Writing Fiction [in High School]:

Bringing Your Stories to Life!

by Sharon Watson

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Examples in this course are meant solely for teaching purposes and in no way construe a recommendation of the complete book or story from which they are excerpted.

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1: FACTS ABOUT FICTION

Jane Austen, author of *Pride and Prejudice*, wrote her first novel at age fourteen. Christopher Paolini began his rough draft of *Eragon* when he was fifteen. Mary Shelley wrote of horrors in *Frankenstein* when she was nineteen.

Now it is your turn.

THE POWER OF FICTION

Alan Alda, an actor and writer, reveals in his memoir *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed* how he discovered the power of his written words:

> On the night of the first preview [of an Off Broadway revue], I stood in the wings and watched the opening sketch I had written. I heard actual laughs coming from the audience. This was the first time I had heard an audience laugh at something I had written, and a cocktail of sweet, tingling hormones shot through my brain. I was suddenly aware of what an astonishing power

there was in words. Once you set a thought in motion, it went on its own. You could write something on Tuesday, and they would laugh at it a week from Friday.

Plato, too, knew the impact poets, playwrights, and storytellers had on audiences. In fact, he seemed to advocate either running them out of town or censoring them, especially when their stories ran counter to the mores of the day.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* had an impact, but an unexpected one. He wrote it to expose and improve the incredibly poor conditions of workers in the U. S. meat-packing industry in the early 1900s. Instead of a public outcry on behalf of the workers, however, readers focused on meat-inspection procedures and tainted meat, and pushed legislation which became the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. That was over a century ago; fiction still has not lost its power.

Readers become attached to characters. When Arthur Conan Doyle killed off his famous Sherlock Holmes, readers became so agitated that he brought the sleuth back to life. When the Harry Potter series came to an abrupt end in 2007, *The Miami Herald* printed an article filled with advice from doctors on how parents can help their children cope with the grief they may experience from the deaths in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

> Talent is helpful in writing, but guts are absolutely necessary. Without the guts to try, the talent may never be discovered.
>
> –Jessamyn West, author of *The Friendly Persuasion*

Even God used the power of fiction when He instructed the prophet Nathan to confront King David about the double sin of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12:1-10). Nathan's job was to tell David a story that revealed unfair dealings and thievery; when David heard Nathan's made-up story, he was cut to the heart.

Fiction cannot be dismissed as unimportant. It's not "just a story."

A TEENY-TINY GRAMMAR LESSON

Before we get to your first assignments, let's clear up a confusing topic: Why is kiwi the name of a fruit *and* an animal?

Or maybe we should just review the use of italics and quotation marks in titles.

When should you use italics in titles? When should you use quotation marks? These burning questions are nowhere near the same level of importance as the kiwi enigma, but they bear examination.

Italics: Titles of books, magazines, newspapers, works of art, TV shows, movies, epic poems (the long, long ones), and ships (who knew?) are italicized. When writing them out by hand, underline them; when putting them on the computer, skip the underlining and go straight to the italics. Here are some examples:

A book:	*The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde
An epic poem:	*Paradise Lost* by John Milton
A play:	*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare
A movie:	*Stranger than Fiction*
A TV series:	*The Mentalist*
A book series:	The Lord of the Rings series [Surprise! When referred to as a series, a title does not use italics or quotation marks.]

Quotation Marks: Titles of short stories, book chapters, articles from magazines or newspapers, episodes from TV shows, and short poems use quotation marks. One way to remember the difference between italic and quotation mark usage is that chapters, articles, and episodes are all pieces from longer works (books, magazines, newspapers, and TV shows). The "pieces" get the quotation marks; the original, whole work gets the italics.

A short story	"Everything that Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor
A chapter:	"First Day Finish" [from *The Friendly Persuasion* by Jessamyn West]
A short poem:	"The Bells" by Edgar Allan Poe
A TV episode:	"The Thin Red Line" from *The Mentalist*

1.1 All Writers and Discussion

Discuss these questions with your group:

› Who are your favorite authors?
› What are your favorite books?
› What books or short stories do you dislike?
› Figure out why these are your favorites and unfavorites.

1.2 All Writers

Write a letter to a living author you like to read. Authors like positive, specific feedback, and they sometimes enjoy answering questions about their work, especially if you

mention you are a student. You will find the address of the publishing company (or an address or Web site for the author) near the copyright page or at the back of the book.

Report to the group when you receive a letter from your author.

ABOUT THIS COURSE

This course will teach you how to write fiction in the form of **short stories** and **novels**.

It will be helpful to know four things about this course:

1. It has two tracks. The first track is for **all writers**, no matter what your experience or skill level. The second is an optional **manuscript track** for those who have written the manuscript of a short story or novel or who are writing one.

manuscript: an unpublished work, whether in first draft form or ready for the publisher. Abbreviation: MS or ms. Plural: MSS or mss.

2. It works best when done with a group. You will write on your own, of course, but discussing ideas, submitting your work to the group for critiques, and critiquing others are important when learning to write fiction. If you don't have a group (classmates, homeschool group, friends, etc.), find or create one. Meet once a week. The benefits will be worth the work.

3. It uses a wide variety of short stories, novels, and movies to show effective or ineffective writing. *However, this course does not necessarily endorse any of the stories in their original form.* Their use in this course is simply as examples.

4. You will be assigned one novel and some short stories to read and a few movies to watch at specific times in the text. The novel, *The Last Book in the Universe* by Rodman Philbrick, is easy to read and, in fact, is below your reading level. This way you can focus on its writing and techniques but not be obliged to struggle with it.

The rest of the course is self-explanatory and easy to follow.

1.3 All Writers and Discussion

End of today's lesson

Make a list of three to five things you want to learn in this course. For example, do you want to know how to create interesting characters? How to create suspense? To write about a theme without having it stick out a mile?

Discussion: Discuss your list with the group.

2: POINT OF VIEW

Who is going to tell your story? Obviously, *you* will write it, but who will *tell* it? Through whose eyes will your story be told?

What difference does it make who tells the story? Think of "Jack and the Beanstalk" told not from Jack's perspective but from the giant's. How would the story change? Who would be the hero—Jack or the giant?

Below are excerpts from two stories a real sister and her younger brother wrote. Both people, now adults, are remembering the same incident from their childhood; it happened in the 1940s in an unused chicken coop. Notice the difference between the two perspectives. First, the sister:

> My brother was squishing slow-moving flies on the windows and I was sweeping the dirt floor when a shadow covered the screen door. We heard mocking laughter and saw a tall, bulky boy click the hook outside, locking us in. We ordered him to let us out but he just laughed at us, his latest victims, and then disappeared through a stand of trees and bushes to his backyard. We hollered and then hollered some more, but no one came. Finally my brother did the unthinkable: He tore the screen, reached his hand through, and unlocked the door. He grew up to be an engineer.

Now, the younger brother, as he remembers it:

> We were in a treasure cave loading the burros with gold and silver artifacts when the opening of the cave suddenly darkened. Someone rolled a large bolder in front of the cave entrance and blocked our exit. Trapped! We had no way out and the air was getting thinner with each breath and, to make matters worse, there were large spiders everywhere.
>
> After dealing with the arachnids, I was able to glean some charcoal from a previous fire, no doubt from a native religious ceremony, and some sulfur from a deposit in the cave wall. The cave was also inhabited by thousands of bats, whose guano is high in ammonium nitrate. I mixed the ammonium nitrate with the charcoal and sulfur to make the gun powder I used to blow open the cave entrance.

It's clear to see that the choice of the story's narrator makes all the difference.

In "A Crazy Tale" by G. K. Chesterton, a character relates some things that frightened him. All actions and ideas are filtered through his lens. Read this condensed excerpt and guess what this character is remembering:

> I heard a great noise out of the sky, and I turned and saw a giant filling the heavens.
>
> He lifted me like a flying bird through space and set me upon his shoulder. With the giant was a woman, and after I had lived some little while with them, I began to have an idea of what the truth must be. Instead of killing me, the giant and giantess fed and tended me like servants.
>
> One day, as I stood beside her knee, she spoke to me; but I was speechless. A new and dreadful fancy took me by the throat. The woman was smaller than before. The house was smaller: the ceiling was nearer.
>
> . . . A disease of transformation too monstrous for nightmare had quickened within me. I was growing larger and larger whether I would or no.

What very normal thing is this character talking about? Take a few guesses before looking at the next page for the answer.

What is your first memory? Most likely, you remember it because the event had a strong emotion attached to it: fear, excitement, happiness, anger, confusion, etc. Perhaps you remember getting into trouble, getting lost, trying to walk, or meeting a

younger sibling for the first time. Or maybe you remember the day you first noticed that people were not statues but beings who could move. How far back do you remember?

End of today's lesson

2.1 All Writers

Write down your earliest memory as a child. Be as complete as possible. Then put it aside for use in another assignment later in this chapter.

THE NITTY-GRITTY OF POINT OF VIEW, PART 1

It will be helpful to be familiar with some basic types of point of view (POV) so you can make informed decisions about which is best for your story. If you have taken a foreign language, you are familiar with the following pronoun chart:

	Singular Pronouns	Plural Pronouns
First person	I, me, my, mine	we, our, ours
Second person	you, your, yours	you (formal—ye), y'all
Third person	he, she, him, her, his, hers	they, them, theirs

There are a few more pronouns, but you get the point. This chart, also used in the English language, shows the archaic, formal "you" ("Hear ye! Hear ye!").

So, why the chart?

Here's why. The names of the POVs come from the pronouns and are named accordingly: first person, second person, and third person.

Before getting acquainted with your point-of-view choices, take a peek at the following character definitions, just for reference:

Answer to "A Crazy Tale": This character is remembering what it was like to be a young boy. The giant is his father; the giantess, his mother. He is frightened when he sees he is growing up and they are no longer of gigantic, and therefore reassuring, proportions.

- **Protagonist:** the main character or lead, the one readers are cheering on, the one whose problems and desires are driving the story
- **Secondary character:** not as important as the lead; issues/desires are not as large or problematic as lead's

› **Antagonist:** another main character or a force, the one who keeps the protagonist from reaching his/her goal; sometimes the "bad guy"
› **Viewpoint character:** the character through which readers see the scene, chapter, or story; usually one of the protagonists

Now, *finally*, here are your most common POV choices. The first ones are in this lesson; the last ones are in the next.

First Person: Information is given through one character's eyes, and he becomes your narrator or guide. The narrator is usually the protagonist.

Point-of-View Choices

First person
First-person peripheral
Unreliable narrator
Epistolary
First-person plural

Second person

Third-person omniscient
Third-person single vision
Third-person multiple vision
Third-person objective

Here's an example of a main character, Hank, telling his own story in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain:

I wanted to try and think out how it was that rational or even half-rational men could ever have learned to wear armor, considering its inconveniences; and how they had managed to keep up such a fashion for generations when it was plain that what I had suffered today they had had to suffer all the days of their lives.

The use of "I" in the narrative is a dead give-away that it is in first person.

In *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nick Carraway is the story's first-person narrator. However, he is a secondary character; the story isn't about him. Gatsby is the main character, but everything we know about him is filtered through Nick's eyes. (Think of the Sherlock Holmes stories in which everything is told by and filtered through Doctor Watson.) This kind of POV is called **first person peripheral**. Here is Nick telling us of the first time he sees his neighbor Gatsby as they both stand in their yards at night:

Point-of-View Choices

First person
First-person peripheral
Unreliable narrator
Epistolary
First-person plural

Second person

Third-person omniscient
Third-person single vision
Third-person multiple vision
Third-person objective

> I decided to call to him. Miss Baker had mentioned him at dinner, and that would do for an introduction. But I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way,

> and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness.

The first-person narrator, no matter what kind he is, can tell us only what *he* is thinking, feeling, seeing, and experiencing. If he wants to reveal how another character is feeling, or how he *thinks* another character is feeling, he has to relate it by what he observes. Notice that Carraway can only relate what he sees Gatsby doing; he may surmise emotions and motivations from this, but he can only guess. So instead of writing "Gatsby was deeply troubled," Nick can only write "he was trembling."

How reliable is the first-person narrator? In truth, each story is colored by the viewpoint character and his or her perspective.

Near the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator Nick Carraway admits he is "one of the few honest people" he has ever known. And we have to decide if he is telling the truth.

When there is a disparity between what the narrator says and what readers can guess is true, that narrator is called an **unreliable narrator**. A fun example of this is in Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al*. Jack, the lead who is writing to his friend Al, has just teased his new wife by saying he is writing to two of his former girlfriends. Not too bright. A tiff ensues, which Jack reports to his friend Al in very ungrammatical terms:

Point-of-View Choices

First person
First-person peripheral
Unreliable narrator
Epistolary
First-person plural

Second person

Third-person omniscient
Third-person single vision
Third-person multiple vision
Third-person objective

> Then she says If you don't tell me I will go over to Marie's that is her sister Allen's wife and stay all night. I says Go on and she went downstairs but I guess she probily went to get a soda because she has some money of her own that I give her. This was about two hours ago and she is probily down in the hotel lobby now trying to scare me by makeing me believe she has went to her sister's. But she can't fool me Al and I am now going out to mail this letter and get a beer. I won't never tell her about Violet and Hazel if she is going to act like that.
>
> Yours truly, JACK

Where do you think his wife really went?

Point-of-View Choices

First person
First-person peripheral
Unreliable narrator
Epistolary
First-person plural

Second person

Third-person omniscient
Third-person single vision
Third-person multiple vision
Third-person objective

A very early novel was largely in the form of letters from a young woman to her family. This technique of telling a story in letter-writing form is called **epistolary** (ee-PIS-toh-LER-ee). The book, *Pamela: Virtue Rewarded*, was written by Samuel Richardson in 1740.

First Person Plural: Information comes through an unknown, unnamed character as though the action is happening to the whole group. First person plural uses pronouns like *we* and *us.*

One example of this rare POV comes from *Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris, a novel about a group of office workers undergoing lay-offs in an ad agency. Readers are never introduced to the narrator because everything happens to "us." In this excerpt, "we" have just been asked by "our" boss how the cold sore ads are coming along:

> We were in the process of coming up with a series of TV spots for one of our clients who manufactured an analgesic to reduce cold sore pain and swelling. We took in Joe's question kind of slowly, without any immediate response. We might have even exchanged a look or two. This wasn't long after his second promotion. Doing okay, more or less, we said, in effect. And then we probably nodded, you know, noncommittal half nods.

Ferris names specific employees and includes stories about them, and through them we develop empathy for their lives lived on the edge of frustration, heartache, goofiness, and impending lay-offs. But the narrator never steps up and identifies himself.

Second Person: A narrator tells what "you" said and did. Second-person POV is often used in tandem with the present tense, which gives it a snappy tone.

Point-of-View Choices

First person
First-person peripheral
Unreliable narrator
Epistolary
First-person plural

Second person

Third-person omniscient
Third-person single vision
Third-person multiple vision
Third-person objective

This example of second-person POV is taken from a student's paper. His assignment, like yours, was to write his earliest memory:

> You're going ice skating tonight, with your dad as your training wheels. It takes a while to get your skates on, but it's worth the effort once you're on the ice. Your dad pushes you around and all you

> have to do is stand there and feel the need for speed. Suddenly, the speed stops, and you feel a mass pushing against you, very top heavy, falling on you and pushing you towards the smooth ice. That would be your dad tripping on his skates, falling like an old pine tree. You don't remember much after that. Some crying might have been involved; all you know for sure is that you end up in a bathroom, slightly dizzy, with a lump on your head, covered with ice, this time in the form of a cold pack.

Second-person POV can be interesting to read in a short story but tires readers when used in a novel.

It's time for a review. Below are the first-person and second-person POVs we've covered so far, plus an example of each:

First person: I flew from the uneven bars and nailed the landing.

First-person peripheral: I watched Jamal on the rings. His routine was fluid, looked effortless. The only thing that gave away his nerves was the tic under his left eye, but judges don't take off points for tics.

Unreliable narrator: I ditched my coach's choreography and used my own at the last minute. I was superb! No one ever conquered the balance beam like I did. I danced. I fluttered. I bounced like a bedspring. The audience watched in awed silence. Of course, the judges didn't know what they were doing. Because of their low marks, I didn't even place.

Epistolary: Dear Paige, I wish you could have come to my meet. I was fantastic!

First-person plural: We knew the routines. We had the crowd. Oh, sure, we were uncertain of ourselves and we shook before our turns came, but nothing could stop us from winning the gold.

Second Person: You stand at the edge of the mat, arms outstretched like a salute to the vast blue in front of you, and you feel the pulse of your heart pinging in your cheeks, in your toes. This reminds you to uncurl your toes because, although you know every move by heart, it is the little things that can undo you.

2.2 All Writers and Writing Group

Now you try it. Write a sentence or two for each POV listed below, just as in the examples above. Make up your own characters and situations.

- First person
- First-person peripheral
- Unreliable narrator
- Epistolary
- First-person plural
- Second person

End of today's lesson

Share your results with your writing group.