

THE WRITERS STUDIO

Fiction and Poetry Writing Classes since 1987

WELCOME TO THE ONLINE WRITING WORKSHOPS

During the course of the next ten weeks, this class will expose students to a variety of narrative techniques through exercises that will allow you to “try on” different narrative voices. Students will have a chance to use voices/personas that they may have never used in their writing, while also exploring their narrative strengths and weaknesses. Until you have learned to create and sustain a compelling narrative voice, you will not be able to write a poem or short story—let alone a novel. This is no easy task, but the creative and personal rewards for practicing and gaining some mastery of the craft of writing are great. Being a skillful fiction writer or poet is one of these rewards. This obviously does not happen overnight or even over ten-weeks. Writing, like any art, requires persistence, and I ask that you be patient with yourself and this process.

Practicing your craft—like practicing scales on a piano—will give you the skill to create your own distinct style. I’m sure you will agree that art—literature—is distinct from a diary or journal entry, journalistic reporting or navel gazing. I assure you that people will not read your poem, short story or novel to hear you grind your ax or stand on your soapbox. They will read because they are engaged, intrigued and moved, and that is what art does. We will spend the class considering exactly how different narrative techniques allow for the most artful and compelling expression in fiction and poetry.

The method we will be using was honed by the teachers of The Writers Studio and has proven to be a highly effective method of training emerging writers. The online program, by contrast, is still fairly new, and if you’ve taken the class before, please note that some things will be different this time around as we try to find the best way to teach in this new environment.

I will cover the methodology we’ll use during the next ten weeks – how class will be structured, how critiques will work, what to look for when doing your exercises, etc.

Technical issues – browsers, Web sites, chatting, uploading, etc. – are addressed in “Getting Started,” which can be found in the Introductory Documents folder in The Writers Studio MSN group.

Some Notes on Craft in Fiction

If you haven’t done so yet, please take a look at the page titled “The Elements of Craft.” (You’ll find it in the document called “ELECRAFT.DOC.”) Here you’ll see brief summaries of terms like *persona*, *tone*, and *mood*. *Persona*, *tone*, and *mood* are your central building blocks of narrative. They are the basics. Worry about them for now, and we’ll address the other elements as necessary.

Persona

If you look at the definition of **Persona**, you will notice that it says “**the distance between the writer and the story’s narrator.**” What exactly does that mean? Your persona narrator is not the writer. The writer creates a persona that s/he uses to tell the story. This distance between the writer and the narrator allows the writer to play and create. For example, if you are too attached to the facts of a true story you want to tell or too invested in getting up on your soapbox about a particular subject, you will feel obligated to “tell it exactly as it happened.” Fiction cares little for the facts or journalistic reporting. Fiction is more interested in artistry and drama, and there is no artistry or drama if there is no freedom or distance to be irreverent, take chances with language or change the facts to create the most engaging story.

Why is distance important? Well imagine if John Cheever sputtered on for page after page about how hard it was to be a homosexual trapped in a loveless marriage. Or picture Flannery O’Connor coming up to you on a street corner and telling you how important it is to give your soul over to Jesus so you can be baptized and take communion and die and go to heaven. You might nod your head and pretend to listen just to humor her. Or you might run the other way. For Cheever, you might pat him on the back and tell him you’re terribly sorry to hear that and then hustle out of earshot as soon as you could. But when their narrative personas speak, you can’t resist paying attention. Cheever puts you right in the middle of the loveless marriage, and O’Connor

makes you feel the flames of purgatory licking your neck. The genius of both of these authors is that they found a way to make their own private dramas as compelling to their readers as they were to them. This is what the proper distance can do for you.

During the course of this class, we will spend four weeks on first person and three weeks on third person. (The remainder of the class will be devoted to working on a specific story or poem developed from one of the exercises in the previous seven weeks.) Second person narrators are rare. You will most often find second person used when a first or third-person narrator uses direct address (where the narrator addresses “you”).

Persona also refers to **“the personality of the first, second or third-person narrator and its narrative distance from the characters.”** Take J. D. Salinger’s first-person narrator in *The Catcher in the Rye* for example. This boy is all personality.

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

In first person, your persona takes the form of an “I” whose job is to reveal him or herself to the reader. Throughout a first person narrative, you are always learning something new about the “I”. The most effective first-person narrators have a particular take on the world and show that world as opposed to telling us about that world.

When we refer to “narrative distance,” we are referring to the distance between the narrator and the characters. A first-person narrator is inherently closer to the characters s/he is dealing with by virtue of being in the story. Third-person narrators are just as much a construction as first-person narrators in that they also have personalities. Again, narrative distance refers to the distance between the narrator and the characters. In third person, narrators can look from afar at characters like little ants or watch them like a bystander seeing a scene unfold or they can be very close, peering over a character’s shoulder, showing us the world from their perspective.

John Cheever's third-person narrator in *The Country Husband* watches the scene from a distance, outside of the plane and then zooms in on his main character.

To begin at the beginning, the airplane from Minneapolis in which Francis Weed was traveling East ran into heavy weather. The sky had been a hazy blue, with the clouds below the plane lying so close together that nothing could be seen of the earth. Then mist began to form outside the windows, and they flew into a white cloud of such density that it reflected the exhaust fires. The color of the cloud darkened to gray, and the plane began to rock. Francis had been in heavy weather before, but he had never been shaken up so much.

Tone and Mood

Mood is the primary emotional response you want to evoke in your reader. It's the feeling you want to creep up your reader's basal ganglia as he or she reads. The basic categories of mood are surprisingly few: joy, loss, sorrow, depression, fear. These are all basic emotions. One exception: anger is generally not considered a mood. Rather anger is used to defend other emotions, usually sorrow. Your narrator can have an angry tone, but realize that anger itself is not a mood, but rather an aspect of tone.

Tone is how the story is told – the voice the persona uses: conversational, formal, humorous, matter-of-fact, etc. In Chekhov's case the mood for some of his greatest works ("Lady With a Lap Dog," *The Cherry Orchard*) were devastating loss and sorrow. Yet his narrator's tone is incredibly cool, even clinical. If you followed the discussion about persona, you probably already know why he had to write like this. When Chekhov wrote "Lady With a Lap Dog," he knew he didn't have long to live. Not surprisingly, the sense of doom in the story is palpable. By choosing a cool, distant tone, Chekhov was able to get enough distance on his material to be able to write it. Had his persona narrator been any closer to the mood, he probably would have found writing a story this close to his heart impossible.

The best single quote I've ever read about tone and mood is from Chekhov: "When you want to touch a reader's heart, try to be colder. It gives their grief, as it were, a background against which it stands out in greater relief." Chekhov wrote incredibly moody stories, but his normal narrative voice was incredibly distant, formal and restrained. My personal experience with Chekhov's stories is to feel like I've been run

through the wringer emotionally and then I scratch my head and say, “How on earth did he do that?” The answer simply is that he understands the separation of tone and mood.

Of course, the point is not to write like Chekhov, though you could do worse. There are many combinations of tone and mood available. Take Ellison, for example. The mood of his *Invisible Man* is clearly depressed and paranoid (and prone to violent outbursts, we learn later). He communicates this through a tone that is incredibly formal, almost like the headmaster of a private school. You can feel the pain his narrator is in – “I might even be said to possess a mind” – but he needs an air of formality to communicate the pain without collapsing into maudlin sentimentality.

The real thing to remember is that we all have things that we want to communicate in our writing, and that the best way to communicate is to **clearly identify the tone and the mood beforehand. And try and keep the tone separate from the mood.** We will discuss this in greater detail during our weekly chats.

Craft in Poetry

So where does poetry enter into all of this? Actually, though the previous discussion is couched in the terms of fiction, it applies equally well to poets. You still have a narrator (most often a first-person narrator), and you still have to reveal something about the “I” in first person or the character(s) in third person. You still need to separate tone and mood, and you still need to find a way to connect to your audience in a way that makes your own concerns equally interesting to the reader. The biggest difference between fiction and poetry is obviously that poetry is a much more compressed form. You are asked to get to the heart of the matter in fewer lines. Take these openings, for example:

There’s a section in my library for death
and another for Irish history,...

-- Billy Collins, “Tomes”

The afternoon the neighborhood boys tied me and Mary Lou Mahar
to Donny Ralph’s father’s garage doors, spread-eagled,...

-- Marie Howe, “Sixth Grade”

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea...

-- Elizabeth Bishop, “The Moose”

All three of these poets have their own way of catching their reader's attention. With Collins it's humor – the juxtaposition of death and Irish history. He's keeping the tone light in the beginning, but with just enough of a hint of darker material to come so that when the narrator takes a sidestep to talk about his deceased mother, the reader goes along with him. Howe takes a different tack. She's describing a horrifying situation – metaphorical rape, really – and she's going to put you right there in the midst of it. She's keeping a lid on the agenda here by forcing her narrator to be really specific about the situation: she and Mary Lou Mahar (as opposed to anyone else) being tied to Donny Ralph's father's garage doors. A lesser talent might have left it at, “tied us to those garage doors,” but Howe wants to make sure you know whom these garage doors belonged to. Later she lets you know that Donny Ralph has nine brothers and sisters and a grandfather, all of whom were absent on the day in question. These observations are not here by accident. The poem derives its strength not from being indignant about what happened, but from the narrator illuminating how people relate to each other, even when the unthinkable is happening. The narrator leaves it up to the reader to be indignant on her behalf. She herself holds no grudges.

Elizabeth Bishop is a special case; in that she is so subtle she confounds almost every discussion of an attention-getting persona in poetry. To sidestep this, I sampled from one of the few poems of hers that starts with a drum roll, as well as with a sentence that goes on for six stanzas and two pages. But I could have just as easily have started with one of the most ungainly openings I know in poetry:

In Worcester, Massachusetts
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
-- Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Waiting Room”

Bishop was famously shy, and each one of her immensely powerful poems is an odd contradiction: she steps in to the spotlight by shuffling, crab-like, out of it. Even in the opening lines of “In the Waiting Room,” there's a narrator who knows where she's going and what she's doing – a supreme confidence in the midst of diffidence. There's a perfectly good aesthetic reason for the clumsy opening: she's putting herself into the head of a six year-old, and telling the story from a largely six year-old point of view. The illusion is almost perfect, the voice authentic. It's like a tightrope act. You keep reading

just to see if she'll slip and fall. She doesn't. This is artistry at a level you don't experience often: an artist so sure of herself that she's willing to sound plain, homey and winsome.

Again, the idea here is not that you're going to write like Bishop or like Howe or like anybody else. The real goal is to write like yourself, but the first step toward doing this is to gain a healthy curiosity about the different sorts of strategies different poets have used to express themselves. Gain an encyclopedic knowledge of what you can do, and when you sit down to write you'll know instinctively what you should do, and whom you should read to help you along your way. And doing this, if you're a poet, will mean that you learn how to read poetry differently than you have done in the past.

One last word about poetry: there are many technical elements that we won't be addressing in this course. Technical matters of prosody – iambs, trochees, spondees, enjambment issues – are all good things to learn but pale in difficulty before the task of creating an engaging persona in your poetry. Learn how to do this and people will forgive the occasional misplaced amphibrach.

Reading As A Writer

Persona, mood and tone are three elements of craft that we will pay particular attention to as we read established authors and the pieces submitted in class. You will be encouraged to read as a writer during this course. When reading as a writer, these are some questions you might ask. Who is the narrator? Is it a first, second or third-person narrator? Why is this written in first, second or third person? Does this narrator use direct address? Why? What tone is the narrator using? Am I getting a sense of the mood? What is the mood being evoked if any? Where is the narrator in relationship to the characters? This last question is especially important in thinking about narrative distance in third person. If your head is swimming at this point, don't worry. We will deal with these questions during the class.

The Exercises

One of the oldest and most effective ways of writing is to model your piece on another writer's work – to use that work as a springboard for your own ideas. That's what we'll learn to do in this class. It's a technique that will stand you in very good stead for the rest

of your writing career. If you're really on top of your literary game you'll notice that that's what Ellison did. The first paragraph of *Invisible Man* is a direct homage to Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. ("I am a sick man... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man. I think there's something wrong with my liver.") It's what writers have done since time immemorial and in this class you will learn how to do it as well.

On Friday of each week I will post a text that will serve as the model for your exercises, along with a short discussion of what the exercise itself will consist of. You will have until the following Friday to write your exercises and post them to the appropriate folder. On Monday at 8:00 P.M. Eastern Time, we will have a one-hour online chat to discuss the exercise. The chats are not mandatory, but excellent if you have questions and would like clarification on the exercise. For those of you who miss the chat, I will post the transcripts to a folder so you don't miss anything. (See the "Getting Started" document for a discussion of how to post, file formats, etc.)

Half the exercises will be based on works of poetry and half will be fiction. Everyone should do all of them. Fiction writers write fiction, and poets write poetry regardless of what the exercise is based on. Use the exercise to try to capture the voice of the persona in the text as fully as you can. It will stretch your abilities and help you find the voice that best works for you down the road. I will also point out in the exercise the elements of craft you should be paying attention to.

Your exercises should be fairly short; fiction writers should produce two pages on average. You want to produce quality over quantity. Remember this is an exercise. Don't try to squeeze an entire story into two pages. Work on using the technique within your two pages. Poets should be naturally safe here, as one-to-two page poems are a fairly standard length. Don't worry about quantity at this point. Connect to a true persona narrator and a palpable mood and quantity will take care of itself.

If the exercise is based on a work of fiction, then I will generally only post the beginning of the piece, not the full piece itself. This limitation is intentional. It's too easy when reading a ten or twenty page story to revert to reading like a reader. When you have just a

couple of paragraphs it forces you to go back again and again to each word, each phrase, each sentence. When you start to do this you begin to read more like a writer.

One last point about exercises: you won't like every text we study in this course. I'll be deliberately choosing from a wide range of authors, casting as wide a net as possible so that you can get a large number of strategies under your belt. Some of them will fit your style, others won't. Some will seem easy, others nearly impossible. Withhold your judgments of the texts. Your concern is not whether you "like" an author's work, but what can you glean from the narrative technique being used. All of the writers we read will be at the top of their craft. This caliber of writer has a lot to teach you, so try to keep your mind open to the lesson. You will certainly benefit more from paying attention to their narrative technique than listening to the conversation in your head about your personal preferences.

A friend of mine once took a wine appreciation course in which the teacher told the class, "Your opinion about what you drink is not of interest here." The point of the class, according to the teacher, was to train the taste buds to recognize different things. That's pretty close to what we're doing here. It's not that you won't or shouldn't have opinions, just be aware of the extent to which opinions can stand in the way of experience

Critiques – Giving and Receiving

Critiques to posted pieces will be due by Sunday. After you have written your critiques, I will start to post my responses to the pieces on Monday. Don't feel you have to respond to everyone's piece, but do try to critique at least three or four. I may ask you to comment on a particular piece if I feel it's appropriate.

It goes without saying that your critiques should be constructive and helpful. You should judge your colleagues' pieces based on craft and technique rather than content. Did they do what the exercise required of them? If so, let them know what specifically worked in terms of the exercise. Feel free to quote sections of text that work and note what specifically worked. If something did not work, tell them how their piece differed from what we were setting out to do in the exercise. Was something confusing or not clear? Let them know. Be honest and be fair.

The quality of your critiques will have a direct impact on the quality of your own writing. It's much easier to see what is or isn't working in someone else's work. Once you see something in someone else's work and have an insight into an element of craft, you are more likely to apply this insight to your own work.

It's more of a challenge to be on the receiving end of a critique. There's a natural tendency to want to defend your piece from its critics. Please do not do this. When you respond to criticism you lose the opportunity to learn from what the critic is telling you. Just sit tight. Listen quietly. Absorb the lesson, and apply it when you do your next exercise. After all, it is only an exercise. There'll be another one next week.

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