

Syllabus

Section #2 Fiction techniques: dialogue, description, and exposition

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Technique will get you through times of no inspiration a heck of a lot better than inspiration will get you through times of no technique. Nothing makes a writer except practice. But some aspects of technique can be taught, and learning technique can help you get through the ups and downs of writing a novel.

Class meets each day from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm. Each class will begin with a writing exercise and a discussion of writing technique. Tuesday through Friday we will read each other and provide feedback.

The biggest emphasis in this class will be on your fiction. That's what we're here for. That's what we'll read and discuss. Participants are invited to bring a short opening of a current writing project (up to three pages) for us to discuss. Otherwise, we'll discuss work generated in class. Be prepared to do a lot of writing.

Monday June 15: Exercise: If the Reader Wants to Know, Just Tell 'em

Exposition (that is, telling somebody something) gets a bad rap in writing, and it's true that we've all hit the place in a book or a story where suddenly we felt like we were reading a manual rather than something to entertain us. But sometimes, you've just got to explain something to the reader, whether it's the Napoleonic Wars, what you protagonist the antique dealer knows about Art Deco furniture, or how your warp drive works.

There are lots of tricks to make the exposition go down easily, from the character who knows as little as the reader, to making the information a point of the plot. We'll talk about what makes good exposition and why something called an "expository lump" is a bad thing.

Tuesday, June 16 Exercise: When I Was a Child...

One rule of writing is start in medias res (Latin for "in the middle of things"). Homer did it in the Illiad, when he started with Achilles sulking in his tent about a girl in the middle of the Trojan War. The problem is, sometimes you want people to know what happened in the past, the way Homer wanted everybody to know that the war started because Paris kidnapped Helen of Troy and pissed off the Greeks. So how do you fill in that backstory? Well, it depends. First you've got to make your reader curious enough to want to know.

We'll also talk about flashbacks, what verb tense to use, and how to show whether you're talking about what happened way back ("As Donna sat in the car, she remembered that fateful car trip, that spring morning so many years ago..." Okay, maybe better than that.) and how to get out of the flashback and back into the "present" of the story.

Wednesday, June 17 Exercise: Um, uh, and, you know what I mean?

What does it mean when people say your dialogue is too on the nose, and why is that bad? How do people really talk? Why, on television, when people pick up the phone do they never say, “Hi. How are you? I’m fine. I talked to your mother the other day and she said she hadn’t talked to you in a week. Oh, I’ve been busy, too, what’s up?” What about slang? What about accents and dialect? Why is dialogue a bad place to do exposition (“As you know Bob, the frambolator is the core of the hyperdrive...”) What it is good for.

The dialogue in your story should sound as if it’s the way people talk, but it shouldn’t be the way people really talk because frankly, a lot of what people say is really boring.

Thursday, June 19 Exercise: Adverbs, Metaphors and the Problems with Fancy Prose

Fancy prose can be really fun to write, but rarely is it something that people like to read. How come? What’s wrong with saying, “Ernest crossed the living room noiselessly.” When do you use a metaphor?

We’ll talk about dense prose and “simple” prose. Issues of vocabulary and of compound complex sentences and maybe even parallel construction. We’ll talk about high diction. What kind of prose makes a scene feel as if it is happening really fast (sometimes good for a fistfight) and what makes things sloooooow doooooown (sometimes good for a love scene.)

Friday, June 20 Exercise: Who Would Have Gessed We’d End Up Here?

We’ll review what we’ve learned, discuss issues raised by the writing in class, and determine a plan of what to do next.

Requirements for credit students

For one unit of credit:

Attend and participate in all class sessions. Complete and submit all overnight assignments.

For two units of credit:

Do all requirements for one credit plus submitting 2,000 words of your own fiction within two weeks of the end of the course.

For three units of credit:

Do all the requirements for two credits plus submitting a 1,000-2,000 word discussion of how you plan to apply what we discussed in class to your own work.