

Composition 2: Creative Writing and Nonfiction Coursebook



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Introduction

Welcome to *Composition 2: Creative Writing and Nonfiction*! The desire to communicate is a fundamental human trait. When human beings first developed written language, it gave people a new way to communicate that didn't depend on being in close proximity to one another. In the past century, technology has transformed our ability to communicate across time and space. Yet, the written word remains a primary method of sharing our stories, ideas, and experiences. In this course, you'll find the tools to help express yourself in writing with greater clarity and effectiveness.

Course Materials

The following materials are used in this course:

- *Meet Cute: Some People Are Destined to Meet*
- *The Art of Creative Research* by Philip Gerard

Meet Cute is a short-story anthology that brings together diverse voices and perspectives. You will be reading a selection of stories from the book. Studying how other writers effectively convey their ideas will help you develop your own writing skills.

What to Expect in This Course

This course is divided into 18 lessons, and each lesson is designed to take about one week to complete. In the lessons, you will find the following sections:

An **Assignment Checklist** is included at the beginning of each lesson. Assignments are fully explained in the lesson.

Learning Objectives outline the main goals of the lesson and give you an idea of what to expect.

Reading selections focus on the art and craft of writing.

Writing sections detail the writing and projects you will be doing in each lesson.

The Writer's Craft spotlights different techniques and writing tips.

Further Study provides ways to extend your learning. All Further Study assignments are optional.

Share Your Work provides reminders and information for students who are submitting work to a teacher.

This course is designed for independent learning, so hopefully you will find it easy to navigate. However, it is assumed you will have an adult (such as a parent, tutor, or school-based teacher) supervising your work and providing support and feedback. If you have a question about your work, ask them for help.

When you begin each lesson, scan the entire lesson first so you have an idea of what you will be doing. Take a quick look at the number of assignments and amount of reading. Having a sense of the whole lesson before you begin will help you manage your time effectively. Use the assignment checklist to keep track of your progress. Check off tasks as you complete them so you can see at a glance what you still need to do. Follow this process for each lesson.

Academic Expectations

This is a writing course, and you are expected to proofread everything before you share it with your teacher to best demonstrate your writing skills. Your teacher will provide feedback on your writing assignments, and you will have the opportunity to revise your writing to make it more expressive.

The appendix contains important material that you will need to read and incorporate into your work throughout the year. Take some time to familiarize yourself with the resources in the appendix. You will find information about original work guidelines, how to avoid accidental plagiarism, and details on citing sources and images.

It is assumed that you will be working with a teacher or other adult who will assess and support your learning. Contact your teacher if you have questions about your assignments or how to get the most out of this course.

A Note About the Workload

Students vary greatly in terms of reading speed, reading comprehension, and writing ability. Some may find the reading in this course takes longer than expected; others may find the writing assignments take a great deal of time. In general, you can expect to spend about five hours on each lesson (or ten hours on double lessons). If you need more time to complete the work, you can modify some lessons to focus on fewer assignments or forgo the reading assignments in order to focus on your composition skills. Modifications like these will allow you to produce work of a higher quality. Each lesson in this course can be customized to suit your needs.

Keep an eye on the workload as you progress through the course. Make adjustments so you have time for meaningful learning experiences rather than rushing to try to get everything done. Consult with your teacher when making adjustments to the workload.

Lesson

1

Why Are Stories Important?

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify a story's theme and key elements.
- Use descriptive details to create a vivid piece of writing.

Before You Begin

The Power of Storytelling

Stories are part of our lives. We hear stories, we tell stories, and we read stories. But what is the purpose of a story? What makes a story successful or memorable? In both fiction and nonfiction, we use stories to help us understand ourselves and one another better. Stories help us face and overcome obstacles, learn how to see the world from a new perspective, recognize the connection between actions and consequences, and relate to others with greater empathy. Stories can entertain, instruct, inspire, heal, or enlighten. Through stories, we explore what it means to be human.

Every story is a narrative, either personal or cultural.

Personal narratives tell an individual's story, usually focusing on a key experience. For instance, a personal narrative might describe something unusual that happened to you or an encounter that helped you see things in a new way.

Cultural narratives connect readers with a particular community. They portray events, places, values, or beliefs that are shared by a group of people and are often instructive in nature. Creation stories, myths, folktales, and fables are some examples of cultural narratives. Cultural narratives play an important role in preserving and maintaining cultural knowledge.

All stories help us connect with others. Both reading and writing stories can build this connection.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read "Before You Begin" and "The Writer's Craft."
- Read or watch a story from an indigenous culture and identify key story elements.
- Reflect on the personal impact of a story.
- Choose your writing assignment:
 - Write a vignette of a retelling of a fairy tale or familiar story.
 - Write a vignette based on a real event.
- Write a list of short story ideas.

Story Elements

Stories have three main elements—setting, characters, and plot—and the interaction of these elements creates the story. Each element matters because each one influences how the story unfolds. These elements are familiar because they are the same elements that create our personal stories, the ones we live every day, which unfold across a landscape of places, people, and events.

We will look at each of these elements in detail during this course, but here is a quick summary.

Setting: Each story happens at a specific place and time. Establishing the setting early in the story helps orient your readers so they can picture the story clearly in their minds.

Characters: Characters are the actors in the story. They make things happen, or things happen to them. If you can get your reader to care about the characters, they will care about what happens in the story and want to keep reading to find out.

Plot: The plot describes what the characters do or what happens to them. Most plots unfold in three basic stages.

- **Setup:** The characters are introduced, the setting is established, and the story problem or goal is presented.
- **Conflict:** The main character encounters internal or external obstacles while solving the problem or accomplishing the goal. Conflict is an essential story element, and this aspect is the main part of the story.
- **Resolution:** The main character overcomes the obstacles and learns something valuable or accomplishes something meaningful.

Archetypes in Storytelling

Stories often contain *archetypal* symbols, which are representations of universal truths or types. For instance, the hero is an archetype that is often found in storytelling. Within each of us are elements of the hero, which is what makes it a universal symbol. Like all heroes, we struggle every day, in one way or another, against elements that prevent us from accomplishing our goals, realizing our dreams, and expressing more of who we are. These obstacles can be internal (such as a lack of confidence or emotional trauma) or external (such as a power figure or a geographic barrier). The weapons and tools we use to overcome our challenges are courage, love, understanding, truth, commitment, fortitude, humor, and so on. As in life, these elements can all come into play in a story in a wide variety of forms.



Stories help us connect with others and explore what it means to be human. (Image credit: Pxfuel)

Archetypes of all sorts are found in story characters. Based on the books and movies you've experienced, you can probably identify archetypes like the jokester, nurturer, villain, trickster, lover, innocent, explorer, and mentor.

The setting or objects in the story can also become symbolic of inner states of being or struggles. For example, a raging river might represent an emotional conflict. A forest might represent a place of protection, or it might evoke a feeling of being surrounded by darkness. A high mountain might symbolize clarity of vision or an insurmountable obstacle. It's important to remember that symbols are not fixed elements you can memorize. They vary according to the events occurring in the story. The way your characters relate to the setting gives direct clues to how these symbols work in the story.

Similarities Between Fiction and Nonfiction

Stories can be imaginary (fiction) or true (nonfiction). In this course, you will be working on two major pieces of writing, one fiction and one nonfiction. While there are major differences between something true and something imagined, there are also similarities between fiction and nonfiction writing. Essentially, both must address the same basic elements: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

	FICTION	NONFICTION
WHO	characters in the story	real people involved in the event
WHAT	story plot or theme	factual event, concept, or idea
WHEN	when the story takes place	when the event took place
WHERE	where the story takes place	where the event took place
WHY	character motivation or incidents leading up to the event	personal motivation or incidents leading up to the event
HOW	sequence of scenes	sequence of events

Another similarity between fiction and nonfiction writing is that they both can be strengthened by following the writing process: prewriting/organizing, writing a rough draft, revising, editing, and proofreading. This course will lead you through each step.

Choosing a Story to Tell

In the first half of this course, you will practice creative writing and produce a short story. One element of your story will form the basis of your research project in the second half of the course. For instance, if you would like to explore an environmental issue in your nonfiction piece, your fictional story might feature a setting or character impacted by the issue; if you'd like to explore the music industry in your nonfiction project, your story might center around a musician trying to start a band. If you create a fictional story that features a journalist, your nonfiction project might explore the role of journalism in a democracy; if your story features a health-care worker, your nonfiction piece might focus on public

health policy, medical research, or health insurance scams. Think of something you'd like to learn more about, and use that as a seed for your story idea.

What do you want your story to do? What feeling or insight do you want your reader to walk away with after they've read your story? You may want your story to broaden your reader's perspective or shift their frame of reference. You may want your story to teach your reader something about the world, to connect your reader with others, or to encourage your reader to explore their own inner landscapes, values, or beliefs. How will your story do that? You can accomplish it by showing the main character's experiences and how they change as a result of what happens in the story.

Stories often have a theme that drives the plot. Here are a few examples of story themes:

- Love is stronger than hate.
- Never give up.
- Everyone deserves a second chance.
- Hard work pays off.
- Never turn your back on nature.
- When you hit the bottom, the only way out is up.
- You have to face your fears in order to overcome them.
- Being different is not a bad thing.
- Some things are worth fighting for.
- Sometimes those who least expect it turn out to be heroes.
- Courage is not the absence of fear.
- Kindness is contagious (pay it forward).

A theme can be expressed in many different ways. For instance, as you read selections from *Meet Cute*, you will see how the theme of "Love can happen when you least expect it" is expressed using many different settings, characters, and plots. Sometimes a theme shapes the writing from the very beginning, and other times it doesn't become obvious until the story is complete.

Story ideas can come from anywhere. A snippet of conversation you hear in passing, an experience you had or heard about, a dream or wish, or inspiration from art or nature are just a few of the things that could provide story ideas. Depending on your goal or purpose in telling the story, your story might be about hope, new beginnings, a lesson learned the hard way, or a change of heart.

Common writing advice is "write what you know," but feel free to write about what you want to explore. You might want to write about what it would be like to live in a very different place or in a different type of family. You might want to write about something you are passionate about, something that intrigues or puzzles you, or something that you've always wanted to do or learn about. Think about an issue, topic, or event that you'd like to research for your nonfiction project—it can be

anything that interests you. Once you have an idea in mind, think about how to use an element of this topic in your creative writing. It should play a significant role.

Active Reading

Reading can help you become a better writer. But have you ever read something and then afterward couldn't remember what you read? *How* you read determines how fully you grasp what you are reading and how much benefit you'll get from it in terms of improving your own writing skills.

Passive reading happens when a reader is not engaged but instead is simply reading the words without analyzing them. The depth of understanding is minimal. Active reading means the reader is engaged with the material, asking questions, looking deeply, and making discoveries.

But what are the specifics of active reading? How is it done? Here are some things an active reader might notice.

- **Plot:** What happens in the book? What is the story about? How does one incident lead to the next?
- **Setting:** Where and when does the story take place? How does the setting affect the characters and plot?
- **Character development:** What are the main character's strengths and weaknesses? How does the main character change over the course of the story? What causes this change?
- **Point of view:** Who is telling the story? How does the personality of the viewpoint character color how the story is told?
- **Language and tone:** How would you describe the author's writing style? Is the language formal or informal? Is the tone humorous or serious? Is it full of emotion or matter-of-fact?
- **Underlying theme:** Is there a main story thread? What has the main character learned from their experiences? What have you learned from reading the book?

Keeping these questions in mind as you read will make reading more meaningful and more enjoyable.

Reading

1. Read or watch a story from an indigenous culture. Choose one or more of the 12 short films in the following collection or find a children's picture book in the folktales section of the library (found in section 398 of the Dewey Decimal System).

“Animating the Mother Tongue: An Indigenous Language Playlist”

folklife.si.edu/magazine/mother-tongue-indigenous-language-animation

2. Write a summary of the story you have chosen (one to three sentences). Include the title and the director or author. In your summary, focus on the story's theme and key elements rather than specific details. Include your thoughts on the power of the story. What role might it serve for those who tell the story and/or those who listen to it?

The Writer's Craft

Show, Don't Tell

Descriptive writing allows a writer to paint a picture with words. Using specific and vivid details helps the reader understand what is happening without having to be told. This “show, don't tell” technique draws the reader into the story and lets them envision it unfolding in their mind like a movie on a screen. By revealing specific physical traits, body language, actions, and setting details, a writer can create a story that feels more authentic and powerful.

So, what is the difference between showing and telling? Here are some examples.

TELL	SHOW
She was upset.	She was scowling at her cell phone and texting furiously. (“Meet Cute” by Malinda Lo, <i>Fresh Ink</i>)
It was cold and rainy.	The column [of soldiers] in the roadway was ankle-deep in mud. The men swore piously at the rain which drizzled upon them, compelling them to stand always very erect in fear of the drop that would sweep in under their coat-collars. The fog was cold as wet cloths. (“The Little Regiment” by Stephen Crane, <i>The Oxford Book of American Short Stories</i>)
A truck came racing up recklessly.	A truck slid around the corner, horn blaring, rear end sashaying . . . The truck jumped the curb and kept coming, half on the street and half on the sidewalk. (“Hunters in the Snow” by Tobias Wolff, <i>The Oxford Book of American Short Stories</i>)
Two men saw the girl drown. They rescued her and brought her back to life.	Two men saw the boat tip, saw her struggle in the waves. They rowed over to the place she went down, and jumped in. When they dragged her over the gunwales, she was cold to the touch and stiff, so they slapped her face, shook her by the heels, worked her arms back and forth, and pounded her back until she coughed up lake water. She shivered all over like a dog, then took a breath. (“Fleur” by Louise Erdrich, <i>The Oxford Book of American Short Stories</i>)

TELL	SHOW
I shot him dead.	<p>Something darker than him, like the wings of a bird, spread on his back and pulled him down. He climbed up once, like a man under bad claws, and just like blood could weigh a ton he walked with it on his back to better light. Didn't get no further than his door. And fell to stay.</p> <p>He was down. He was down, and a ton load of bricks on his back wouldn't have laid any heavier. ("Where Is the Voice Coming From?" by Eudora Welty, <i>The Oxford Book of American Short Stories</i>)</p>

It usually takes a lot more words to show rather than tell what is happening, but the result is a richer and more meaningful reading experience.

Usually “show, don't tell” applies to creative writing, but some forms of nonfiction benefit from the technique as well. For instance, if a writer is presenting a persuasive article in favor of providing additional funding to schools, they might include a description that shows the condition of the cafeteria or computer lab. Showing the condition of these areas—cracked linoleum on the floor, peeling paint on the window ledges, electrical outlets that are crowded with multiple power strips, and students waiting in line for their turn on the few computers available—would have a greater impact than just saying the facilities need updating. *Showing* lets the reader form their own opinions, based on the observational evidence presented, rather than just being told what to think.

Writing

1. Is there a story that has had a powerful impact on you? It can be a story from a book or movie, or a story you heard someone tell. If so, write a few sentences reflecting on your experience. Alternately, you can ask someone to tell you about a story that has influenced them and write a few sentences about that.
2. A vignette (pronounced vin-YET) is a short piece of writing that captures a specific incident or moment in time. In a vignette, a writer uses well-chosen details to illuminate a pivotal encounter or reveal something important. Vignettes use the “show, don't tell” technique to create a vivid picture. (See “The Writer's Craft” for more information.)

Choose one of the following options to write a vignette of 1–2 pages (around 400–800 words).

- a. Write a vignette that features a well-known story, such as a classic movie or fairy tale, but give it a twist. Stay in keeping with the story's theme. For instance, one theme of Cinderella is that virtue wins in the end—Cinderella is kind despite her desperate circumstances and finds true love. In keeping with this theme, you might set the story in modern times and have the main character overcome bullying using kindness and succeed in achieving her dreams. Once you have envisioned your new take on the story, choose one pivotal scene in the new story line to describe in a vignette.
- b. Write a vignette that focuses on something that happened to you, but uses an alternate ending. Your scene should be based very loosely on a real event, but you have complete freedom to change the characters and details. (If you prefer to use a completely fictional event, that's fine too.) For inspiration, here is a list of possible scenarios:
 - Moving to a new place
 - Meeting someone for the first time
 - Helping someone in trouble
 - Confronting or being confronted by a friend or stranger
 - Facing a big decision
 - Facing a frightening situation
 - Taking a big risk

If you already have an idea of what your fiction and nonfiction topic will be in this course, feel free to write a vignette that you might be able to use later in your short story.

3. Think about what you'd like to write for your short story, which you'll be working on for the next eight weeks. Consider the story themes that interest you, and then brainstorm a few ideas for your short story. Write down anything that comes to mind. You don't need to add any details or know where the story will start or end yet. At this point, just write a list of possible story lines (plots). Aim for at least three ideas. They can all be related or be very different.

Your completed short story will be about 3,000–7,000 words (approximately 8–15 pages), so your plot should be fairly straightforward.

4. Take a few minutes to reflect on your current skills as a writer. Consider each statement carefully and check the box that best describes your feelings, then fill in the blank for the final statement. Be honest in your answers—you won't be graded on this. You will repeat this exercise later in the course.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I can express myself clearly in writing.					
I like the creative process of writing.					
I enjoy doing research and writing about what I've learned.					
Discussing my work with others helps me clarify my ideas.					
I benefit from constructive feedback from others.					
I incorporate feedback into my work to make it more expressive and effective.					
The revision process makes my writing stronger.					
Editing and proofreading make my writing stronger.					
I'm good at finding and correcting my mistakes during the editing and proofreading processes.					
Things I'd like to work on to improve my writing skills:					

Further Study

(All Further Study assignments are optional. Choose any that interest you.)

Choose a book that you really enjoyed reading. It can be a middle grade fiction book, young adult book, or any book that you know well. Begin rereading it to find out what the author did that made the book a success for you. If you don't have a favorite book, ask a friend, parent, or teacher what books they really liked and choose one based on their recommendations.

You will be using your chosen book in future Further Study assignments that you choose to complete.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher. Make sure each assignment is clearly labeled. Please proofread your work and make any corrections before submitting it for review. When you have submitted your work, notify your teacher, and then proceed to lesson 2.

If you have any questions about the lesson assignments or how to share your work, let your teacher know. If you would like to modify any of the assignments or activities (now or in the future), please consult with your teacher first.

Lesson

2

Who: Creating Characters Readers Care About

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Analyze how a character changes over the course of a story.
- Use specific details to create unique characters.
- Use dialogue to express unique character traits and the relationship between characters.

Before You Begin

Character Development

One of the first things a writer needs to figure out is who will be in their story. While a story idea might come to you before you have a character in mind, it is the character who will bring the story to life and give it meaning. An interesting main character is critical to the success of a story. Readers must really care about your character to stay interested in the story. Writers often spend a great deal of time on character development, creating elaborate background information (or backstory) about their characters. Most of these details never make it into the story, but by getting to know what the character wants, needs, fears, and can accomplish, the author can write a convincing story.

Because short stories are so brief, they usually only feature just a few characters. Your main character—the protagonist—is the focus of the story and the one who experiences the central conflict. The protagonist is the hero of the story, but they shouldn't be too perfect. They should feel real, like someone you know. Just as you have feelings, worries, and dreams, they should too, although theirs might be quite different than yours. The antagonist is the one who is getting in the way of the main character accomplishing their task. The antagonist will often feel human and relatable, with typical strengths and weaknesses, rather than being a quintessential villain. It can make the story more interesting if the antagonist is likable in some way. Likewise, it makes the story more interesting if the protagonist has

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read “Before You Begin” and “The Writer’s Craft.”
- Read a short story and answer questions about character development.
- Write a plot summary for your original short story.
- Create two character profiles.
- Write a dialogue between your two characters.

flaws. Sometimes a third character is used to support, guide, or motivate the main character, but the protagonist's actions are ultimately what solve the problem or overcome the challenge.

Revealing Character Traits

Recall some of your favorite characters from books or movies. What do you think made them so memorable? What did you like about the protagonist? What didn't you like? What did you like and dislike about the antagonist? Jot down some notes as you answer these questions. Analyzing how successful characters are portrayed can help you develop your own characters.

Next, spend some time thinking about your main character. How old is this character? What are they like? What are their likes and dislikes? What are their flaws or weaknesses? What kind of friend are they? What makes this person unique or interesting? What do they do best? Figuring out these details is part of creating a character sketch or character profile. You'll want to do this for each significant character in your story. Once you know your characters well, you will have a good sense of how each might talk, feel, act, and react. Below are some examples of how character traits can be revealed.

In "A White Heron" by Sarah Orne Jewett (*The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*), we are introduced to an extremely shy character:

. . . she hung her head as if the stem of it were broken, but managed to answer "Sylvy" with much effort when her companion again asked her name. (139)

In "Battle Royal" by Ralph Ellison (*The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*), we are shown a much more subtle character trait:

I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed. (442)

In *The Poet X*, author Elizabeth Acevedo combines physical and personality traits in one revealing description:

She's also little—like, for real petite—but carries herself big, know what I mean? Like she's used to shouldering her way through any assumptions made about her. (37)

Another way to help the reader get to know your characters and experience the story is by revealing emotions. In "Sonny's Blues" (*The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*), James Baldwin uses physical details to show what the main character is feeling after finding out his brother has been arrested:

A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins but it never got less. Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was going to choke or scream. (483)

You'll want to give a physical description of your characters to help the reader picture each one in their minds. This is usually done through someone else's eyes, although sometimes the character can reflect on their own looks. Here is a description from "The Sheriff's Children" by Charles Chesnutt (*The Oxford*

Book of American Short Stories) that gives a clear view of the character while revealing something of his nature as well:

He was a tall, muscular man, of a ruddier complexion than is usual among Southerners. A pair of keen, deep-set gray eyes looked out from under bushy eyebrows, and about his mouth was a masterful expression, which a full beard, once sandy in color, but now profusely sprinkled with gray, could not entirely conceal. (177–178)

Unique phrasing can help the reader get a sense of the inner character while viewing their outer self, as author Katharine McGee does in “Click” (*Meet Cute*) when the two main characters meet for the first time:

She was pretty in a wispy, ethereal way, with fair hair and eyes, and the sort of translucent skin that comes from spending too much time indoors, as if she were still reflecting the glow of her computer screen. A modern-day digital nymph. (74)

This description not only gives the reader a picture of the main character but also conveys the personality and sensibilities of the point-of-view character. (See below for more on point of view.)

When creating your characters, consider how they are like those around them and how they are different. You might have a character who has physical, mental, or emotional challenges. Perhaps they have dyslexia, are on the autism spectrum, use a wheelchair, or are dealing with depression. Your character’s challenges will be part of who they are, how they think and move, and how they see the world. Their challenges may have a strong impact on the plot.

Revealing Relationships

How characters react to one another is also important. The relationship between characters often influences how they act or what they do. In “Oomph” by Emery Lord (*Meet Cute*), the main character’s relationship with her father is revealed early in the first scene, and it gives us significant information about Cass:

I definitely blame whatever genetics wired my dad to be an Olympics-qualifying worrier.

“Hi again, Dad,” I say into the phone. My throat is relaxed, the pitch of my voice cheerful. I am the picture of not annoyed.

“I can hear you rolling your eyes, Cass.”

I throw one hand up in the air, though there’s no one with me to acknowledge my exasperation. And that—my aloneness—is exactly why he has already texted me four times since I got in the cab. Once was to make sure I was going to JFK, not LaGuardia. C’mon, Dad. New York is intimidating, but I do have basic capabilities.

“Cassidy. Are you there?”

Deep breath. I’m a trained actress, but it takes a toll, pretending I am fine for my parents when I am internally freaking out. (156–157)

Her father’s concern mirrors Cass’s own feelings about being alone in New York City, which play a key role in the story.

In “Somewhere That’s Green” by Meredith Russo (*Meet Cute*), Lexie’s sexual orientation (and her desire to keep it a secret) influences her relationship with her mother, which in turn influences her actions and how the plot unfolds:

“And you promise you won’t have sex?”

“Mom!” Lexie slapped her hands over her face and gasped, though not for the reason her mother probably assumed. “No, Mom. You know I’m not like that.” Her mom actually didn’t know the extent to which Lexie was “not like that,” and she hoped she never found out. (114)

The Character Arc

When we read a story, we want it to have a purpose. Things are not exactly the same at the end of the story as they were in the beginning. Something has changed, and often what changes is the main character.

Think about what will happen in your story. How will this affect your main character? This *character arc*—the internal change the character goes through as a result of what happens in the story—is an essential piece of storytelling. We are all changed by important experiences in our lives, hopefully for the better. How does your character change? What causes it? What has your character gained or lost by the end of the story? Let these ideas percolate in your mind as you start to develop your characters.

Point of View

Every story is told from a certain perspective. Who is the best character to tell your story? Sometimes the story is told as seen through the eyes of the main character, so the reader only knows what the main character sees or thinks, and sometimes an unnamed narrator tells the story from a more objective viewpoint, allowing the reader to see what every character is doing and thinking. This all comes down to point of view. Imagine, for instance, how different the story of Little Red Riding Hood would be if it were told from the point of view of the wolf.

Writing from a particular point of view (POV)—first person, second person, or third person—can have a big impact on the way the story is told and how the reader experiences it. Second-person point of view is rarely used in fiction, but let’s take a closer look at first-person and third-person perspectives.



Like people, each character has their own unique perspective. Whose viewpoint will you use to tell your story? (Image credit: Pxfuel)

First-Person Perspective

First-person perspective can feel very personal because the narrator is telling the story directly, using pronouns such as *I*, *me*, *we*, and *my*.

Here is an example of writing in the first person:

When I walked into the room, everyone stared at me. I suddenly wondered if I had remembered to zip up my pants.

Sometimes first-person writing feels so personal that the reader feels like the author is telling their own story rather than a fictional one.

Writing in first-person perspective means you can only reveal what the POV character sees, hears, or feels. Look at this example:

I was so angry, I had to look away from him. He rolled his eyes at me while my back was turned.

There is no way the first-person narrator, who had looked away, could have known the other character rolled his eyes. The narrator would have to see the eye-rolling in a reflective surface (a mirror, window, or blank TV screen, for instance) for that to be realistic and consistent with the first-person viewpoint.

Third-Person Perspective

Third-person writing uses a more objective point of view, using pronouns such as *he*, *she*, and *they*. Most fiction is written in third-person perspective, so this format will probably feel very familiar to you.

There are two main types of third-person writing: limited and omniscient.

Third-person limited perspective is the most common point of view used in fiction writing because it feels personal while maintaining an objective distance. The story is told as seen through the eyes of one character at a time, and the narrator describes the experiences, feelings, and thoughts from that single perspective, which allows the reader to feel very involved in the character's life. As the character's inner thoughts and feelings are revealed, the reader gets to know the character and care about what happens to them. What other characters are doing when the main character is not present are not revealed; the thoughts and actions of other characters are only revealed if the viewpoint character sees, hears, or finds out about them. Usually an author will choose one viewpoint character, but third-person limited perspective can have two or more viewpoint characters by dividing the text based on who is telling the story. Usually either the character's name will be listed in title format when the viewpoint changes or the POV switch will happen at the beginning of a new chapter.

Here is an example of third-person limited point of view:

When Jesse arrived home an hour after curfew, he braced himself for trouble. He could tell his mom was upset even though she didn't say a word. She had that pinched look around her mouth and was rubbing her forehead as though trying to erase the worry lines there. He had seen that look before, and it didn't bode well.

The POV character (Jesse) is revealing what he experiences, which includes the clues he's picking up about how another character (his mom) is feeling. Readers don't really know what his mom is upset

about, but we can see that she's upset, and we assume it's because her child came home after curfew. (This is a great place to throw in an unexpected *plot twist*, such as revealing that she's upset about something else entirely and is about to break the bad news to Jesse.) You can reveal a lot about others using third-person limited perspective while still maintaining an intimate sense of the main character.

Third-person omniscient perspective can give the writer the most flexibility since the narrator is all-seeing, able to look into the hearts and minds of every character as well as see things that the characters can't, such as danger lurking around a corner. This omniscient viewpoint gives the reader a very wide perspective rather than focusing narrowly on one character. It can be very useful when telling a complex story. Third-person omniscient perspective differs from third-person limited perspective in that the omniscient narrator can see everywhere at once while the third-person limited narrator can only see what is happening from one character's viewpoint. An omniscient narrator can reveal the inner experience of multiple characters in a single scene; a third-person limited narrator can only reveal the inner experience of the viewpoint character.

Here's an example of third-person omniscient perspective:

Ramon opened the door and stumbled back when everyone jumped out and yelled, "Surprise!" His heart pumped into overdrive, and he nearly slammed the door and ran away. But instead, he took a deep breath, swore quietly, and stepped into the room with a smile. His friends laughed and clapped one another on the back, delighted with themselves for arranging the surprise party.

Isabella wove through the crowd, batting away balloons as she made her way toward the door. She could tell Ramon had nearly run away, just like she thought he would. She was proud of him for facing the unexpected crowd. She threw her arms around Ramon when she reached him, and said, "Happy birthday, little brother."

Using the omniscient point of view, the reader can experience this surprise birthday party scene from more than one angle and get to know the feelings and thoughts of Ramon, Isabella, and the crowd, all of whose experiences of the scene are very different. Notice how the switch between major viewpoint characters is signaled by a new paragraph; this helps the reader recognize that they are now seeing the story through someone else's eyes.

Switching back and forth between the thoughts and actions of several characters, however, is a tricky technique to master. Writers must work hard to keep the scenes from becoming disjointed. Readers may have a hard time identifying with more than one character at a time, so they tend to distance themselves from the story and read it more objectively rather than be fully drawn into it. For this reason, many writers choose the third-person limited point of view to tell their story and help readers really care about their main character.

Past and Present Tense

When writing fiction, you have to decide if you want to write your story in the present tense or in the past tense. This is another choice related to perspective: Will you tell the story from the perspective of

things unfolding as the reader turns each page (present tense) or from the perspective of something that has already happened (past tense)?

Most stories are told in the past tense, and this is a familiar and effective way to tell a story. It follows the tradition of “Once upon a time . . .” tales where the storyteller is relating events that took place in the past. This is comfortable because it’s easy to believe—in real life, recounting an adventure happens after it is over, not while you are in the middle of it.

Writing in the present tense is a way to give your story an added feeling of tension, immediacy, and excitement. It can help readers feel like they are watching things unfold in the moment. The reader feels like they are part of the adventure, finding out things at the same time the main character does.

Whether you write using past or present tense, it’s important to keep the verb tenses consistent. Make your choice and stick with it. Read the following passage:

Pearl leaped over the widening crack and ran across the shaking ground. She debates pulling out her phone. *No time to take a video*, she thinks. Pearl headed for the trailer used by the seismologists, eager to see what the quake measured.

Can you feel how the frequent shifts between past and present tense make it confusing?

Here’s the same passage written in past tense:

Pearl leaped over the widening crack and ran across the shaking ground. She debated pulling out her phone. *No time to take a video*, she thought. Pearl headed for the trailer used by the seismologists, eager to see what the quake measured.

Here it is again, in present tense:

Pearl leaps over the widening crack and runs across the shaking ground. She debates pulling out her phone. *No time to take a video*, she thinks. Pearl heads for the trailer used by the seismologists, eager to see what the quake measured.

Think about the different feel of storytelling in the present or past tense. Are you drawn to one style or the other? Which would better serve your story? For instance, an action-oriented story might benefit from being told in the present tense, while a more introspective or relationship-driven story might benefit from being told in the past tense.

Purposeful Dialogue

Almost all stories contain dialogue, conversations between the characters in the story. Dialogue should always serve a purpose. It can provide information about the characters’ opinions or emotions, show relationships between characters, explain circumstances, describe actions or plans, reveal motivations, or serve any other purpose that directly relates to the progression of the plot. When writing dialogue, each line needs to matter and contribute to the story.

Dialogue should resemble the natural speech of each character. Letting your characters speak in their own voices gives you a chance to reveal their personalities and backstory every time they open their mouths. Consider the following five characters, each asking for a glass of water at a restaurant:

Character 1: “Could I . . . uh, have a glass of water, please? If it’s . . . uh, not too much trouble?”

Character 2: “Gimme some water now! I’ve already asked you twice, and I’m sick of waiting.”

Character 3: “I’d like a glass of water with two slices of lemon on the side, no ice, and a straw.”

Character 4: “Bottled water. Voss Artesian, if you have it.”

Character 5: “I’m super thirsty! We’ve been out hiking all morning, and I forgot my water bottle because the cat threw up on my bag just as I was leaving, so I switched bags at the last minute but forgot my water because it was in the little side pocket. I was dying of thirst by the time we got back to the trailhead, and I’m desperate now! Can you bring me some water? And hey, just leave the whole pitcher!”

It’s easy to get a strong sense about a character by the way they speak and what they say. For instance, character 1 is shy and lacks confidence, and character 2 is aggressive and impatient. Creating dialogue that matches the character’s personality is a great way to show who they are instead of telling the reader what they are like. As a writer, you can use dialogue to your advantage.

In writing conversation or dialogue, make a new paragraph each time there is a different speaker. It’s also important to make it clear who is speaking. In general, writing he/she/they said works well most of the time—readers don’t even notice these phrases, so the flow of the story isn’t interrupted. However, sometimes you’ll want to use descriptive and active verbs to convey how something is said, which adds flavor and energy to the scene. Here’s an example:

“Time to leave!” yelled Mom.

Kit grumbled, “I’m not ready.”

Jake complained, “My foot still hurts.”

Mom gave them her patented mom-look. “Time. To. Leave.”

You’ll notice that the last example doesn’t actually state that Mom is the one speaking, but it is clearly implied. Remember, if you can show how a character is feeling by their body language or the words they say, that is better than coming right out and saying they were impatient or grumpy.

Story dialogue should sound realistic but have a purpose instead of just being casual chitchat. Every time a character opens their mouth, we should learn something new about the character, plot, setting, motivation, etc. Plot and character development often intersect in dialogue, as they do in this passage from “Why I Learned to Cook” by Sara Farizan (*Fresh Ink*):

“You don’t apologize for who you are. I’m an old lady now and perhaps that doesn’t mean much in the world we live in, but I exist and I shouldn’t have to be sorry for that. As a woman, you have to know that. Don’t ever apologize for who you are,” she said.

I nodded and held her hand. It was wrinkled but soft and smaller than mine. I kissed the back of it.

“You’re right,” I said. (94)

The grandmother’s statement is about what was happening in the moment (they were at the grocery store and someone was impatient at the old woman’s slowness), but it also directly relates to the story theme and the main character’s journey of connecting with her heritage and finding her own identity.

You can see the same purposeful dialogue in “One Voice: A Something In-Between Story” by Melissa de la Cruz (*Fresh Ink*), when the main character is talking about what it is like to walk alone at night across campus as a female student of color:

“I wouldn’t have been thinking about anything except for my safety. I would have been tracking each of those blue emergency phones across the quad, calculating just how far I would have to run to reach one if someone were to attack me.” (139)

Her personal journey directly relates to how racism impacts her life. The specific details she uses help us understand her experience much more fully than if she had just said, “I don’t feel safe on campus.” Powerful dialogue does multiple things at once.

Reading

Every story you read has the potential to help you become a better writer. In the next eight weeks, you will be reading selections from *Meet Cute*. This will help you become familiar with the short story format and give you a wide variety of writing styles to examine. As you read each story, notice what works and what doesn’t. Think about how you can use this knowledge to make your writing more effective.

1. Read the following short story:
 - “The Unlikely Likelihood of Falling in Love” by Jocelyn Davies (*Meet Cute*)
2. Answer the following questions.
 - a. Who is the story’s narrator? What point of view does the writer use (first person, third-person limited, or third-person omniscient)? Is the story told in past or present tense? Do you feel these author choices benefited the story?
 - b. What role did each main character have in how the plot unfolded? How did their actions, attitudes, goals, or personalities influence that happened?
 - c. Did the main character change over the course of the story? If so, how?

The Writer's Craft

Narrator Voice

Who will tell your story? Who is the narrator? Perhaps you have read a book in which the narrator's voice is distinct and adds a unique flavor to the story.

Let's look at some examples.

"Don't Pass Me By" by Eric Gansworth (*Fresh Ink*)

. . . I'd failed kindergarten. When you screw up Taking a Nap and Playing with Finger Paint, no one forgets. (39)

"The Unlikely Likelihood of Falling in Love" by Jocelyn Davies (*Meet Cute*)

It was one of those days when things just kind of clicked. I didn't hit the snooze button on my alarm; my sister, Aviva, didn't take forever in the bathroom (how much mascara does one really need to wear in seventh grade?); and my well-meaning parents (who are deluded enough to think they're pretty cool for parents) didn't attempt to engage me in time-consuming lines of questioning like, "Did you download the new Weekend Warrior album?" (no one downloads albums anymore, *Dad*) and "What did you do to your hair?" (I slept on it, okay??). The line at Brooklyn Bagels wasn't too long. My bagel was crisp on the outside, doughy on the inside, the cream cheese was evenly and sparingly applied (no messy globs that get all over your face and hands), and my peach Snapple was cold and sweet.

. . . There I was, taking a perfect sip of iced tea as the perfect sun rose over my perfect city, a city I love, a city that, for once, had conspired to get me to school on time, and I was leaning against the door (I refuse to sit on the subway ever since the incident with the old man who wasn't wearing any pants), looking out the window toward the Statue of Liberty, experiencing the first glimmer of that end-of-school-year feeling, that spring lightness in the air, like fresh laundry. (195–196)

"259 Million Miles" by Kass Morgan (*Meet Cute*)

I check in with the cheerful receptionist bot at the front desk, then turn around and freeze, unsure where to go. The first cluster of armchairs is way too near the couch. It'd be creepy to sit that close to the girl. But the other cluster is too far away. It would seem like I'm purposefully avoiding her.

I shift my weight from side to side. I have to make a decision. Just standing here like this is even weirder. Quickly, I lower myself into the farthest of the closer chairs, then pull out my tablet so the girl knows I'm not going to try to make conversation.

She doesn't look up, and I let out a sigh of relief. It's fine. I'm fine. (219)

“Where Is the Voice Coming From?” by Eudora Welty (*The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*)

I ain't ask no Governor Barnett to give me one thing. Unless he wants to give me a pat on the back for the trouble I took this morning. But he don't have to if he don't want to. I done what I done for my own pure-D satisfaction. (397)

You might notice that all of these are written in first-person perspective. It's especially important for a story written in first person to have a strong, distinct voice. However, using third-person limited perspective also gives you a chance to convey the personality of the POV narrator (or multiple narrators). “Somewhere That's Green” uses third-person limited perspective with an alternating point of view, and each has a distinctive voice.

Lexie: She hadn't known Nia was auditioning. It hadn't occurred to her that a transgender would want to be in a musical, though now that she thought about it she felt a little reflexive wave of embarrassment because obviously they were people, right? With the same ambitions as everyone else? (111)

Nia: Nia reached over without taking her eyes off the road and flipped Lucian's newsie cap into the backseat, too frustrated to laugh at his screech of protest. She'd been shocked when Lucian had admitted that he and Lexie were friendly—she noticed he used the word *friendly* instead of *friends*, as if testing the waters. She knew Lucian had other friends, that obviously they didn't spend every second of every day together and he talked to other people . . . but still, the idea that he'd spent time with that Lexie girl felt like a betrayal. And now they were in a freaking musical together. (115–116)

Through Lexie's narration, you can sense her hesitancy, her social anxiety, as she questions her own opinions as though she's not quite sure of herself. Nia's narration has a very different tone, and you can feel her strong emotions and her outer toughness that covers her inner turmoil.

It may take some time to solidify your narrator's voice. Don't worry. The more you get to know your POV character, the easier it will become. You'll find yourself writing in their voice as you get into their head and develop a sense of how they would tell the story to a friend (the reader).

Writing

You will be diving into your short story in this lesson and completing it in eight weeks. Each week, you will work on a different aspect of the story. If you feel yourself getting stuck on an element, such as deciding who your main character will be or where the story will be set, it might help to remember that this is just one story of many that you might write in your life. Use this story to experiment. Choose any type of character or setting and see where it takes you! You might be surprised at what you find yourself coming up with when you let your imagination take over and don't overthink things too much.

At each stage of writing, it can be extremely helpful to discuss your ideas with someone. This is an excellent way to help you sort through your ideas, firm up your choices, and brainstorm how the story will progress. Many writers join or form a writing group for this purpose. Feel free to talk to your teacher about meeting with other students to talk about your writing projects.

1. Choose one of your story ideas (from lesson 1, assignment #3) as the focus of your short story. Write a one- to three-sentence summary of the plot. This is just your starting point and may change as you work on your story.
2. Who will be in your story? Write character profiles for two main characters in your story. Include a brief description of the character arc for your main character, explaining how they change as a result of what happens in the story. You can use the Character Profile Chart at the end of this lesson, make your own list, or describe your characters by writing a paragraph about each one. In addition, you can draw or paint your character to get a clearer picture of who they are.
3. Write a scene of dialogue between the two characters you have described. The dialogue should reveal their individual personalities as well as their relationship. The dialogue can happen in person, on the phone, via text, or by any other communication method. You don't have to include setting details or action. Use their conversation to convey something specific about each character, based on their profiles.

Further Study

(All Further Study assignments are optional.)

Think about the favorite book you chose in the Further Study section of lesson 1. Who is the main character? Can you write a description of this person without referring to the book? What was memorable about them? Try to write a physical description as well as a description of their personal attributes, style, personality, and skill set.

Afterward, look through the book and try to identify where and how the author conveyed this information.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you are ready, share your work with your teacher, and include any questions you might have. Notify your teacher when your work is ready to be reviewed, and then continue to the next lesson.

You can use the assignment checklist found at the beginning of each lesson to keep track of what you've finished and what still needs to be done; just check off each assignment as you complete it.

Character Profile Chart

	Character 1 Name:	Character 2 Name:
What is their greatest strength?		
What are they afraid of or insecure about?		
What is their goal?		
What five adjectives describe them best?		
What are their quirks?		
What are they really good at?		
What do they like to do for fun?		
What relationship do they have with their family?		
What makes them angry?		
What makes them happy?		
How do they like to spend their time?		
What is their age, gender, ethnic or cultural identity, religion, or sexual orientation?		
What do they look like?		
How do they change by the end of the story? (character arc)		

Lesson

6

Putting It All Together

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify successful story elements and make suggestions for improvement.
- Elaborate on scene summaries to create fully realized scenes.
- Connect scenes to create a rough draft of a short story.

Before You Begin

Writing a Rough Draft

You've created your characters and gotten to know how they talk, think, and act. You know what motivates them and how they'll change over the course of the story. You've developed your plot, created a story problem, and added obstacles that your main character will face. You know how your story will begin and have identified the key elements. You have envisioned a setting and understand what impact it will have on your characters and plot.

You've planned and mapped your story. You are well prepared. Now you are ready to write!

How you write your story is up to you. Below are some guidelines to consider as you express your creativity in story form.

In your opening scene, establish the point of view and narrator's voice while orienting your reader to your story world (time, place, and setting). Establish the story problem or goal early. Show your main character's reason for wanting to pursue the goal or solve the problem.

While some stories mainly take place inside the main character's head, such as when they wrestle with an ethical or emotional decision, the majority of stories include action because, as human beings, we often have to act to accomplish our goals. Give your characters interesting and important things to do. Show them actively living their story, chasing their dreams, solving their problems. Physical action adds excitement and a sense of immediacy. It helps the reader see the story unfolding like a movie in their head. Having your characters *do* things is just as important as having them say or think things.

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read "Before You Begin" and "The Writer's Craft."
- Read a short story and give your opinion on what worked and what didn't.
- Write a rough draft of your short story.
- Share your story with two readers.



Sometimes characters have to face their fears to accomplish their goals. What will your character do?
(Image credit: Pxfuel)

Remember, dialogue and action in a story need to have a purpose—they need to move the story forward. If a character walks into a room, they must have a good reason for doing so; it can't just be because they need to be there for the next scene. Just as you wouldn't normally wander around your house for no reason, your characters shouldn't wander without purpose throughout your story.

As you unfold the sequence of events that form the main bulk of your story, connect each scene so that what comes first influences what comes later. Make sure your conclusion directly relates to the character's goal and personal journey. One of the tricky parts of writing a story is knowing when to end it. It's easy for a story to go on and on; after all, we keep living our lives after important goals have been accomplished. But this is a story, and it needs a definite beginning, middle, and end. This is where your prewriting planning comes in handy. Use your outline, story map, and list of scenes to keep you from getting off track. Keep in mind how your story will end, and make sure your characters are moving toward that point with purpose.

These are all elements that you've carefully considered and planned for. In your rough draft, you'll bring them all to life in a cohesive way.

As you write, just let the words flow without judgment. Your rough draft will not be perfect so don't try to make it your best writing. That's what the revision phase is for. When writing the rough draft,

embrace the necessary imperfections. Your goal is simply to write a complete story, putting all the important pieces into place. Resist the temptation to go back and fix something or read what you've just written. Just keep moving forward. There is a good reason that you have one week to write your rough draft but will have two weeks to revise and polish it. Your goal this week is to get the whole story written down. There will be plenty of time to fix things later. For now, just write!

Reading

Your main focus this week will be writing your rough draft. If you need extra time for writing, you can skip the reading assignments below.

1. Read the following short story:
 - “259 Million Miles” by Kass Morgan (*Meet Cute*)
2. Write one or two sentences for each question, or discuss your responses with your teacher.
 - a. What did you like about this story?
 - b. What didn't you like? What would you change if you could?

The Writer's Craft

ABC Story Checklist

A story checklist can be used before writing the rough draft or during the revision process. Every story doesn't need to include every element, but all are worth considering as you create your story. How might each element enhance your story? How might it appear?

For future writing projects or as a writing exercise, this story checklist can be used over the course of 26 days (focusing on one element a day) or over the course of 6 months (focusing on one element a week). Feel free to add your own prompts and expand on this story checklist.

This week, you might like to pick three elements from the list below to think about as you write your rough draft.

A	Attributes	What attributes do your characters have that differentiate and define them?
B	Beauty	What is the element of beauty or truth in this story?
C	Culture	We are all impacted by the culture we live in and our cultural heritage. How does this impact your characters and the events of the story?

D	Drive	What is driving each character? What is their motivation? How is this expressed?
E	Emotion	Our emotions are constantly shifting in relation to what is happening around us and within us. How are your characters' emotions expressed in gestures, facial expressions, body language, and speech?
F	Faces	What do your characters look like? Have you described their physical attributes clearly enough for readers to create a strong picture in their minds?
G	Goal	The main character must really care about something. What is your character seeking? What do they want most in their life?
H	Highs and lows	What are the highs and lows of the story? The obstacles and victories form the shape of the novel. Does your narrative arc keep the tension mounting?
I	Intersection	How do people, objects, ideas, and events meet, collide, and connect in your story?
J	Justification	How do your characters justify their actions? Each character needs a reason for acting as they do.
K	Kid	What was your main character like as a kid? How have their childhood experiences or upbringing influenced the person they are now?
L	Lifestyle	How does your character live? What do they value? How is that reflected in their lifestyle?
M	Mastery	What is your character good at? What skills or abilities do they have that might benefit them in their quest?
N	Nurture	Everyone needs nurturing support of some kind. Who supports your character? What do they do when they need a break from the world? How do they calm down when they are upset?
O	Opening hook	Where does your story begin? Put some thought into how to hook your reader with the first page, the first paragraph, and the first line.
P	Pace	How does your story handle time? Does it happen over the course of a year or all in one hour? Are the main story events spaced out over the story?
Q	Quirks	What quirks do your characters have? Quirks make characters feel more real. Quirks can be rooted in physical, mental, or emotional needs, and can manifest physically, mentally, or emotionally.
R	Representation	Who is included in the story? What groups do they represent? Who is left out? How do these decisions affect your story?

S	Setting	Have you crafted a setting that is believable? Have you described it fully enough for your readers to have a clear mental picture? Have you anchored your story in time and space?
T	Takeaway	What will your reader take away from this story? What is the overall message or theme? What will stick with the reader long after the story is over?
U	Unusual	Every person and every story is unique. In what ways are your characters alike, and how are they unique? What unusual events happen in the story?
V	Voice	How does each character speak? People talk in many different ways, using different vocabularies and speaking styles. Your characters shouldn't all sound the same. The way someone speaks reveals something about who they are.
W	World-building	What world do your characters inhabit? How is your story world like the world you inhabit? How is it different? How do you show this?
X	eXcitement	Where is the tension or excitement in your story? How does the excitement build? When does it come to a climax? How does it resolve?
Y	Yesterday	Every character has a backstory. How have past events impacted the main character and led to the unfolding story line? Make sure the reader has enough backstory to put the character's motivation, goals, and challenges in context.
Z	Zebra	If a zebra walked across the room you are in right now, it would surprise you. What is the zebra in your story? What is really going to make your readers pay attention? It could be something like a secret kept or revealed, a risk or big decision, an unexpected or extreme emotional response, a daunting challenge, or overwhelming temptation. How will you surprise your reader?

Writing

1. Write a rough draft of your story. You have one week. Given how much preparation you have done, you are well prepared to write your story. Using your scene summaries, begin with your first scene, and write it in full detail, showing a comprehensive picture of what happens. Move on to the next scene, and systematically work through the story, scene by scene.

Add as much detail as you like so the reader can picture it fully. Don't worry that you are adding too much detail. It's better to add everything you might want to include now and then refine it later than to write sparingly now and have to add new content during the revision phase.

Take a deep breath, let it out slowly, and begin. Don't worry about how good your story is or whether people will like it. Just write.

2. Once you have completed your rough draft, write a brief cover letter that identifies which areas of the story work well, and others that need improvement.

Share your rough draft and cover letter with your teacher and at least one other person. Let them know your story is a work in progress and that you are looking for feedback on how it flows and holds together. Ask them to note what works well and where they have questions or confusion.

Once you hand off your rough draft to your first readers, take a break from it. This lets you come back to it with fresh eyes when you begin the revision process in the next lesson.

Further Study

It's time to put down your favorite book, and focus on writing your own story. Who knows? It might become someone else's favorite book one day!

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher. By now, you probably have a good system for organizing, labeling, and submitting your work. If you would like suggestions on how to make the process go more smoothly, please talk to your teacher.

Lesson

14

Getting the Whole Story

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Organize research content into a structure that supports the purpose of the text.
- Identify where more detailed information or additional research is needed.
- Locate or create relevant graphics to support the text.

Before You Begin

Structuring Your Piece

Now that you have gathered detailed research notes, you are ready to create an outline that defines the scope of your project. Up until now, you have probably been casting your net wide, collecting information on related topics and experiences. Now it's time to see what you have and decide what to focus on.

First, take a moment to recall your target audience and the purpose of your piece. These can act as guideposts as you decide what to include in your piece, what to emphasize, and what to leave out.

You can approach the sorting, organizing, and prioritizing of information in any way that works for you. If you have copious notes, it might be helpful to first scan the notes and identify ones you know you want to use. This is particularly useful if you have a transcribed interview—it's important to home in on the quotes that are the most expressive, revealing, insightful, or whatever you are looking for. After you have identified the content that you are certain about, you can sort the rest in order of priority. When you add it to your outline, this priority sequence can help you determine what gets included and what gets left out. While all of your research was beneficial in helping you gain a comprehensive understanding of your topic, not all of it will make it into the final piece.

Sometimes a writer begins a research project with one idea in mind, but that idea morphs into another as the topic is explored. Maybe you started by looking at the mechanics of swimming, but your

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

- Read “Before You Begin” and “The Writer’s Craft.”
- Read pages 144–148 and 155–160 in *The Art of Creative Research*.
- Create an outline for your nonfiction writing project.
- Add research notes to your outline and conduct additional research as needed.
- Add graphics to supplement your project.

research led you to learn about open water swimming and the early attempts to swim across the English Channel. If you find you have a lot of rich material on swimming the Channel, you might choose to focus on that for your project.

Think back to creating a story map in lesson 5. Just as a plot might not unfold in a straight line, you are free to structure your nonfiction project in any way that serves your purpose. For instance, for a piece about swimming the English Channel, you might begin with some details about the width, depth, temperature, shoreline, and boating traffic of the Channel to set the scene, then segue into early attempts to swim across, and then end with modern-day swimmers attempting the crossing. Or you could begin by describing a modern-day swimmer mid-swim, with their support crew, technology, and specialized gear, then contrast that to early swimmers, sprinkling in details related to Channel statistics to put things into perspective. How you shape your piece is up to you. Just as with fiction writing, your goal is to grab your reader's attention and keep them eagerly turning the pages. How can you tell this true story in the most engaging way?

As you organize your notes and devise a structure for your piece, you will begin ordering your research notes in the correct sequence. Use your outline as the structure, and start adding notes under each heading and subheading. If you aren't sure where a particular piece of information might fit best, you can set it aside. Once everything else is in place, you can look at the leftovers and see if you can use them. If not, you can save them for a future project. Don't delete any notes—you never know when they might come in handy.

Fair and Balanced Treatment of the Topic

A nonfiction piece of writing is not always objective. In fact, the goal of the piece may be to persuade the reader's opinion or argue for or against something. Editorials are a good example of nonfiction writing that takes a strong stance and presents factual information that supports that stance.

For most types of nonfiction, however, you will want to present your topic in a fair and balanced way. This is particularly relevant if your topic is controversial. If you are writing about renewable energy, you'll want to present the pros and cons of each type instead of just talking about the benefits. If you have interviewed a director of a nonprofit that advocates for better services for unsheltered people, you might want to balance that by contacting a city council member who voted against a measure supported by the nonprofit to hear their reasoning.

Be aware of how your tone and word choice can show your bias. For instance, an article that uses emotional adjectives (such as "devastating decision" or "gleeful relief") or judgmental terms (such as "complaining critics" or "naysayers") is designed to sway public opinion. An article with careful wording that avoids judgment or favoritism is likely trying to inform the public without revealing an opinion one way or the other. To present a balanced treatment of the topic, include the ideas and concerns of each side, use respectful language and neutral labels, and avoid emotionally laden modifiers.

Even noncontroversial topics can be explored in a way that gives the reader the full picture instead of just a single perspective. This leaves the reader free to form their own opinions or views of the topic.

For instance, if you are reporting on a local Renaissance fair, you might have a keen interest in the metalworkers who make swords and armor, but you'd also want to learn about and describe other craftspeople as well as the food, costumes, jousting, children's activities, and music.

All writers have biases. Sometimes these are in full display in their writing, but often it is the writer's job to present information in a way that doesn't take sides. The details that you choose to include, the order in which you present the information, the tone you use, the quotes you choose, and so many other decisions should serve the purpose of your piece rather than your own personal agenda or views. Sometimes the best thing a writer can do is approach a topic as a novice, absorbing everything without judgment. When you write your piece, the purpose of the writing will inform how objectively, subjectively, or persuasively it is presented.

Following up with New Sources

Once all your research notes are put into place in the outline, you will start to see gaps or places where more information is needed. Do you need to define terms or include a diagram? Are there insufficient facts to support a particular argument? Do you need more examples of a concept, photos of an event, or quotations from your interview subject? Your outline will show what's still missing. This will guide your final research tasks.

Sometimes you will revisit your sources to collect more information, but often you'll need to locate new sources. Since you know more about your topic at this point, it is likely your search will be much more targeted now. It might reveal more specialized information, which will help you fill the gaps, add authentic detail or relevant background information, or present a more balanced and comprehensive picture. Remember to keep track of new sources and add them to your works cited page.

This is an excellent time to interview one or more additional sources, do some fieldwork, or participate in another activity. Your greater knowledge of the topic can result in a more successful experience. For instance, if the person you interviewed last week for a piece on female pilots talked about a small airstrip nearby where she got her start, you might plan a visit and try to talk to her former flight instructor or another female pilot who is just learning to fly. This type of follow-up research can provide richness and added dimension to your piece.

As Gerard notes in *The Art of Creative Research*:

There is just no substitute for being there—where *there* is for your project. Some of the *theres* have included a mansion in Stratford-on-Avon where secret special troops trained during World War II; a legal distillery run by an old-time bootlegger in the North Carolina Piedmont and a not-so-legal still site run by another; a clothing factory in China where workers happily stitched into sweaters and T-shirts labels that read “made in the U.S.A.”; a country churchyard in North Carolina where lies buried a rural schoolmaster who died claiming to be a Napoleonic field marshal; the heaving hull of a container ship in open water as I scrambled aboard via a rope Jacob's ladder; the basement holding cell of a police station; a canoe overturning in white-water on the upper Cape Fear River.

The writer is often in motion, and there are useful things to know about travel and working in the field, including how to cope with the unexpected. Above all, *being there* confers the unmistakable authority of *presence*: the narrative resounds with the authority of firsthand experience. (130–131)

You don't have to travel far to gain valuable experience. Think creatively about local places that might offer interesting perspectives to your piece. If you are doing a piece on the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, you may not be able to travel to New York to see it in person, but there might be a breeder or trainer nearby who can provide intriguing insight into the world of dog shows. If you are researching the Antarctic, there may be local scientists who are involved in related research, or a pier or an aquarium nearby where you can observe marine animals at close range. Talk to the people you meet in your travels about your project and ask about their work. You never know where it might lead.



Take advantage of local resources to learn more about your topic. (Image credit: Pxfuel)

As Gerard states, many writers have found information and sources in unexpected ways:

Every good writer I know can tell similar uncanny stories about how he or she accidentally stumbled onto an event or person or place or opportunity that was totally extra, not counted upon in advance, a lucky surprise. But the truth is no mystery: Not only does luck favor the prepared mind, but it favors the writer with the prepared mind who is in the right place at the right time. And for that to happen, you have to go somewhere. (132–133)

If you want to incorporate more fieldwork into your project and need help brainstorming ideas, talk to your teacher. Even a one-hour visit can give you a unique perspective and help your project have a more lively, authentic feel.

Write detailed notes from all additional research you conduct. Add them to your outline to round out the sections. Continue to review the outline, look for gaps, and add new information until you feel you have enough to provide the reader with an engaging, informative experience.

Reading

Read the following in *The Art of Creative Research*:

- Read pages 144–148, “Reporting Through All Five Senses,” in chapter 8
- Read pages 155–160, “You Can’t Avoid Mistakes,” in chapter 9

The Writer’s Craft

Is That True? The Importance of Fact-Checking

No matter the purpose, you should always strive for accuracy in nonfiction writing. Verify facts with a second or third source. Try not to make assumptions but instead search for verifiable information. This is not always easy, as Gerard points out in *The Art of Creative Research*:

It can be maddeningly hard to find out the truth of any particular fact beyond a shadow of a doubt. But that’s fine—you can use that. Often the most interesting thing the researcher finds is what you don’t find, the doubt that hovers over each fact. Time and again, we learn that stories that seem too neat and satisfying are actually bogus. The too-good-to-be-true fact all too often is just that. There is a great satisfaction in loosening our hold on everything we thought we knew for sure. Scientists were once so certain that DDT was harmless, they literally spooned it into their mouths like sugar at press conferences—a cautionary tale if ever there was one about ever being too sure of ourselves.

Research is rarely conclusive. It often teases us, contradicts itself, and leaves the writer with hard choices. Even basic facts—a date on which an event occurred, the names of the people involved—can be in dispute. Share some of these choices with your reader, and deepen the drama and impact of your writing. (149–150)

Do your best to use reputable sources, check information with multiple sources, and when you find contradictory information, try to get to the bottom of it or let your reader know what you found.

Writing

1. Create an outline for your nonfiction writing project. Make sure the structure and scope of your project is evident. Include several main topics and subtopics—this will help ensure that you are addressing your topic in a comprehensive way. Share your outline with your teacher.
2. Add your research notes to your outline. Conduct additional research to gather more information as necessary. Write detailed notes and add them to the outline. Remember to update your works cited page. Provide your teacher with a list of additional sources you used, interviews you conducted, or activities you did.
3. So far, you've been focused on text, but most projects can benefit greatly from some type of visual element. Identify where graphics will enhance your piece. Think about the many texts you've read during your research for this project. What visuals did you find particularly helpful or interesting? Graphics can include maps, diagrams, charts, photos, artwork, graphic organizers, or any other type of visual that is directly related to the text and supports the reader's understanding.

Find or create at least two graphics to include. The source of each graphic should be credited; if it is your original work, credit yourself. Write a relevant caption and/or title for the graphic that clearly shows how it is connected to your text. Share at least two graphics (with their captions and source credits) with your teacher.

Further Study

To gain more practice with writing with an authoritative sense of place, complete prompt 17 on page 148 of *The Art of Creative Research*.

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your work with your teacher. Make sure your submission is organized and labeled. If you have any questions about your work or the lesson assignments, let your teacher know.



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