



## CHAPTER 1: FACTS ABOUT FICTION

Assignment overview: 5 lessons with writing assignments and/or discussions

1 Manuscript Track assignment

### Lesson 1: The Power of Fiction + a Teeny-Tiny Grammar Lesson

Students are reading examples of how fiction has changed lives, and they are learning when to use italics or quotation marks in titles.

#### 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.

**Teacher:** Mention your favorite author and why he or she is your favorite, if you feel it is appropriate. Ask students what their favorite passages or story events are and encourage them to talk about their dislikes, too. This can be a lively discussion, especially if you lead them to talk about books they've had to read for school. If some students say they don't like to read, draw them out as to their reasons (learning disabilities, for example). The reasons might help them understand themselves better and might help them become better writers.

Students have reviewed the use of italics and quotation marks in titles just before this assignment. Let them know that you expect them to follow these rules in their assignments.

#### 1.2 All Writers

Write a letter to a living author of fiction 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 for the author) near the copyright page or at the back of the book.

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

**Teacher:** Guide the discussion about what kinds of questions to ask authors. Students should be specific with praise and questions: "I liked it when...", "I liked the battle scene between...", "How did you come up with the crazy name for the dog?" "Why did you let so-and-so die?" and so forth.

Decide if you want your students to turn in the letter to you before they mail it.

If you have a letter from an author, a signed copy of a book, or a personal anecdote about meeting an author, please share it with the class.

It may be possible that one or two students enjoy no living authors. In this case, consider allowing them to compose a letter to their deceased author as though that person were still alive.



## Lesson 2: About this course + Good writers are good readers + Character versus person + Where do ideas come from?

Needed: A newspaper for each student. Students are learning the following: (1) The format and contents of this course, (2) habits of effective readers, (3) the difference between *character* and *person*, and (4) where to glean ideas for stories.

### 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? Are you interested in learning how to write about a theme without having it stick out a mile?

Discussion: Discuss your list with the group.

**Teacher:** This discussion allows students to have a say in the class, to buy into the class and its material. If they mention something not included in the course, consider looking up the subject and finding the answer for them. If they mention something you know you will be teaching, let them know they will encounter the material in this course.

### 1.4 All Writers and Discussion

Comb through 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.

**Teacher:** Newspapers will often donate copies of their daily editions if you schedule this ahead of time. This is helpful because many students’ families don’t get a daily paper or won’t go out of their way to pick one up for the assignment. With donated copies, all students read the same edition together. You may want the newspaper assignment to occur in the classroom with students making lists and sharing them later or calling out interesting items as they come across them.

## Lesson 3: I have an idea. Now what? + Make-believe and truths

Students are learning (1) the “best” way to write fiction and (2) the best fiction is based on emotional truths.

### 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 is unbelievable, discover what makes it so.

Discuss this with the group.



**Teacher:** Here are just a few examples of “lies” and truths from the Disney/Pixar movie WALL•E.

### “Lies”

- A robot does not have emotions and cannot care for another being like WALL•E does.
- Robots cannot fall in love.
- Earth is not abandoned and uninhabited.
- Space travel on this level is not yet possible.
- It is hard to believe that the whole remnant of the human race would be lazy and overweight and so careless of their lives and children.

### Truths

- It is possible that someone who has been running things for a long time would become angry or jealous when someone new takes over or asserts his authority (like the computer with the ship’s captain).
- It is possible to consume too much (Earth’s resources, manufactured goods, food).
- Everyone wants to be loved.
- The Earth and its resources deserve our help and respect.
- Some things are worth saving and defending (EVE’s plant and, by symbolism, her unborn baby).

## Lesson 4: Hook your reader

Students are learning the importance of and strategies for engaging the interest and curiosity of their readers early.

### 1.6 All Writers and 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,” O. Henry) [**Teacher:** *Possible Qs—The narrator is one of the kidnapers, and it doesn’t sound as if it turned out well for him and his pal. How did it look like a “good thing”? Is the kidnapper’s family rich? Why did they kidnap? Whom did they kidnap? How did it all go wrong?*]
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,” G. K. Chesterton) [**Teacher:** *Possible Qs—How can a crime be “beautiful”? “The most...” indicates there were more. What were they? Why did Flambeau quit his life of crime on this Christmas? If he is so “highly moral” now, what is he doing? Was he ever caught? Did he ever pay for his life of crime? What was this “beautiful crime”?*]
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*, Louis Sachar) [**Teacher:** *Possible Qs—Why is it called Camp Green Lake if there is no lake? What happened to change a “green lake” into a “dry, flat wasteland”? Why is the character at a camp?*]
4. He should never have taken that shortcut. (from *Timeline*, Michael Crichton) [**Teacher:** *Possible Qs—Why not? What happened?*]
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*, James Patterson) [**Teacher:**



*Possible Qs—What is happening to this character? Is she really “facing imminent death”? If so, how? Who or what is threatening her?]*

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*, Jane Austen) [Teacher: *Possible Qs—Who is the single man? Is he really “in want of a wife”? Will the neighborhood succeed in pairing him off? If so, with whom?]*

## 1.7 All Writers and Writing Group

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

**Teacher:** Feel free to change the logistics of this activity or the time limit. This can be in-class work or a homework assignment. If a student draws one of his own hooks and doesn't want to write from it, allow him to choose again. Consider allowing students the opportunity to return a hook they simply can't sink their teeth into, but allow it only once per student.

## 1.8 Manuscript Track (for those who have written or are writing a short story or novel manuscript—this is extracurricular and not considered part of the normal class work)

Read the opening sentences of your story. Do they grab the audience? Do they hint of things to come? Do they spark essential questions?

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

**Teacher:** This is the first time the students in the manuscript track have been given something of their own to do. Your class may not have time or space for this track. You may not have students for it, either. Decide if you want to begin a group of manuscript students or completely ignore this part of the course. *Ignoring the manuscript track will not diminish the other writers' class experience in any way.* The additional track will be extra work for those students who choose it; the track is simply a chance to form a group on a higher writing level for writing, discussing, and critiquing purposes.

Tell students in this group to bring in their original hook and their new one so the group can compare them and give opinions. This is before the official critique groups have formed and been given directions (see chapter two for this), so simply encourage them to make positive, helpful remarks and think of questions for the writer.