

Guildford Book Festival – October 2022
Creative Writing Class
Notes from Rachel Marsh

DAY ONE – GETTING STARTED

Exercise I:

Do both writing prompts to determine if you're a planner or a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pantser.

Writing Prompt 1: Freewriting

Spend 5 minutes writing. Do not stop. Do not read your work as you go. Just write.
The topic: Beneath the dead oak tree

Writing Prompt 2: Planning

Spend time just plotting out a story. Use bullet points or a numbered outline. Do not write out fully.

Alternative prompt: Personify the dead oak tree

Discussion I

Which of these writing prompts did you enjoy more? Did you find that your favourite writing prompt was similar to your normal writing routine or at odds with it? Did you want to combine two of the writing prompts?

When writing you should write in a manner that:

- 1) gives you the most enjoyment out of the experience
- 2) helps you be productive
- 3) gets you regularly writing

When you feel stuck in your writing practice try mixing up the way you write. For example, if you normally write in bursts, try planning.

Discussion II

Answer the following questions:

1. 'Why are you taking this class?'
2. 'What do you want to achieve?'
3. 'How do you write best (planner, ruminator, frenzied inspired)?'
4. 'What are your writing goals, and how can you use today's class to make a plan to achieve your writing goal?'

Homework

Choose a character from either something you've written today, or from something you're already working on, and develop a character sketch.

DAY TWO – CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Exercise I

Writing Prompt

Write a physical character sketch of your protagonist. (If you already did this for your homework, write an emotional sketch.)

Lecture I

Character Development is understanding your character as if they were real.

Exercise II

In your groups, asks each other questions about your characters. Any question can be asked, and you cannot say ‘I don’t know’.

Lecture II

Question:

What is the difference between a ‘character-driven’ plot and an ‘action-driven’ plot?

Answer:

- In a character-driven story everything that happens is because of the characters’ personalities. Example (film): *The Royal Tenenbaums*
- In an action-driven story the character is less important and events happen no matter how the character reacts. Example (film): *Raiders of the Lost Ark*
- Note: Most stories are a combination of character-driven and action-driven.

If you get to know your characters as if they were real people, your plot will almost write itself.

Discussion I

Question:

What do you need to do to make a character come alive in your mind?

Answer:

- Live with him/her.
- Think about him/her constantly.
- Ask yourself questions about him/her.
- DON’T BE AFRAID TO MAKE THINGS UP.

Conflict and Change

Your character must always face a conflict. He or she may decide not to change in the face of that conflict, but without a conflict the story will be boring.

Thinking Exercise

Who is the protagonist in the story? Who is the antagonist? Is the antagonist internal (the character is his/her own enemy) or external? If your story has an external antagonist, is it a static antagonist (a constant force like the environment) or is a dynamic antagonist (a force that ebbs and flows like another person)?

Exercise III

Describe your antagonist. If the antagonist is internal (human vs self), project that internal conflict onto a character, as this will provide the protagonist with someone to interact with, and thus keep the story from being entirely within the protagonist's mind.

Homework

Write/think about a scene in which your protagonist is in conflict with the antagonist.

DAY THREE – PLOTTING

Discussion I

Beginning, middle, and end = Three-act structure

It's our natural way of talking.

Think of an anecdote. This will have a beginning, middle, and end.

Discussion II (Not included in class)

Beginnings: A beginning starts with action.

Example: Kafka's *Metamorphosis* doesn't start with the protagonist going to bed the day before, or even his dreams that night. It starts with him waking up to find that he has transformed into a bug. See the first line.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm>

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin.

Question: Find the beginning in this excerpt:

Randolph started every morning the same. He brushed his teeth, before showering. He used Axe shower gel and then put shampoo on his head, despite being bald. He towelled off with one of three blue towels, and then he walked to the bedroom naked. Once in the bedroom he pulled a clean uniform from the wardrobe. He put on his uniform in this order: pants, trousers, shirt. Then he put on socks and brushed his hair. On his way out the door, he slipped on his shoes. Even though today started the same as every morning, it did not end the same. In fact, Randolph's day ended five seconds after he left his house, when he was squashed by a meteorite the size of a lawnmower.

Answer:

Even though today started the same as every morning, it did not end the same. In fact, Randolph's day ended five seconds after he left his house, when he was squashed by a meteorite the size of a lawnmower.

[NOTE: The above example shows that sometimes we need to get a running start to writing, and we often push too much information in the beginning of a story. When you start to edit, think about what you can cut. Where does your story really start?]

Discussion (based on a note from Pheobe):

What is my story? Why am I writing it? What is my genre? Is it chronological? What is the pace? Is the reader surprised?

Film Plotting – See attached document

A plot point is a major point of action that pushes the story forward.

The attached structure is for film only, but can be used to help you structure a longer piece of work. If a novel is 320 pages, you triple each number on the chart. For example, in a novel you might have the set up in the first 15 pages, and the first main plot point by page 90.

Please remember that novels and short stories do have a beginning, middle and end, but they are not necessarily structured in this manner. This is just to help you if you are stuck.

Exercise

Plot out your story based on the template provided.

DAY FOUR – DIALOGUE AND VOCABULARY AND SETTING

Dialogue

If you know your character well, the dialogue will flow easily. You'll know your character's cadence and what phrases they use regularly.

We all use specific phrases again and again. Some people will use long words. Others will use short.

As you get to know your character, the way your character talks, what phrases they may rely on will come clear.

For example: Boxer vs pugilist.

Plus, people speak differently in different situations.

Examples, of how someone may speak defiantly depending on their personality and situation:

Tips (not included in class)

These tips are to be used during the editing process only, as it's more important to get the words on the page. Plus, these are tips not rules, as they can be broken in different situations.

Contractions are your friends

Don't: 'I am coming to get you.'

Do: 'I'm coming to get you.'

Cut the exposition

Don't: 'George, my bother, you put the codes to the big black safe in the back of the store safe in the giant American refrigerator.'

Do: 'You put the codes in the fridge.'

Cut the adverbs

Don't: 'Damn it, you lost the codes,' she said angrily.

Do: She slammed her fist down on the table, 'Damn it, you lost the codes.'

Use action WHILE characters are speaking

Don't: 'We lost the codes,' she said angrily. She then walked to the fridge, opened the door and saw them. 'Oh, here they are,' she said relieved.

Do: 'We lost the codes,' she said opening the fridge. 'Oh, here they are. Thank god.'

Cut every day movements

Don't: Brenda walked to the elevator, hit the button, and stood there for five minutes humming a tune while she waited for the elevator to arrive. It finally arrived, and she stepped in. It took three seconds for the lift to reach the bottom floor. She exited the elevator and turned left. Gloria's office was the second door. She knocked. Gloria said she could enter. When Brenda came in the room, Gloria stood up – she had been at her desk – and they shook hands.

‘Thank you for seeing me,’ said Brenda.

‘My pleasure,’ said Gloria.

‘Shall I put on the kettle?’ asked Brenda.

‘Yes please,’ said Brenda who didn't really want a tea but thought it would be rude to not accept.

Gloria put on the kettle...

[TEN PAGES LATER]

‘I need the codes.’

‘I'm sorry. But I've lost them. They're gone.’

‘Damn it Gloria,’ Brenda stood and walked to the window. ‘We need them before Kevlar detonates the reactor.’

Do: Brenda stormed into Gloria's office, ‘I need the codes.’

‘I've lost them. They're gone.’ Gloria had been waiting for Brenda. She knew this day would come.

‘Damn it, Gloria,’ Brenda stood and walked to the window. ‘We need them before Kevlar detonates the reactor.’

Gloria hadn't realised Kevlar even had the reactor.

SETTING

Exercise:

Describe this smell to someone who can't smell.

Baby

When developing your story, you will want to immerse the reader. This means trying to predict elements that might be visualised in a different way than you had intended. For example, for some the smell of ‘baby’ will be sweet like talc, but others will envision it as a stench.

DAY FIVE – PUBLISHING

Publishing with a small presses and magazines:

You should never submit your work until it's fully edited.

Tips on publishing.

- Start small. Try to get short stories or essays published in literary magazines, or try to win prizes. This will help you build a reputation, and by mastering short prose it will help you with longer pieces.
- Only submit after reading the submission guidelines (also known as the writer's guidelines), and if your piece does not fit the submission guidelines DO NOT SUBMIT.
- Search Google for writing prizes and special themed additions to literary magazines. The US is an excellent place to publish short work, because the States is so large they have more options. However, many US publications and competitions require an entry fee. This is less common in the UK, but that is changing.
 - Literary magazines and competitions legitimately require entrance fees. HOWEVER, traditional publishers do not. If you're looking to have your novel published, and they ask for a reading fee, they may not be legitimate.
- Make sure your work has been thoroughly edited before submitting.
- If you're worried about who will own the copyright of your story once it's published, ask before submitting.

Regarding Multiple Submissions and Copyright

Most literary magazines request first rights. Meaning you publish first with them, then it's yours to do what you like with. However, some may request global rights for a specific amount of time, or even forever. If you're worried about it, send them an email and ask.