths.

Expressive Verbs and Variations

Keep in mind other ways of saying common words when moving dialogue. Often it's best to stick with "he said" and "she said," as they are widely used and accepted words that let the reader know who's speaking. Only when it's crystal clear who is talking, in an even exchange, can the notation of who's speaking be omitted. Whenever you're not sure whether the reader will know who is saying what, it's better to tell them than run the risk of having them confused.

If "said" is beginning to sound trite, think of similar words that will convey the same thing, such as, "remarked," "stated," "told," "chimed," "sang," "expressed," "pontificated," "encouraged," "elaborated."

You may also follow up an expressive verb with a description of how it's said, such as, "He said with anger in his throat," or "She chimed as if she'd rehearsed saying it in the bathroom just moments ago."

Be creative with how you explain the nature of the words spoken, just try not to distract from the overall flow.

Alternative words for "asked" might be "questioned," "wondered," "inquired," and so on.

The expressive verbs are often more effective in conveying intensity than the exclamation point. Try only to use an exclamation point when it is absolutely necessary. **AND NEVER USE MULTIPLE EXCLAMATION POINTS OR ALL CAPITALS!!!!** It's unnecessary, over the top, and grammatically incorrect. Try instead such words as "yelled," "exclaimed," "shouted," and remember that they can be paired with adverbs like "belligerently," "authoritatively," or "awkwardly." Don't rely on punctuation to do the work of the story. If a moment is supposed to be tense, that should be clear because of the environment and the way the characters are written into it and what they are saying.

Remember that in dialogue you are not only conveying what is said, but how it is said.

Lesson 10 Assignment Overview:

Reading: What We Talk About When We Talk About Love by Raymond Carver

Note the way most of the story moves through dialogue and how Carver's details and descriptions are more important because of it. Also note that the story makes use of spaces in the text, where a line is skipped at particular points. Pay attention to why the spaces are placed where they are.

Cite three separate descriptive details, each from a different page, and explain the relevance/significance of them. Go below the surface.

What role does alcohol play in the story, besides intoxicating everyone?

List three of the things talked about while talking about love.

Notebook: Daily writing, 20-30 minutes

Wednesday's brainstorm: ""

To Be Turned In: Choose one of the following and give characters A, B, and C each a name, and write up to a page in which the following information is conveyed through dialogue and body language:

- A. is bossy and over-assertive and doesn't like to change opinions
- B. is open-minded and easily outspoken, though intelligent
- C. speaks from the heart and is ashamed of feeling unhappy

- A. likes others to think he/she is intelligent
- B. is concerned with how A is viewing him/her
- C. is more interested in what B has to say and doesn't particularly like A, though doesn't want to show it

Answers to Reading Questions

Food for thought: Drinking plays a heavy role in this story. Raymond Carver spent most of his life as an alcoholic before quitting when he was forty, and remaining sober for the last ten years of his life. He noted the moment he stopped drinking as the single most important event in his life, and said the only time he wrote anything worthwhile was when he was sober. The notion that writing and drinking goes together is mostly propagated by alcoholics and those who can't separate alcohol from the other facets of their lives. Ironically, they are often not productive writers, and are seldom any good.