

PART I

FICTION

Section 1: Plot

Weeks 1-4

Week 1

Plot points

Purpose: To understand how stories come together.

Plot, simply, is what happens in a story. Every time something new and significant happens in a story, that's a plot point. Don't think of plot points too scientifically. Have you ever told a story? Every time you said "and then," you were moving on to a new plot point.

A very brief version of the plot of *Alice in Wonderland* is: A girl falls down a rabbit hole and meets all sorts of strange creatures. A larger version of the plot would include a lot more detail.

This week, we're going to acquaint ourselves with plot by looking closely at a published story. Think of your task as dismantling a watch to see how all the pieces fit together to make it tick: You'll be taking a finished story apart into its pieces to help you understand how it works, and you'll accomplish this by finding the major plot points in the story.

Let me give you an example by showing you the major plot points in a scene from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Then, I'll ask you to read the fairy tale "Rapunzel" by the Brothers Grimm and find that story's plot points in the same way.

Read the following excerpt from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain.

Monday morning found Tom Sawyer miserable. Monday morning always found him so—because it began another week's slow suffering in school. He generally began that day with wishing he had had no intervening holiday, it made the going into captivity and fetters again so much more odious.

Tom lay thinking. Presently it occurred to him that he wished he was sick; then he could stay home from school. Here was a vague possibility. He canvassed his system.

No ailment was found, and he investigated again. This time he thought he could detect colicky symptoms, and he began to encourage them with considerable hope. But they soon grew feeble, and presently died wholly away. He reflected further. Suddenly he discovered something. One of his upper front teeth was loose. This was lucky; he was about to begin to groan, as a “starter,” as he called it, when it occurred to him that if he came into court with that argument, his aunt would pull it out, and that would hurt. So he thought he would hold the tooth in reserve for the present, and seek further. Nothing offered for some little time, and then he remembered hearing the doctor tell about a certain thing that laid up a patient for two or three weeks and threatened to make him lose a finger. So the boy eagerly drew his sore toe from under the sheet and held it up for inspection. But now he did not know the necessary symptoms. However, it seemed well worth while to chance it, so he fell to groaning with considerable spirit.

But Sid slept on unconscious.

Tom groaned louder, and fancied that he began to feel pain in the toe.

No result from Sid.

Tom was panting with his exertions by this time. He took a rest and then swelled himself up and fetched a succession of admirable groans.

Sid snored on.

Tom was aggravated. He said, “Sid, Sid!” and shook him. This course worked well, and Tom began to groan again. Sid yawned, stretched, then brought himself up on his elbow with a snort, and began to stare at Tom. Tom went on groaning. Sid said:

“Tom! Say, Tom!” [No response.] “Here, Tom! TOM! What is the matter, Tom?” And he shook him and looked in his face anxiously.

Tom moaned out: “Oh, don’t, Sid. Don’t joggle me.”

“Why, what’s the matter, Tom? I must call auntie.”

“No—never mind. It’ll be over by and by, maybe. Don’t call anybody.”

“But I must! DON’T groan so, Tom, it’s awful. How long you been this way?”

“Hours. Ouch! Oh, don’t stir so, Sid, you’ll kill me.”

“Tom, why didn’t you wake me sooner? Oh, Tom, DON’T! It makes my flesh crawl to hear you. Tom, what is the matter?”

“I forgive you everything, Sid. [Groan.] Everything you’ve ever done to me. When I’m gone—”

“Oh, Tom, you ain’t dying, are you? Don’t, Tom—oh, don’t. Maybe—”

“I forgive everybody, Sid. [Groan.] Tell ‘em so, Sid. And Sid, you give my window-sash and my cat with one eye to that new girl that’s come to town, and tell her—”

But Sid had snatched his clothes and gone. Tom was suffering in reality, now, so handsomely was his imagination working, and so his groans had gathered quite a genuine tone.

Sid flew down-stairs and said: "Oh, Aunt Polly, come! Tom's dying!"

"Dying!"

"Yes'm. Don't wait—come quick!"

"Rubbage! I don't believe it!"

But she fled up-stairs, nevertheless, with Sid and Mary at her heels. And her face grew white, too, and her lip trembled. When she reached the bedside she gasped out:

"You, Tom! Tom, what's the matter with you?"

"Oh, auntie, I'm—"

"What's the matter with you—what is the matter with you, child?"

"Oh, auntie, my sore toe's mortified!"

The old lady sank down into a chair and laughed a little, then cried a little, then did both together. This restored her and she said: "Tom, what a turn you did give me. Now you shut up that nonsense and climb out of this."

The groans ceased and the pain vanished from the toe. The boy felt a little foolish, and he said: "Aunt Polly, it SEEMED mortified, and it hurt so I never minded my tooth at all."

"Your tooth, indeed! What's the matter with your tooth?"

"One of them's loose, and it aches perfectly awful."

"There, there, now, don't begin that groaning again. Open your mouth. Well—your tooth IS loose, but you're not going to die about that. Mary, get me a silk thread, and a chunk of fire out of the kitchen."

Tom said: "Oh, please, auntie, don't pull it out. It don't hurt any more. I wish I may never stir if it does. Please don't, auntie. I don't want to stay home from school."

"Oh, you don't, don't you? So all this row was because you thought you'd get to stay home from school and go a-fishing? Tom, Tom, I love you so, and you seem to try every way you can to break my old heart with your outrageousness." By this time the dental instruments were ready. The old lady made one end of the silk thread fast to Tom's tooth with a loop and tied the other to the bedpost. Then she seized the chunk of fire and suddenly thrust it almost into the boy's face. The tooth hung dangling by the bedpost, now.

But all trials bring their compensations. As Tom wended to school after breakfast, he was the envy of every boy he met because the gap in his upper row of teeth enabled him to expectorate in a new and admirable way. He gathered quite a following of lads interested in the exhibition; and one that had cut his finger and had been a centre of fascination and homage up to this time, now found himself suddenly without an adherent, and shorn of his glory. His heart was heavy, and he said with a disdain which he did not feel that it wasn't anything to spit like Tom Sawyer; but another boy said, "Sour grapes!" and he wandered away a dismantled hero.²

2. From *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain (CreateSpace, 2010), pp. 37–39.

Since I will ask you to come up with 10 plot points for “Rapunzel,” here’s a 10-point **plot summary** of this snippet from *Tom Sawyer*:

1. Tom searched himself for aches that could keep him out of school.
2. He found a loose tooth but decided against using it as the excuse.
3. Then he found pain in his toe.
4. He started groaning very loudly, hoping to get Sid’s attention.
5. Sid awoke and, seeing Tom wailing with agony, ran downstairs to get Aunt Polly.
6. Aunt Polly figured out pretty quickly that nothing serious was wrong.
7. Tom resorted to Plan B: the tooth.
8. Against Tom’s pleas, Aunt Polly pulled it out.
9. Tom went to school after all.
10. Unexpectedly, he was the source of attention because the new gap in his teeth allowed him to spit in new and creative ways.

In the above, note that I didn’t go into too much detail—I hit just the basics. Two good guidelines for plot summaries:

- Try to write it so that someone reading only the plot summary could get a pretty good idea of what the story’s about, without any major blank spots. The opposite of this is true, too: If the summary makes sense without a piece of information, you can leave it out. For instance: Is it crucial for someone reading the summary to know that Tom was trying to get out of school? Yes. Is it crucial for this person to know that Mondays always put Tom in a funk? Not as much.
- Try to make room for information that will be necessary later on. For instance, #9 wouldn’t make much sense without #1. And #7 wouldn’t make much sense without #2.

Your turn. Read the fairy tale below and list its 10 main plot points, using the guidelines above. If you can write them down from memory after you finish the story, that’s great. But if you’d like to help yourself as you read, you can put a checkmark in the margin every time something “new” happens. When you’re done reading, you can go back to your checkmarks and use the plot points they refer to as your 10. Either way, a good way to guide yourself, after you’ve written down the first plot point in your summary, is to ask: “What happened next?”

Before you start, you might want to know that “rampion” is a kind of flower with an edible root that resembles turnip. It’s often used in salads in Europe. An “ell” is the length of a man’s arm. (Whenever you encounter words whose definitions you don’t know, make a point of looking them up in a dictionary. In fact, you should devote a portion of your practice notebook to vocabulary. By the time you’re done with this course, you may have quite a list of newly learned words.)

**“Rapunzel”
by the Brothers Grimm**

THERE was once a man and a woman who had long in vain wished for a child. At length the woman hoped that God was about to grant her desire. These people had a little window at the back of their house from which a splendid garden could be seen, which was full of the most beautiful flowers and herbs. It was, however, surrounded by a high wall, and no one dared to go into it because it belonged to an enchantress, who had great power and was dreaded by all the world.



One day the woman was standing by this window and looking down into the garden, when she saw a bed which was planted with the most beautiful rampion (rapunzel), and it looked so fresh and green that she longed for it, and had the greatest desire to eat some. This desire increased every day, and as she knew that she could not get any of it, she quite pined away, and looked pale and miserable. Then her husband was alarmed, and asked, “What ails you, dear wife?” “Ah,” she replied, “if I can’t get some of the rampion, which is in the garden behind our house, to eat, I shall die.”

The man, who loved her, thought, “Sooner than let your wife die, bring her some of the rampion yourself, let it cost you what it will.” In the twilight of evening, he clambered down over the wall into the garden of the enchantress, hastily clutched a handful of rampion, and took it to his wife. She at once made herself a salad of it, and ate it with much relish. She, however, liked it so much—so very much—that the next day she longed for it three times as much as before. If he was to have any rest, her husband must once more descend into the garden. In the gloom of evening, therefore, he let himself down again; but when he had clambered down the wall he was terribly afraid, for he saw the enchantress standing before him.

“How can you dare,” said she with angry look, “to descend into my garden and steal my rampion like a thief? You shall suffer for it!”

“Ah,” answered he, “let mercy take the place of justice, I only made up my mind to do it out of necessity. My wife saw your rampion from the window, and felt such a longing for it that she would have died if she had not got some to eat.”

Then the enchantress allowed her anger to be softened, and said to him, “If the case be as you say, I will allow you to take away with you as much rampion as you will, only I make one condition. You must give me the child which your wife will bring into the world; it shall be well treated, and I will care for it like a mother.” The man in his terror consented to everything, and when the woman gave birth, the enchantress appeared at once, gave the child the name of Rapunzel, and took it away with her.

Rapunzel grew into the most beautiful child beneath the sun. When she was twelve years old, the enchantress shut her into a tower, which lay in a forest, and had neither stairs nor door, but quite at the top was a little window. When the enchantress wanted to go in, she placed herself beneath this and cried,

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your hair to me.”

Rapunzel had magnificent long hair, fine as spun gold, and when she heard the voice of the enchantress she unfastened her braided tresses, wound them round one of the hooks of the window above, and then the hair fell twenty ells down, and the enchantress climbed up by it.

After a year or two, it came to pass that the King’s son rode through the forest and went by the tower. Then he heard a song, which was so charming that he stood still and listened. This was Rapunzel, who in her solitude passed her time in letting her sweet voice resound. The King’s son wanted to climb up to her, and looked for the door of the tower, but none was to be found. He rode home, but the singing had so deeply touched his heart, that every day he went out into the forest and listened to it. Once when he was thus standing behind a tree, he saw that an enchantress came there, and he heard how she cried,

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your hair.”

Then Rapunzel let down the braids of her hair, and the enchantress climbed up to her. “If that is the ladder by which one mounts, I will for once try my fortune,” said he, and the next day when it began to grow dark, he went to the tower and cried,

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down thy hair.”

Immediately the hair fell down and the King’s son climbed up.

At first Rapunzel was terribly frightened when a man such as her eyes had never yet beheld, came to her; but the King’s son began to talk to her quite like a friend, and told

her that his heart had been so stirred that it had let him have no rest, and he had been forced to see her. Then Rapunzel lost her fear, and when he asked her if she would take him for her husband, and she saw that he was young and handsome, she thought, “He will love me more than old Dame Gothel [the enchantress] does;” and she said yes, and laid her hand in his. She said, “I will willingly go away with you, but I do not know how to get down. Bring with you a skein of silk every time that you come, and I will weave a ladder with it, and when that is ready I will descend, and you will take me on the horse.”

They agreed that until that time he should come to her every evening, for the old woman came by day. The enchantress remarked nothing of this, until once Rapunzel said to her, “Tell me, Dame Gothel, how it happens that you are so much heavier for me to draw up than the young King’s son—he is with me in a moment.”

“Ah! you wicked child,” cried the enchantress, “What do I hear you say! I thought I had separated you from all the world, and yet you have deceived me!” In her anger she clutched Rapunzel’s beautiful tresses, wrapped them twice round her left hand, seized a pair of scissors with the right, and snip, snap, they were cut off, and the lovely braids lay on the ground. And she was so pitiless that she took poor Rapunzel into a desert where she had to live in great grief and misery.

On the same day, however, that she cast out Rapunzel, the enchantress in the evening fastened the braids of hair which she had cut off to the hook of the window, and when the King’s son came and cried, “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let down your hair,” she let the hair down. The King’s son ascended, but he did not find his dearest Rapunzel above, but the enchantress, who gazed at him with wicked and venomous looks. “Aha!” she cried mockingly, “You would fetch your dearest, but the beautiful bird sits no longer singing in the nest; the cat has got it, and will scratch out your eyes as well. Rapunzel is lost to you; you will never see her more.”

The King’s son was beside himself with pain, and in his despair he leapt down from the tower. He escaped with his life, but the thorns into which he fell pierced his eyes. Then he wandered quite blind about the forest, ate nothing but roots and berries, and did nothing but lament and weep over the loss of his dearest wife. Thus he roamed about in misery for some years, and at length came to the desert where Rapunzel lived in wretchedness. He heard a voice, and it seemed so familiar to him that he went towards it, and when he approached, Rapunzel knew him and fell on his neck and wept. Two of her tears wetted his eyes and they grew clear again, and he could see with them as before. He led her to his kingdom where he was joyfully received, and they lived for a long time afterwards, happy and contented.³

3. From “Grimm’s Tales” in *The Harvard Classics*, Vol. 17, ed. by Charles William Eliot (New York, 1909), pp. 71–74.

Each of your plot points should be about a sentence long. If you're squeezing too much into a single sentence, you can break up the information into two sentences.

Plot:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

After you've finished, spend some time rereading your plot points. This list is the plot of the story broken down to its essentials. Like the beams of a house visible during construction, it exhibits the basic structural framework that holds the building of the story together and keeps readers excited to find out what happens next. The authors may have come up with the entire story plan in advance, or they may have gotten an idea for how to start and then improvised from there as they went. Either way, try to understand that a story isn't pulled out of thin air. It takes forethought and an awareness of what will keep the reader's attention.

Challenge exercises:

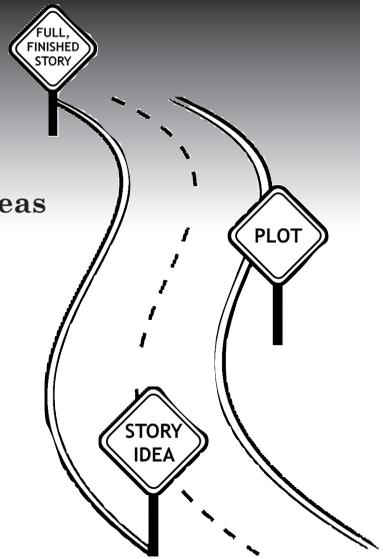
1. Not only books have plot. So do movies, plays, sometimes even dance numbers. Pick a favorite movie and write a 10-point plot summary for it.
2. In your 10-point plot summary for "Rapunzel," cross out numbers 6–10 and come up with five new plot points—a new, invented ending for the story.

Week 2

Come up with 10 story ideas

Purpose: To practice coming up with the essential building block of a story—the story idea.

Last week, you took a finished story apart into its plot points. Before you can have plot points, you need a plot, or a general idea of what the story will be about. Think of these as way stations on a Story Road that begins with Story Idea (A), continues to Plot Points (B), and ends with a Full, Finished Story (C). In Week 1, you went from C to B. This week, we'll be practicing A.



What makes a good story idea? There are some very complex answers to this question, but a very simple one will do for the time being: anything that makes a reader want to read on. Sometimes, we can't put a story down because we fall in love with a character. Sometimes, it's because the author is very funny or writes beautifully. When we can't put down a story because of its plot, that's because we're dying to find out what happens next. That could be because the author has described to us a conflict between two parties and we want to find out which one will get the upper hand. Or it's because we've met a character who really, really wants something, and because we're interested in this character, we'd like to find out if he or she is going to get it. In the words of a young writer I know, "All you need for a good story is characters you care about and the problem they're going to solve." Whether they're going to solve it is what keeps us reading. This is called "suspense."

So, suspense might be one element of a good plot. The occurrence of something unusual might be another. Think about it: A typical day in your home might not make for an exciting short story. But what about a day that begins like any other day but ends with an appearance by a mysterious visitor, a man in a black trench coat and top hat who claims to have known your father in college—and can quote random tidbits about what he was like there—but whom your father doesn't remember at all... .

This week, you will come up with 10 story ideas of your own.

In coming up with the 10 story ideas, try to describe situations likely to make your readers curious to read on. If you're stuck, pick the nearest object or person and ask yourself two questions: What type of out-of-the-ordinary thing might happen to this person or object? Or: How can I create suspense using this object?

Here's an example of the first: Are you sitting in the kitchen right now? Is there a toaster? What if... the toaster stops requiring electricity in order to function? What if—continuing with this thought—the oven starts cooking dinner without having to be turned on? What if the household appliances start developing personalities and start being able to move? Maybe the washing machine rumbles out of its place in the garage, bumps around the house collecting everyone's laundry, and washes it without needing to be turned on. Maybe it does this even though the laundry doesn't have to be done. Maybe no one can leave the house because the washing machine has taken everyone's clothes hostage! And so on. As you can see, a very simple starting point like a toaster can take us to very exciting and unusual places.

Here's an example of the second: You might be sitting at your kitchen table and looking at your brother as he prepares for guitar practice. Maybe he likes a girl in town, and because he knows she likes music, he recently took up guitar. His band is in the final round of a town-wide Battle of the Bands competition against a band featuring a popular kid who's been playing guitar his whole life. Maybe his dad was a guitarist in a famous rock band! Maybe the kid got lessons from Paul McCartney of the Beatles! Wouldn't we want to know who won this competition?

Here are several more examples of story ideas:

1. The last time you were scared: What was making you scared? How did the situation resolve itself?
2. Your mom comes home one day and acts the opposite of her usual self. Nothing obviously spooky happens—she doesn't grow fangs or begin to fly around on black wings—but you start feeling a sneaky suspicion that she's not herself.
3. Someone you know has the opportunity to get a lot of money if he cheats. What does he do? And what's the situation?
4. A rancher has had his prize bull killed and sets off to find the attacker. What happens?

These story ideas all have a question whose answer the author is hoping his readers will want to find out.

In #1, what's making the narrator scared and how will he defeat the fear?

In #2, what's really going on with the narrator's mom?

In #3, does the person cheat, and what are the consequences?

In #4, does the rancher find the person who killed his bull?

Your turn. The situation you describe can be as brief as a sentence or as long as a paragraph. Like the story ideas above, your situation should feature some kind of question or mystery likely to make a reader want to read on.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Challenge exercise:

In one sentence—no more than 25 words—write out the story idea behind your favorite movie. Do the same thing for your favorite book.

Week 3

Turn a photograph into a story

Purpose: To come up with a plot using the image in a photograph.



This exercise will test your story-inventing skills. Find a photograph, preferably with no caption and no clues to what's in it. A photograph of a man looking to the side in excitement (we can't see what he's excited about) is better than a photograph of a row of chocolates in a chocolate shop. The latter example is just business as usual—a chocolate shop is selling chocolates. (Though you're welcome to imagine an unusual and surprising story around those chocolates.) I'm just saying that it's easier for the imagination to start running if there's a ready mystery in the photograph: Whose hand is that? Why is the man crying? Why is that man excited? And so on.

You can look for a photograph online, in an old book, or in a current magazine. Take at least a half-hour to find a good one. How do you know you've found a good one? That's the one that puzzles you, makes you wonder about what's going on in the photo, or catches your attention so that you forget you're looking for a photograph for an assignment.

Then write 500 words in narrative form about the photograph. ("Narrative form" means that you would write it like a diary entry, one sentence following the next. The alternative would be to jot down observations in your notebook where each new observation is a bullet point, beginning a new line.) Imagine you're explaining what's going on in the photograph to someone who can't see it. Don't limit yourself to what you can see; imagine as much detail outside the photograph as you can. Here are some potential questions to answer:

1. What do we see in the photograph?
2. What do we not see in the photograph, but know must be near?
3. Are there people, or parts of people, in the photograph?
4. What kind of mood are they in?

5. Let's guess who they are based on how they're dressed or what they're doing.
6. What happened to these people yesterday?
7. What do they hope will happen tomorrow?
8. What is their relationship to one another?

And so on. (Remember: There are no incorrect answers.)

Feel free to devote more than one sentence to a particular detail of the photograph. In fact, if you wanted to devote your entire entry to a single thing about the photograph that caught your attention, feel free.

Challenge exercise:

Do you have a camera? Tell a story in 25 photographs using your camera. This will, of course, require you to think about what's going to happen in the story. If it's a story about a boy's dream of basketball stardom, you'll need your brother, a hoop, and... well, there are so many directions in which you could go. You may wish to write a "script"—a plan for the photographs—before you start, or you may want to be spontaneous. This assignment should remind you a little of your plot summary in Week 1. There, you practiced telling a story through an outline of the main plot points. You had to say a great deal in only 10 sentences. Here, you'll be summarizing a story in 25 photographs.

Week 4

Map out a story idea with plot points

Purpose: To take a story idea one step closer to being a finished story by plotting out, step by step, what will happen in the story.

In Week 1, you took a finished story (Station C on the Story Road) apart into its plot points (Station B). In Week 2, you practiced coming up with story ideas (Station A). This week, we're going to take some ideas for stories (A) and give them plot points (B).

You can have as many plot points as you'd like. Your mission is to describe what happens in this story, step by step, and if that takes more than the 10 entries we used in Week 2, that's fine. In length, they can be anywhere from a sentence to a paragraph.

How to do this? Let's use one of my story ideas from Week 2 as an example. Remember the story in which household appliances came to life? Here's what I wrote in Week 2:

Are you sitting in the kitchen right now? Is there a toaster? What if... the toaster stops requiring electricity in order to function? What if—continuing with this thought—the oven starts cooking dinner without having to be turned on? What if the household appliances start developing personalities and start being able to move? Maybe the washing machine rumbles out of its place in the garage, bumps around the house collecting everyone's laundry, and washes it without needing to be turned on. Maybe it does this even though the laundry doesn't have to be done. Maybe no one can leave the house because the washing machine has taken everyone's clothes hostage! And so on. As you can see, a very simple starting point like a toaster can take us to very exciting and unusual places.

You've got several plot points just in the description above:

1. The toaster stops requiring electricity in order to function.
2. The oven starts cooking dinner without having to be turned on.
3. The household appliances start developing personalities and start being able to move.

4. The washing machine rumbles out of its place in the garage, bumps around the house collecting everyone's laundry, and washes it without needing to be turned on.
5. Soon it starts doing laundry even though the laundry doesn't need doing.
6. No one can leave the house because the washing machine has taken everyone's clothes hostage!

As you can see, there's an escalation taking place here: First the toaster comes to life, then the oven, then the washing machine. At first, this is a positive development: How helpful that the washing machine collects and washes the laundry by itself! But then, the plot turns dark: The washing machine starts hijacking everyone's laundry. So we've got some suspense here: How is this problematic situation going to be resolved? That's what you'd have to figure out in the remainder of the plot points.

Creative writing textbooks have all kinds of formal names for what I described above: The escalation is known as *rising action*; the big moment of resolution—in this case, perhaps a confrontation between someone in your family and the leader of the appliances—is known as *climax*; the tying up of loose ends that happens afterward is called *falling action* or *resolution*; and so on. You don't have to concern yourself with these terms now; the more important thing is that you know them instinctively: A story has to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Think of your favorite movie or book: We meet the characters, we learn about the situation in which they find themselves, we learn about what they want, and we read or watch on to find out how things turn out.

You could use one of the story ideas you came up with in Week 2. If you'd like to try something different, here are some other ideas:

1. Two sisters compete against each other in the finals of a sport. Tell us what sport, what kind of relationship they have, who wins, and how it happens.
2. Tell a story of how trapped miners kept up their spirits—or not—until they were rescued.
3. You're the owner of a basketball team down on its luck. It hasn't won in years and is out of money. A businessman from another town offers to buy the team, but that would mean its relocation from the town where it has been based for nearly 50 years, a town where everyone loves the team. What happens?
4. A boy runs away from home to find a wizard because he is looking for the answer to a question. What is the question? What happens in his quest?

Mentor Materials

for

Part I: FICTION

Mentor Materials

Section 1: Plot Weeks 1–4

Week 1—Plot points

Purpose: To understand how stories come together.

Here’s what a sample list of plot points from “Rapunzel” might look like:

1. An enchantress catches a man stealing rampion from her garden and lets him go in exchange for his first-born.
2. The enchantress locks up the little girl, named Rapunzel, in a high tower without stairs or a door.
3. The enchantress visits Rapunzel by climbing up her long hair.
4. One day, the King’s son happens upon Rapunzel’s sweet song, but can’t climb up to her until he overhears the enchantress instructing Rapunzel to let down her hair.
5. The King’s son does the same thing. In the tower, he and Rapunzel declare their love for each other.
6. Rapunzel tells the King’s son to bring silk so she can weave a ladder to escape.
7. One day, Rapunzel accidentally reveals the plan to the enchantress.
8. The enchantress cuts Rapunzel’s hair, banishes her to a desert, and tricks the King’s son into climbing up to the tower by lowering Rapunzel’s hair.
9. Cursed by the enchantress and heartbroken by Rapunzel’s banishment, the prince leaps out of the tower, and his eyes are pierced by thorns.
10. He wanders until he discovers Rapunzel, whose tears return his eyesight, and they live happily ever after.

It might help to not limit the writer to 10 points in the first draft of the outline. Let her create as many plot points as she wishes. Then, in the second draft of the summary, she can focus on combining and cutting.

It's not the end of the world if the writer ends up with more than 10. It's an arbitrary number for the purposes of this exercise. The aim of this lesson isn't so much to learn how to outline as to see how plot points lead to a story. For instance, in my first draft of the outline, I devoted the first two plot points to the couple that had long been dreaming of a child. I cut them out in the second draft because, as important as they are, they vanish after the opening lines, and there's so much else of import that happens in the story.

If the writer is stuck, prompt her with questions:

1. Is the enchantress Rapunzel's mother? If not, how does Rapunzel become her ward?
2. How does the King's son learn of Rapunzel?
3. How does the enchantress trick the prince into climbing up to the tower after she's banished Rapunzel?
4. What happens when the prince gets up there?
5. Does the prince find his way back to Rapunzel?
6. Will the story outline still make sense if we cut out mention of the husband and wife who gave birth to Rapunzel? If we cut out Rapunzel?

Week 2—Come up with 10 story ideas

Purpose: To practice coming up with the essential building block of a story: the story idea.

Remind the writer that, in coming up with a story idea, "unusual" doesn't have to mean "extraordinary." Beginning writers often overreach, imagining that a story must have aliens invading Earth to count as a story. (Just as often, they underreach, imagining that nothing more unusual and suspenseful than the regular day they just had is necessary.)

If the writer is stuck, ask him to pick an object—any object, even something prosaic. Then ask him to describe the usual purpose of this object. Then ask how something unusual could befall this object. You'll be surprised by how even the most mundane objects harbor potential as focal points for stories. Even that toaster becomes interesting when it suddenly stops requiring electricity to do its work.

The two keywords for coming up with story ideas at this stage are: "suspense" and "unusual." Questions to ask the writer: Will this make you/the reader want to find out what happens next?

You may also choose to have the writer do the challenge exercise *before* embarking on the lesson's assignment as a way of becoming comfortable with story ideas. For more story ideas toward which you can nudge the writer, look at Week 4, where I mention some others.

Week 3—Turn a photograph into a story

Purpose: To come up with a plot using the image in a photograph.

To practice, you might choose a famous image like the Times Square Kiss or the raising of the American flag over Iwo Jima. The latter, especially, presents an opportunity for the writer to investigate some history alongside this week's lesson. The Iwo Jima image is useful as well because while its history may not be known yet to the writer, its meaning is fairly easy to decipher: Soldiers are raising an American flag.

Why are they raising an American flag, you might ask. Because they won a battle, the writer might respond. A battle against whom? Here, the writer, if she doesn't know about the war against Japan, might say something incorrect but imaginative like: "Aliens." Go with this direction: Did the aliens attack the U.S.? What happened? Tease a narrative out of the writer, step-by-step, by asking questions based on her answers in this way.

In any lesson, you can help yourself come up with questions to prompt the writer by brainstorming around what might be called the **5 Essential Ingredients of Fiction**: plot, characters, dialogue, setting, point of view. Go through each of these categories, applying them to the image/story idea/etc. at hand:

- What's happening here? (plot)
- Who are the characters? (character)
- What are they saying to each other? (dialogue)
- Where is this taking place? (setting)
- Who's telling the story? (point of view)

For this week specifically, here's a list of sample questions that could apply to any image:

- What do we see in the image?
- What's the setting? Are we indoors or outdoors? If outdoors, what's the weather? If indoors, where are we? A department store, a baseball

diamond, a homeless shelter, a battlefield?

- Who are the characters, if any?
- Do they know each other? What do they think of each other?
- What can we tell about them, based on their mood or the way they are dressed?
- If we could ask them “What do you want?”, what would they say?
- Let’s imagine where these characters were at this time yesterday.
- Let’s imagine what this place looked like on another occasion.
- Why are the characters doing what they’re doing?

Week 4—Map out a story idea with plot points

Purpose: To take a story idea one step closer to a finished story by plotting out, step-by-step, what will happen in the story.

If the writer is stuck for ideas about what happens next, or how to begin, prompt him with questions. If the story idea is “Mom comes home from the grocery store acting weird,” you might say “Weird how?” or “What does Mom usually do when she gets home from the grocery store?” The writer might say, “She puts the groceries away.” Then you might say, “So, wouldn’t it strike you as strange if she did something different from that? What might that be? Would it be weird if she sat down and started eating cereal directly from the box without having put anything away?” When the writer answers affirmatively, you might ask: “What would you do if you saw that? Might you not ask Mom why she was doing that, or if she was hungry? And wouldn’t it be strange if Mom said no, she wasn’t hungry at all, then rose to put the groceries away?” And so on.

As discussed last week, you might lean on the 5 Essential Ingredients of Fiction. Let’s say the story idea is “Mr. Smith’s car runs out of gas on a deserted highway at night.”

Potential questions:

Plot: What happened? Did Mr. Smith forget to fill up? Or is there a leak in his tank? If there’s a leak, is that because the car is faulty or someone punctured his tank? If the car is faulty, is it a rental or his own car? If his own, is Mr. Smith not very vigilant or skilled at taking care of automobiles?

Notice that, inevitably, plot overlaps with character: Asking what happened leads to us to wonder whether it happened because the character is not vigilant or skilled at taking care of vehicles. The 5 Essential Ingredients

of Fiction is just a brainstorming tool: It's meant to get you thinking about essential aspects of the story. Your questions will ultimately overlap categories.

Generally, you can imagine your questions to the writer as a kind of choose-your-own-adventure. If the writer says the car is a rental, for instance, you might ask: Did he rent it at the airport? Where did he fly in from, and why? (Touches on setting.) If Mr. Smith owns the car, you might ask something else, like whether he isn't very good at taking care of vehicles.

Proceed down the list of the 5 Essentials:

- **Dialogue:** Does Mr. Smith have a cell phone? Is it getting a signal in this emptiness? Did he call his wife earlier? Speaking of which, is he married? Does anyone know where he is? If he can get a signal, can he call police?
- **Setting:** Where is he going, anyway? Why is he out so late at night in such an empty place? Was he rushing somewhere? What season is it? If it's winter, is he in danger of freezing to death?
- **Point of view:** Is Mr. Smith telling us the story? Is he telling it to us as it's happening or after the fact? If after the fact, that must mean he didn't die there in the cold night, right?

There are other categories you might include in your repertoire, such as:

- **Description:** What kind of car is it? What is Mr. Smith wearing, and what does it tell us about his background? (Touches on character.) And so on.

PART II

POETRY

Section 1: Introduction to Poetry

(or, I'm a poet and I don't know it)

Weeks 1-2

Week 1

The alphabet exercise

Purpose: To begin to understand the difference between fiction and poetry.

What's poetry, anyway? Instinctively, we know what poems look like, but can you put into words how poems are different from short stories? Let's come up with a couple of things that are true for poems, but not true for stories:

1. The lines in poems are usually much shorter than the lines in stories
2. Poems are organized in groups of lines (called stanzas)
3. Sometimes, poems rhyme
4. Poems are (usually) much shorter than stories
5. Poems have many more restrictions than stories (some poems have to rhyme; others have to have a certain number of syllables in each line, or a certain number of lines in each stanza; etc.)
6. This may be hard to appreciate now, but poetry *sounds* very different from fiction. Because poems must pack their meaning into a far smaller space, using far fewer words than fiction, they end up sounding a lot more charged and intense than short stories. The language in short stories often resembles the language people use in everyday life. Less so in poetry.

These characteristics, among others, make poetry very different from fiction. Think of poetry and prose as distant cousins, or, better yet, two artisans who use the same material—words—to make very different objects. Poetry presents an excitingly different creative challenge from fiction. If, until now, you've found yourself drawn only to fiction, give poetry a try. I used to focus only on fiction, but then had to teach a college writing course that included poetry as well. I'm so grateful for that forced introduction because it brought me into a new world of words that has made me not only interested in poetry, but a far better fiction writer, too.

Part of the reason for this has to do with something mentioned above: Poems have far less room and far fewer words than stories to make their point. Poems tend to deploy more precise and expressive words, images, and ideas,

as these have to do that much more work in presenting an idea or feeling to the reader. The language of poetry is especially concentrated. Think of it as a balloon inflated to the fullest, a single breath away from exploding.

Part of what makes poems different is all the restrictions poets work under. This week, you'll write a whole poem while working under one such restriction: each new line of your poem must begin with the next letter of the alphabet.

In a page of your notebook, line the left margin with the alphabet, like this:

A _____
B _____
C _____
D _____
E _____
F _____
G _____
H _____
I _____
J _____
K _____
L _____
M _____
N _____
O _____
P _____
Q _____
R _____
S _____
T _____
U _____
V _____
W _____
X _____
Y _____
Z _____

Now, let's try to tell a story where each new line begins with a new letter of

the alphabet. In each line, you can write **complete sentences** or **fragments**. Here are examples of both:

Complete sentences:

A screeching noise woke me up.
Before I got up, I looked at the alarm clock.
Crazy, I thought: It's not even 5:00 a.m.
Downstairs, everything was quiet.
Everyone still seemed to be sleeping.
Funny things happen in the night while everyone sleeps.

Fragments:

Anyway,
Brothers and sisters
Can
Do
Everything together like
Friends



(Sometimes, it's okay to give yourself a hand by using a "throwaway" word like "anyway," just to help you get going.)

This exercise actually has two restrictions: 1) you have to choose words that make some kind of sense for the story you're telling *and* 2) they ought to be words that begin with the appropriate letter. Therefore, you may wish to do a **practice round** that has no restrictions. Just write the first five words that start with A that come to mind, then the first five words that start with B, and so on. Hopefully, this will warm up your "vocabulary muscles" and make it easier to come up with a story for the real exercise.

When you're ready for your alphabet poem: Try to tell a single story throughout the exercise. If you're stuck, you could keep going with the strange-noise-downstairs story in the first example. You could tell the story of a horse who can talk (A Brown Colt Dances, Explains Facts, Grabs my Hand...) or pirates attacking a ship (A ship appeared on the horizon,/a Black flag waving from its mast./The Captain ordered the sailors to clear/the Deck.) The story doesn't have to make perfect sense, and it's fine to help yourself by inserting a "help-word" such as "a" or "the" before an alphabet letter:

A ship appeared on the horizon,

a Black flag waving from its mast.
The Captain ordered the sailors to clear
the Deck.

It's also acceptable to alternate complete **clauses** (the first three lines in the pirate story above) with fragments (the fourth). (A clause is a group of words that includes both a noun and a verb. "The brown colt dances" is a clause, but "the brown colt" is not.)

Modified exercise: If the 26-letter alphabet feels like too much, forget about the last 13 letters. Just try to get to M.

Challenge exercises:

1. Write an alphabet poem backwards, with your first line beginning with Z and your last line with A.
2. Get as far as you can in an alphabet poem where each new line has only one word.

Week 2

Acronym poem

Purpose: Write a poem where each new line begins not with the next letter of the alphabet but with the next letter of an acronym (ASAP, TTYL, CIA).

This week, you'll use an acronym to help you write your second poem.

Acronyms are abbreviations of words using their first letters. ASAP is an acronym for “*a*s soon *a*s possible”; CIA stands for Central Intelligence Agency.

Your job in this lesson is to come up with 10 mini-poems where each new line begins with the next letter of an acronym. (So, you'll have to start by coming up with 10 acronyms.) I'll give you the first five acronyms; you'll have to come up with the rest.

My five:

AWOL (*a*bsent *w*ithout *l*eave)

FWIW (*f*or *w*hat *i*t's *w*orth)

ANFSCD (*a*nd *n*ow *f*or *s*omething completely *d*ifferent)

LSHMBH (*l*aughing *s*o *h*ard *m*y *b*elly *h*urts)

AARP (*A*merican Association of *R*etired *P*ersons)

The same rules apply as for the alphabet poem—both complete sentences and fragments are fine; so are both complete and incomplete clauses. For instance, for AWOL, you could do:

Always

Want to have

One more

Lollipop

Try hard for your poem to make sense instead of being a random collection of words.

Challenge exercises:

1. Come up not with mini-poems but new *acronyms* using the same letters. For instance, you could revise AWOL to stand for:

Arbitrary
Withdrawal
Of
Lollipops

2. Write mini-poems (that make sense) using first letters not of an alphabet or acronym but of words:

1. JURASSIC
2. SUPERCOLLIDER
3. EXTRAORDINARY
4. MASSIVE
5. PIPELINE

3. Write mini-poems (that make sense) using not first letters but first *words*, drawn from common phrases:

For instance:

Over
My
Dead
Body

could become something like:

Over the moon I sailed,
My chariot aiming heavenward while the world slept like
Dead people, my
Body becoming lighter and lighter.

Here are five you could try:

1. This Is Ground Control
2. Roses are Red and Violets are Blue
3. Fairy Tales Can Come True
4. And They Lived Happily Ever After
5. Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind

4. Write mini-poems (that make sense) where each new line begins with a new *random* word rather than part of a phrase:

1. Iron Broccoli Gem Squirrel Platoon India Racecar
2. Recycle Underslept Windy Magic Snap Burrow Upset
3. America Baseball Charlie Diana Everyone Fantasy Glowing
4. Spoon Sleep Milk Bib Snow Cute
5. Poem Poem Poem Poem Poem Poem

Section 2: Description

Weeks 3–6

Week 3

As unhappy as a bluefish at the end of a fishing line: Comparisons

Purpose: To learn how to use similes and metaphors.

Imagine if someone said, “It snowed.” Could you picture in your mind what that person was telling you? Probably—most of us know what snow looks like. Now, imagine if that person said, “It snowed so much that going to the mailbox felt like walking through water.” We’ve all probably waded through a pool or an ocean, so now, we’re not only imagining the snow with our minds but also *feeling* with our bodies what walking through that snow must have been like. That second impression—the comparison of walking through the snow to walking through water—helps us to imagine more richly how much snow there was.

There are lots of ways to compare one thing to another, but this week, we’re going to focus on two: **similes** and **metaphors**.

A simile compares two things by putting one thing next to another, using words such as “like” or “as.” For example, “The rising sun looked **like** an apple on fire.” Metaphors, on the other hand, compare two things by saying that one thing *is* another. “The rising sun **was** an apple on fire.” Clearly, metaphors don’t mean this literally but poetically. Both similes and metaphors help us imagine what something is like by comparing it to something else.

How does one come up with a simile or a metaphor? Let’s use my example from above: I started with the snow. The aspect of it I wanted to highlight in the comparison was how much of it there was and how difficult it made walking. If I wanted to emphasize the *size* of a snowbank using a comparison, I would have tried to think of tall things and said something like: “The snowbank was a skyscraper towering above Mom’s Mazda.” If I wanted to focus on how *cold* the snow made it, I would have tried to think of other



cold things and said something like: “The snow made it as cold as an icebox.” But since I wanted to focus on what it *felt* like to walk through the snow, I had to come up with another image having to do with sensation. Wading through snow is all about fighting through resistance; what else feels like that, I wondered. Doing sit-ups might work, I thought, but that wasn’t a very precise comparison. With snow you’re trying to move forward; with sit-ups, you’re more or less stationary. Maybe there was a better image, an image having to do with movement and resistance? That’s when I remembered what it feels like to wade through water.

For this week’s assignment, you’ll complete 10 fill-in-the-blank exercises that practice your knack for these kinds of comparisons. Let’s do the first couple together so you can observe how I come up with the comparisons.

1. As excited as a _____.

Process: I start by thinking: Who or what exhibits excitement? Lottery winners exhibit excitement. Students having finished their homework for the day exhibit excitement. Moms who’ve just been told their children have finished their homework for the day (and cleaned up their room) exhibit excitement. And there you have it: As excited as a student who just finished her homework. Or: As excited as a mom whose daughter has finished her homework.

Challenge question:

Is this a simile or metaphor?

Now come up with your own answer: As excited as who or what?

2. John had told Sam, over and over: no visitors in the woodshop. But Sam seemed to pay attention about as well as a _____.

Process: The first couple of sentences here are just for information. Our focus goes immediately to the last sentence. What are we seeing there? Sam doesn’t pay attention well. The assignment asks us to compare Sam to something else that fidgets or is restless or can’t focus. What about:

But Sam seemed to pay attention about as well as a hummingbird.

Challenge question:

Simile or metaphor?

Now come up with your own answer. What did Sam pay attention about as well as?

3. Charlie gazed at the men moving around on the baseball diamond as if they were _____.

Process: This is a tricky one. The first thing to do is to determine for what we're trying to find a comparison. For Charlie? For the baseball diamond? No—for the men on it; the sentence says “as if *they* were...” This comparison implies that Charlie was mesmerized by the baseball players. What kind of individuals might transfix us as viewers? What about magicians? Or something more fanciful, like special emissaries who are telling us the secret of our future? So, how about:

Charlie gazed at the men moving around the baseball diamond as if their feet were writing out the secret meaning of his life.

Challenge question:

Simile or metaphor?

Now come up with your own answer. What were the men moving around like?

Finish the rest of these on your own:

4. The apple was as green as a _____.
5. The yacht bobbed in the vast blue sea, nothing more than a _____.
6. Whenever Meredith couldn't figure her way out of a quandary, she ran. Miles and miles. It helped her clear her head. Streaking down the carriageways of the woods around her home, she felt like a _____.
7. Threading a needle is like _____.
8. He was a _____; he never let disappointment get to him.
9. The cat slunk around in the darkness, a _____.
10. The stars studded the sky, a _____.

Challenge exercises:

1. Come up with five similes and five metaphors on your own.
2. Find five similes and five metaphors in today's newspaper. (They're all over the place—trust me.)

Week 4

Abstract into concrete

Purpose: To come up with concrete words for abstract objects and ideas.

In both fiction and poetry, it's much better to use concrete images than abstract ideas.

What's the difference? Abstract is anything that means something different depending on who's hearing about it. Love is abstract—whatever comes across the word thinks of a different thing. (You might be thinking about your mom darning one of your socks and I may be thinking of a dozen flowers.) Darned socks and flowers are both concrete; when I say flowers, you're not going to think of a refrigerator. Neither will anyone else hearing the word (unless they're really strange). You might say, yes, but there are lots of different kinds of flowers, and you'd be right. There's a way to be even more concrete here: azaleas, tulips, mums, rhododendrons. Put another way—and you might remember this distinction from your “Who Am I?” exercise from the fiction section—abstract is general and concrete is specific.

Concrete is better than abstract because concrete is a lot easier to imagine—it's clear *exactly* what has to be imagined. (And when we read books, we have to imagine everything, as the book itself is nothing but a bunch of ink on a page.) If a reader has to lose time and get distracted by figuring out what exact kind of love the writer is referring to—sock-darning, or flower-giving, or the million other kinds?—he's liable to get frustrated and stop reading the piece in front of him. This week's exercise is all about figuring out how to make abstract things concrete through specific descriptions.

Let's start by thinking of some abstract things, shall we? Let's include love. Can you think of others? Take a moment to jot down 5. If you're stuck, look at my list:

1. Love
2. Anger
3. Generosity

4. Blue
5. Five

You'll notice that the first three are emotions, but #4 is a color and #5 is a number. Colors are abstractions. Blue is an abstraction; "blue cat" is not. And numbers like "five" are abstractions, too; "five fingers" is not. It's the concrete details that turn an abstraction into something very easy to visualize, because it's so specific.

Another great way to test for concrete vs. abstract, if you're stuck, is to ask: Can you pour chocolate sauce on it? It's not a foolproof test, but it generally works. Can you pour chocolate sauce on blue? No. On a blue cat? Yes!

So, this week, your job will be to write five mini-poems (four lines each) describing abstract things in concrete terms. (You can use my list, or your own.) So, for instance, if you were writing a poem about love, it could look something like this:

Love is a hand reaching for another hand,
A warm bed on a cold night,
A ship sailing toward the harbor,
A grin on a face at the arrival gate.

This may remind you a little of the comparison exercise from last week: You're comparing one thing to another. (Quick: Do the above lines consist of metaphor or simile?) The difference is that you're translating something abstract into something concrete.

Challenge exercises:

1. Write an alphabet poem where each line describes the shape of its starting letter in concrete terms. (A is a man doing jumping jacks...)
2. Do the same thing for a number poem ("1 is a telephone pole, 2 is a swan...")



Mentor Materials

for

Part II: POETRY

Mentor Materials

Section 1: Introduction to Poetry

(or, I'm a poet and I don't know it)

Weeks 1–2

Week 1—The alphabet exercise

Purpose: To begin to understand the difference between fiction and poetry.

Here's an example of one complete alphabet poem, using the starting lines above and utilizing both complete sentences and fragments, and both complete and incomplete clauses:

A screeching noise woke me up.
Before I got up, I looked at the alarm clock.
Crazy, I thought: It's not even 5:00 a.m.
Downstairs, everything was quiet.
Everyone still seemed to be sleeping.
Funny things happen in the night while everyone sleeps.
Go back upstairs, I told myself; drink some
Hot milk to help fall asleep.
It's only 5:00, after all!
Just as I returned upstairs,
Ka-boom! I heard again from downstairs.
Looks like I'm not getting very
Much sleep to-
Night, I thought.
Or maybe I should just ignore the noise?
Put the pillow over my head, make it
Quiet with earplugs, and finally get some
Rest?
Sounds
Totally
Unlikely!
Very unlikely.
What do you have to do to catch
Yourself some
Zzzzzzzzzzs around here?

To create this alphabet poem, I thought ahead only as far as the next letter. (In fact, I covered up every letter but the next one, which made the task more manageable.) Working on, for instance, “s,” I was, in the back of my mind, thinking ahead to “t” and trying to think of words that begin with “t” that could go together in a phrase with something that begins with “s” (it’s not always possible but it was, in this case).

Another way to drum up ideas is to come up in advance with a list of words that begin with the necessary alphabet letter and also have to do with sleep. (Quiet, pillow, noise, earplugs.) In fact, you may wish to have the writer come up with 25 Words That Have To Do With Sleep (if she’s writing an alphabet poem about being woken up in the middle of the night) before even starting the exercise. That will give her a whole bunch of words to work with and around as she constructs the poem.

Another way to help the writer if she’s stuck on a particular letter is to get her to open a pocket dictionary and flip through the letter until a light-bulb goes off and she finds something with which she’d like to work. (Another option is to simply write out 20, say, “p” words from the dictionary and try to make one work.)

You might ask how the poem above is different from a piece of prose chopped up into 20 lines. It’s a fair question—there *isn’t* much difference right now. My example is not exhibiting any of the things that distinguish poetry from prose except for line breaks—there is no rhyme scheme, no meter, and—most importantly but least quantifiably—the language is slack and colloquial, and the imagery basic. Don’t mistake this for poetry: it merely mimics the writer’s stage of development. As we proceed through this course and on to further levels of this series, our poetry will improve in tandem.

Week 2—Acronym poem

Purpose: Write a poem where each new line begins not with the next letter of the alphabet but with the next letter of an acronym (ASAP, TTYL, CIA).

If the writer is stuck, help him the same way you did in Week 1: Take a break from the assignment and brainstorm words that begin with the necessary letter. Or flip through the dictionary—a great way to expand vocabulary! Here are some other acronyms you could recommend in case the writer is having trouble coming up with the five he needs to choose on his own. You can either give the writer the acronym and ask him to guess what it stands for, or give the writer the words/phrase and ask him to come up with the acronym:

AAMOF (as a matter of fact)
CEO (chief executive officer)
IKWUM (I know what you mean)
JTLYK (just to let you know)
POAHF (put on a happy face)
NIMBY (not in my backyard)
POTUS (President of the United States)
WHO (World Health Organization)

You'll notice that acronyms often correspond to clichés; it's precisely because the phrase is used so often that someone developed an acronym. We'll have a lesson on the problem with cliché later in the course; for now, it's great that the writer will be steering the acronym away from the cliché, endowing those over-familiar letters with new meaning.

As you probably noticed, this lesson uses the challenge exercises to gradually ramp up the restrictions under which the writer has to produce a poem that still makes sense. This is one week where I would strongly advise taking extra time to do all the challenge exercises, as they have this sequential nature.

Mentor Materials

Section 2: Description Weeks 3–6

Week 3—As unhappy as a bluefish at the end of a fishing line: Comparisons

Purpose: To learn how to use similes and metaphors.

Because metaphors are difficult to prompt (see #10, for instance), make sure the writer answers with an actual comparison. But this comparison need not be literal. That is, the writer could compare the star-studded sky to a face studded with freckles, or she could compare the star-studded sky to a necklace. As long as both images share the *dominant* detail—many small dots in the same place—it works. But it’s critical that the writer focuses on the detail declared dominant by the assignment. That is, #10 asks the writer to compare the studdedness of the sky—not the color of the sky, and not anything else related to astronomy. Here are some answers that could work for #10:

The stars studded the sky, a freckled dark mask.

The stars studded the sky, a holey undershirt.

The stars studded the sky, a necklace of pearls.

The stars studded the sky, a box of nails holding up a dark curtain.

In #4, the dominant detail is the greenness of the apple.

In #5 (less obvious), it’s the smallness and fragility of the yacht in the “vast blue sea,” so the writer would have to come up with a comparison that stresses this, for instance “nothing more than a sapling in a windstorm.”

In #6, the writer would have to compare Meredith to someone fast, someone light, someone casting the troubles off his shoulders—a puma? an Olympic torchbearer? one of those messengers sprinting from town to town in the Greek myths?

In #7, the dominant detail is left up to the writer. For me, threading a needle is like “trying to get my cat into his carrier” (dominant detail: generic difficulty) or “like trying to hike through a slot canyon in New Mexico” (dominant detail: physical narrowness), but I can just as easily imagine an

answer such as “Threading a needle is like administering a shot” (dominant detail: the act of poking a thin item into/through something else) or “like sinking a jump shot” (generically putting one thing into another).

In #8: Clearly, “he” was an optimist. But the writer can’t say that; she has to come up with a metaphor whose dominant detail is optimism: “He bought lottery tickets every day.” Or, “He would have been the one cheerful guy on the *Titanic*.”

In #9: The dominant detail here seems to be pretty well-defined: The notion of stealth, an object moving through a concealing space, like a submarine, a special-forces soldier, or a thief.

Week 4—Abstract into concrete

Purpose: To come up with concrete words for abstract objects and ideas.

The distinction between concrete and abstract is, well, quite abstract to young writers. But it’s a critical one for good writing. Reading is more difficult than watching television—the reader has to form images based on the words by himself. That work is hard. The writer has to help the reader by making it as easy as possible to imagine what he is saying—not by using simple words or images, but by being as concrete as possible. Think about it: If my novel says “Sam loved Arianna,” you get the gist of his feelings about her but little more. *How* does he love her? If I tell you about him observing her with a slightly fearful wonder as she swings with their daughter in a park, wouldn’t that tell you more?

Don’t worry if the writer doesn’t quite grasp the distinction between concrete and abstract at this point. The more important thing is to get him to practice specificity, vividness, and concreteness. If he becomes stuck in coming up with a list of five abstractions, help him by performing the chocolate-sauce test. Can you pour chocolate sauce on generosity? On fear? On politics?

If the writer is confused about what kinds of concrete images he ought to come up with for his abstract terms, ask: What does it make you think of? Take a break from the exercise and jot down five associated images for each one. Chances are the writer will produce concrete images in response. It’s our natural storytelling impulse to translate from abstract into concrete, even when we aren’t working on exercises or writing poems. The images the writer produces can feed his poem for this week’s exercise.