



1: FACTS ABOUT FICTION

Lesson 1

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 years old. 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 advocated either running them out of town or censoring them when their stories ran counter to the mores of the day.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* had an **unexpected impact**. 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. Either way, fiction moved the readers.

Fans become **attached to characters**. When Arthur Conan Doyle killed off his famous Sherlock Holmes, readers became so agitated that he brought the

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*

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*.

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 told David a story about unfair dealings and thievery involving a pet sheep—something close to David's heart. When David heard Nathan's made-up story, he was cut to the heart and repented.

Fiction is powerful. 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, Websites, 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: *Cake Boss*
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, Websites, 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: “Quinceañeras, Quarterbacks, and K9s” from *Cake Boss*

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 fiction 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 a Website address 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.

Lesson 2

About this course

Writing Fiction [in High School] 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.
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, and so on), find or create one. Meet once a week. The benefits will be worth the work.
3. It uses examples from 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 course. 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.

manuscript: an unpublished work, whether in first draft form or ready for the publisher.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



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

1.3 All Writers and Discussion

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 characters that readers will connect with? To write about a theme without having it stick out a mile?

Discussion: Discuss your list with the group.

Good writers are good readers

If you want to be a good writer, be a good reader. But what does it mean to be a “good reader”?

Read books from many genres, time periods, and cultures. This broadens the scope of your learning and shows you what has been done in the past, how it developed, and what is possible for you to do with your writing.

genre: [ZHAWN rə] the kind of story, i.e., historical fiction, adventure, mystery, western, suspense, literary, and so on.

C. S. Lewis, author of the Narnia tales, was an avid reader. He loved fairy tales and greatly admired the work of Kenneth Grahame (*The Wind in the Willows*) and George MacDonald (*Phantastes*, *Lilith*, and *At the Back of the North Wind*). Their influence is evident throughout Lewis’s work. J.R.R. Tolkien’s extensive knowledge of Germanic and Anglo-Saxon literature (think *Beowulf*) bleeds into *The Hobbit* and the Rings trilogy. When Dean Koontz, a modern suspense writer, was asked about favorite childhood memories, he began his reply with, “Going to Mars with Ray Bradbury.” They—and you—are standing on the shoulders of literary giants. Get to know the giants.

Read with an awareness of what you are reading. Watch how the author creates an empathetic character (makes you like the character), handles point of view, or weaves symbolism into the story. When you find a compelling passage, copy it out by hand or type it into a computer file and



then pick it apart to see how it was created. Imitate it by writing your own passage based on the original one.

Character or person?

People are real. *Characters* are invented, no matter how real they seem to readers. It's a nit-picky but important differentiation, especially when you discuss stories. So, instead of talking about the *person's* motivation, discuss the *character's*.

Where do ideas come from?

Ideas can come from anywhere—your subconscious, a crazy vacation, the Internet, a newspaper or magazine article, a friend's casual comment, a sermon point, a personal experience, books filled with story prompts, or a novel you happen to be reading. Anywhere and everywhere.

For example, **Ray Bradbury's** *Fahrenheit 451* was born of two ideas that collided. Late one night when Bradbury was walking with a friend, a policeman gave them a warning for walking out late. Bradbury was so peeved he wrote "The Pedestrian." Later he wondered what it would be like if firemen did not put out fires but created them. From this came "The Fireman." And both of these ideas later influenced *Fahrenheit 451*.

In *Zen in the Art of Writing*, Bradbury recommends writing about what irks you, about how you wish things could be different. It worked for him. It might for you.

E. B. White became interested in a spider in his barn on his new farm and he couldn't help but become attached to her. Her name? Charlotte. You can read about her in *Charlotte's Web*.

Where does this stuff come from? Wish I knew.

—Sue Grafton,
mystery writer

When **Leo Tolstoy** watched as a woman was crushed to death under a train in 1872, he was overcome with emotion. She had thrown herself under the train because of a broken relationship, and Tolstoy had known her. From his grief, he fabricated the story of *Anna Karenina*, a married woman who has an unhappy affair.

Frankenstein, on the other hand, owes its life to a summer of inclement weather and the writings of Dr. Erasmus Darwin (the not-yet grandfather of Charles), who wondered if it were possible to use electricity to bring



inanimate objects to life. So why not try human corpses? thought young **Mary Shelley**.

Mystery writer **Agatha Christie** has a simpler secret to gathering ideas: “The best time for planning a book is while you’re doing the dishes.”

Get into the habit of writing down your ideas when they hit you. Keep a notebook nearby. Print off that crazy Internet article and keep it in a file for future reference and inspiration.

1.4 All Writers and Discussion

Comb through a newspaper—yes, a newspaper—for story ideas and make a list of three interesting things you find. Read the whole thing, even all the ads and personals. For instance, think of the stories you could invent from these six words (often attributed to Ernest Hemingway): “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

Discussion: Share your finds with the group.

Lesson 3

I have an idea. Now what?

Here are some common methods for writing fiction:

- › You have no idea what you’re going to write, but you sit down and write.
- › You have an idea, so you sit down and write.
- › You have an idea and a nebulous plan, so you sit down and write.
- › You have an idea and an organized outline, so you sit down and write.

Notice the common clause in all this: “You sit down and write.”

All of these methods have worked for successful writers.

Which is best for you? Only you can tell.

Some authors are adamant that you have to plan out every character, character background, event, and ending. Others just write and see where the story ends up.

If my doctor told me I had only six minutes to live, I wouldn’t brood. I’d type a little faster

—Isaac Asimov,
author of *I, Robot*



Try different methods. Your learning style, personality, experiences, and habits will allow you to find the method that works best for you — **if you sit down and write.**

Here's the "formula":

- Step 1: Write.
- Step 2: Ponder.
- Step 3: Rewrite.
- Step 4: Adjust.
- Step 5: Write some more.
- Steps 6-51: Repeat steps 2 through 5 endlessly.
- Step 52: Proofread and polish, polish, polish.

Your process may be different, but you get the idea. Writing is not simply putting words on paper. It also involves follow-up work. And gluing your seat to the chair.

You'll learn many things in this course, but as you write your rough draft, forget about all of it and simply write. Use the creative side of your brain to write your first unshapely mess. Then go back and use the formal side of your brain (where your internal editor lives) to rewrite, shape, and polish.

There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately no one knows what they are.

—Somerset Maugham,
author of *Of Human Bondage*

Make-believe and truths

Good stories are an intricate blend of make-believe and truth. For instance, it is not possible, to my knowledge, to walk through the back of a wardrobe and discover a land filled with dwarves, dryads, and talking animals. It's all invented, but it is grounded in such reality — believable characters, feelings, reactions, truths about life, settings, and so forth — that it comes alive in readers' imaginations.



You can invent a wise-cracking rabbit who stands upright and says, “What’s up, Doc?” but no one will believe in him if you don’t give him

The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense.
—Tom Clancy, best-selling author

human reactions and feelings and make some honest observations about human nature and life—in Bugs Bunny’s case, that if you are the underdog, it pays to be wily.

If you write about a person—oops! character—betraying a friend, be honest about the friend’s reaction (anger, fear, self-doubt, loneliness, and so on) or you will lose credibility with your readers and then you will lose them. And readers can smell a dishonest reaction as far as they can smell skunk spray on a windy night.

Speaking of credibility, Franz Kafka begins “The Metamorphosis” with this totally unbelievable event:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

Who can believe this situation? No human wakes up as an insect. The premise is completely impossible. However, Gregor Samsa’s *feelings*, his family’s *reactions* and dealings with each other, his worry about his job—all of these are very honest and believable, and, therefore, the story is credible.

Your whole story, as you have written it down, is an invention. It never happened exactly that way. That’s why it’s called fiction. But you will make it *seem* as real as the world around you. You will build your story with believable and vivid details, honest emotions and reactions, and a cause-and-effect pattern (more on this in chapter 11: “Scenes”). This will cause your readers to willingly put their disbelief on hold and enter into the fictional world you create.

I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.
—Tim O’Brien, “Good Form”

1.5 All Writers and Discussion



Make a list of five “lies” (or inventions) and five truths in movies, short stories, and novels of your choosing. If something strikes a wrong chord, discover what makes it so.

Discuss the above with the group.

Lesson 4

Hook your reader

I'm writing a book.
I've got the page
numbers done.
—Steven Wright,
comic

Who has not been lured by this time-honored method of beginning a tale: “Once upon a time . . .”? Those four words hold so much promise and delight, and, like a balloon filled with water, you can almost feel their heft in your hand as you anticipate the rest of the story.

First impressions are important in fiction. You have only a few minutes to **hook** your reader. A hook is just what it sounds like: Those first sentences or paragraphs that hold such enticing bait in front of a reader that he'll bite and keep reading your story.

Here's the first sentence from Nicholas Sparks' *A Walk to Remember*:

When I was seventeen, my life changed forever.

What was the event? How did his life change forever? Readers want to know. Check out this one from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which throws us into the middle of a grave situation (bad pun intended):

Marley was dead: to begin with.

Sometimes the best hooks surprise us and make us ask questions. Consider how Dickens begins *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.



With these contrasts, Dickens sets up the opposites and ironies that appear throughout his story and makes us ask, “How could this be?”

Nicolae, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, borrows Dickens’ hook in order to make a stark point:

It was the worst of times; it was the worst of times.

Ray Bradbury uses a hint of violence in *Fahrenheit 451* to create curiosity:

It was a pleasure to burn.

It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*.

If an author plants questions in the reader’s mind, it becomes his job to answer them or at least address them in his story, which Bradbury does.

Here’s part of the hook for Rodman Philbrick’s *Freak the Mighty*:

I never had a brain until Freak came along and let me borrow his for a while, and that’s the truth, the whole truth.

How can you borrow someone’s brain? How did the narrator get along without a brain? Does he mean it literally or figuratively? What’s so freaky about Freak? When he says it’s the truth, does he mean it or is he stretching things? Believe it or not, *all* of those questions are answered in the book.

You may be familiar with this famous opening:

It was a dark and stormy night.

Those words, so often imitated and parodied, begin Edward George Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford*, written in 1830. What suspense! What atmosphere! What sense of foreboding! Then he completely unplugs the electricity with how he handles the rest of his first sentence, which was perfectly acceptable to readers and editors of that time:

It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along



the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.

Was the rain falling or wasn't it?

Until recently, writers could take many chapters to hook readers, but this will bore today's readers. How many great classics have left you bored simply because they took so long to get to the meat of the story?

Publishing houses hire professional readers, often college or graduate students, to read submissions. These young men and women have hundreds of stories to read and, most likely, will not finish yours unless you hook them early. For short stories, this means the first few paragraphs. For novels, the first pages.

There is a good reason why authors used to mosey through the first few chapters. In the scope of history, it is only recently that people have had television, movies, and other means of personal entertainment. The readers of *Robinson Crusoe* did not have shelves of books in their bedrooms. Stories came by way of plays, local storytellers, traveling professional storytellers, or an occasional book. In a world without constant bombardment, reading a book was a special treat, and, like a box of chocolates, was enjoyed when digested slowly.

But people don't read like that now. They are in a hurry. They expect the story to *get* to the story. In addition, they are accustomed to television shows that begin with one- or two-minute teasers—intentionally constructed to hook viewers—and movie previews that promise action, thrills, and adventure.

Here's the thing: Modern authors are not writing for people who lived one hundred years ago. They have adjusted their "hook" strategy for modern times.

Hooks can perform tasks other than catching readers and generating questions. Here are a few:

- > Set the tone for the story
- > Let readers know what type of story they are reading (the genre)
- > Reveal tension
- > Introduce the main character and his or her major problem (the major dramatic question)
- > Foreshadow events to come
- > Predict (or give hints about) the ending



Keep this in mind: Make sure your hook has something to do with what's really going on—or with what will happen later.

1.6 All Writers and Discussion

Discussion: Read the following hooks. What questions do they raise?

1. It looked like a good thing: but wait till I tell you. We were down South, in Alabama—Bill Driscoll and myself—when this kidnapping idea struck us. It was, as Bill afterward expressed it, “during a moment of temporary mental apparition”; but we didn’t find that out till later. (from “The Ransom of Red Chief” by O. Henry)
2. “The most beautiful crime I ever committed,” Flambeau would say in his highly moral old age, “was also, by a singular coincidence, my last. It was committed at Christmas.” (from “The Flying Stars” by G. K. Chesterton)
3. There is no lake at Camp Green Lake. There once was a very large lake here, the largest lake in Texas. That was over a hundred years ago. Now it is just a dry, flat wasteland. (from *Holes* by Louis Sachar)
4. He should never have taken that shortcut. (from *Timeline* by Michael Crichton)
5. The funny thing about facing imminent death is that it really snaps everything else into perspective. Take right now, for instance. (from *Maximum Ride* by James Patterson)
6. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.
However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen)

1.7 All Writers and Writing Group



Create three hooks, put them into a bowl with others from your writing group, and write a story from one you draw out. You need not write the whole story; simply write for ten or so minutes to see where you can take it—or where it takes you. Read results aloud, if desired.

1.8 Manuscript Track (for those who have written or are writing a short story or novel manuscript)

Read the opening sentences of your story. Do they grab the audience? Do they hint of things to come? Do they reveal tension?

Rewrite your hook until it is effective at capturing your audience. Then share it with the group and evaluate each other's hooks.

SAMPLE