The Creative Writer

Level Three: Building Your Craft

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Level Three: Building Your Craft

by Boris Fishman

INTRODUCTION

TO THE STUDENT

This is the third volume in the four-volume *The Creative Writer* series. The last volume, *Level Two*, focused on the basic elements of fiction: plot, character, dialogue, setting, point of view. That is, a story needs to be *about something*—what happens in it is the **plot**. And, of course, it needs **characters** to whom this "something" is happening. These characters will probably talk to each other (**dialogue**); the story will probably take place somewhere (**setting**); and it will be narrated from the perspective of a particular character, who may or may not be part of the action, and may or may not be a trustworthy guide to the events of the story (**point of view**). These are the Five Essentials of a short story; practically every traditional short story will have them.

This year, we're going to get more detailed. Instead of dealing with these broad categories, we'll talk more about **technique**—that is, writing skills that make stories better. For instance, in Weeks 5–7, we'll talk about the difference between specific (**concrete**) and not very specific (**abstract**) descriptions of people, objects, settings, etc. In weeks 8–10, we'll work on **precision**—that is, on being ever more detailed, accurate, and articulate in our **concrete** descriptions. Weeks 11–13 focus on writing stories by **showing** all the action versus **explaining** (or telling) what everything that happens means.

This year's overall focus will be on character because, in some ways, it's the most important element of fiction. Some teachers of writing go so far as to say that "character is plot," by which they mean that a writer finds his plot by figuring out what happens to the characters he's created in the situation in which he's placed them. A shy, self-effacing guy and a brash, outspoken girl meet on the bench outside the principal's office—he, waiting to get enrolled in the school; she, on her way to detention. Not much plot here, except what the author comes up with based on the personalities of the characters he's working with.

If you're not already familiar with the Five Essentials of fiction, you might want to go back and complete the exercises in Level Two of *The Creative Writer.* But if you understand the basics of how these elements work, keep going.

Like fiction, poetry has 5 Essentials. In the second level of this series, we started with the question of **what to write about** (Weeks 1–4). Then we discussed **how** to write about it: **description** (Weeks 10–13). Then we moved on to **form**: how to organize a poem into lines and groups of lines called stanzas (Weeks 14–17). And we finished by discussing, just as in a song, **rhythm and sound**—how, for instance, the repetition of certain sounds or words affects the feelings inspired by a poem in the reader. (Weeks 14–17).

This year, we're going to study these elements again, but at a much faster clip. Instead of devoting a whole multi-lesson **unit** to each of the craft skills above—description, form, sound, etc.—we are going to devote only a single lesson to each. And instead of practicing these skills by writing poems of our own, we're going to do it by working with a published poem by a great American poet.

Her name is Sharon Olds. Born in 1942, she's one of America's greatest living poets. Olds writes vivid, honest poetry likely to stay with you long after you've finished it. Take "Feared Drowned," the poem that's going to be our focus for the next seven weeks. It features powerful descriptions; startling, unexpected comparisons; tremendous feeling and intelligence; and a look and sound that, in subtle ways, reinforce the main message of the poem.

At its most basic, the poem is about a woman on a beach who can't find her husband—hence the title. But as you'll see in the closing lines, which Olds uses to such powerful effect, this poem is also about a lot more than someone's afternoon on a beach. (As I mentioned last year, closing lines count for a lot because they're the last thing to stay with the reader.)

As in earlier volumes of the series, each lesson comes with additional guidance and direction for a mentor who can help you to make your work better.

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FICTION

CHARACTER REFRESHER AND BEYOND

RIFFING ON AN EXISTING CHARACTER

Purpose: To refresh our understanding of character by practicing on an already existing character, from fiction and real life.

Let's ease into things by filling out character profiles for characters who already exist. There was an exercise built around this in Level 2, but there, it was up to you to come up with a character you knew—someone from your neighborhood, say—and imagine her in an invented situation. This time, I'm going to provide a bit more guidance. This exercise has two parts. In the first, you're going to choose a *famous person* and imagine him in an invented situation.

What does "famous" mean? You can pick a historical and no-longer-alive figure like Abraham Lincoln or George Washington. Or you can pick a Hollywood actor, a singer, or a sports figure. The point is that it has to be someone publicly known, but whom you don't know personally.

Let's say you're interested in swimming and choose Michael Phelps, the swimmer who won all that gold at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Your job is to imagine Michael Phelps in an invented situation. That is, if you watched the Olympics, you saw Phelps in the pool and maybe in the locker rooms during an interview; maybe the TV network did some kind of special highlighting his life and training back at home. Fine—but your job is to imagine Phelps in some *other* setting. Imagine him getting a phone call from a friend in need of help. Based on what you've seen about Phelps on TV, read in the newspapers, or discussed with your parents, siblings, and friends, what would he do?

The mission here is to depart from what you know about Phelps. That doesn't mean imagining the opposite of what you've observed about him. If the television special described him as humble and hard-working, you don't have to represent him as conniving and selfish. Rather, you have to extend the idea you have of the character into a situation in which you haven't observed him. If he's humble and hardworking, how would that shape his response to his friend?

As you do this, you'll want to keep in mind that even star athletes like Phelps are complicated characters because they're human, which means that they're imperfect. Listening to Michael be a goody two-shoes as he misses practice in order to advise his friend may be nice, but it's not going to make for compelling fiction. We want to go beyond the simplified portrait we get of politicians, actors, celebrities, and so on in the public arena. We want to learn who these people are in private.

Most people are neither good nor bad, but a mixture of the two, different parts of them gaining the upper hand at different moments. Also, we have public selves and private selves, and they don't always agree, especially if people have expectations of us in the public arena that we feel obligated to satisfy. (You'll practice creating characters with internal contradictions more next year.) So let us see your favorite football player, your favorite actor, or your favorite historical or scientific figure in a private setting.

Another example: If you picked the president of the United States—someone you've probably observed a great deal at state functions, and wearing a suit—you might imagine him on a fishing trip. What is he wearing? What kind of tics/habits/pet peeves does he have? What kind of character traits does he reveal during the outing? Who is with him? Where have they gone to fish? What happens? As we've learned, it's hard to come up with a character profile for someone without touching on other aspects of a short story.

Unlike last year, when your character profile consisted of 500 words in narrative form or as bullet-point entries (essentially, you *told* us who this person was), this year, I'd like you to try to ***show* who the character is by writing a 500-word scene featuring a situation, dialogue, description of a setting, etc.** That is, don't say "President So-and-so likes to joke around." That's too abstract for this assignment. Instead, write something like:

The lake was up a series of switchbacks on a dried-out mountain, their main company the periodic marmot burrowing into the scree. The water glistened with a painful blue. As they unloaded and pushed off, a golden eagle swooped down low over the water, making its crik-crak.

They were out for nearly an hour when Cutty, the Secret Service man, announced he didn't have this kind of patience and started digging around in the cooler. While Cutty was turned around, the President pulled up Cutty's line, replaced the bait on its hook with a small cantaloupe he had been hoarding, and released it into the water.

"Whoa, Cutty, you got one, you got one—you've got to pay attention!" the President shouted.
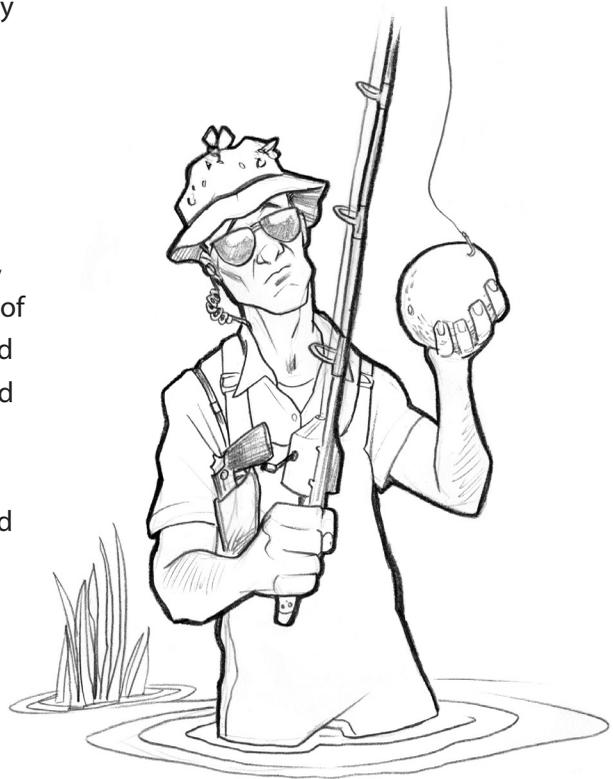
Cutty tossed half the cooler overboard getting his hand back on the rod and wheeling it up with all fury. When the yellow melon popped out of the water, everybody burst into laughter.

"I wouldn't have done it if I'd known you'd throw our lunch overboard," the President sighed.

The above fragment is only 170 words, so you can devote more room to details like setting and dialogue, which figure briefly above. (Notice also the use of precise, specialized, "technical" language: "switchbacks," "scree," etc. Also, "crik-crak" is an example of something we haven't discussed yet: **onomatopoeia**, which refers to the use of words that describe a sound by imitating it.)

A BRIEF NOTE ABOUT SHOWING VS. TELLING:

We'll talk a lot more about the difference between showing and telling later this year, but here is a brief introduction. My little excerpt nowhere tells the reader that the president is a prankster. Instead, it describes an episode during which the president *acts* like a prankster. Sometimes the author *tells* us that a character is, say, petulant; sometimes, she *shows* us, by having a character whine on about something or other.

Showing does not have to take the form of dialogue and presented action. Consider the following:

> They rowed for a quarter of an hour, losing sight of the shoreline. Cutty thought the rowboat was tilting right, so he went into the cooler, meaning to shift some of the contents to the front. While he was dug in back there, lifting out Ziploc bags of chili and rice, the President reached out two fingers and began to reel in Cutty's line. When he had the hook in hand, he slipped off the rubber worm and hooked the cantaloupe that he had stashed in his gym bag. It dropped to the bottom of the lake so fast that Cutty's rod nearly went overboard. The President yelled and Cutty lunged for it, a couple of Ziplocs flying out of his hands into the lake. When he hauled up the brick of the melon, you could hear the laughter all the way back at the shore.

This fragment shows through **description by the author** rather than by **dialogue**. But still, it *shows* rather than *tells*. It never directly spells out the "message" behind the presentation: the President is a prankster.

Your turn. Remember: 500 words, featuring a situation, dialogue, description of a setting, and so on, all of it designed to show who a character *is*.

CHALLENGE EXERCISE

1. Do something similar for an existing but *fictional* character whom you're drawn to: Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, Harry Potter, Ender Wiggin from Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*.

2. Place the character you choose in a situation in which the book or film in question hasn't placed him or her. Then show or tell us about the character in the situation. The same rules apply: Write a scene of 500 words, where the qualities of the character are entirely up to you.

CHARACTER FROM SCRATCH

Purpose: To refresh our recollection of how to create characters from scratch.

This week, you're going to write another five-hundred-word scene that shows who a character is. However, before you write the scene, you need to perform a couple of extra steps.

In previous levels of this series, I recommended that you start keeping a notebook so that you have a treasure trove of ready material—funny sayings, memorable details, observed character tics—when you sit down to write a story and need details to get your imagination going.

Next time you're in line at the supermarket, I want you to pull out the little notebook in which you write down your interesting observations. In this notebook, make notes about the person(s) directly in front of you and directly behind you. Write down whatever you think is important—what they're wearing, the expressions on their faces, what they're holding, what their relationships are to each other, what they might be thinking about.

When you're back home, I want you tell us more about these people. Like a private investigator, I want you to tail them (in your imagination!) to their homes or wherever they go after the supermarket. I want you to show us what their lives are like.

Your second step is to sketch character portraits for the main players. First, how many are there? If you took notes about a couple, you'll have two. You can write about both,

or you may wish to focus on only one member of the pair. Write down 10 adjectives that describe each subject. Then, come up with three different situations that exhibit their character. (Do they sneak down to the fridge at midnight? Go fishing or to the opera on the weekends? What's their favorite magazine?)

Which of the three situations feels the most interesting or promising? In other words, which one gives you the most ideas on what happens next? Choose that one.

Now you're at the final step: Develop the situation into a 500-word scene involving the chosen character(s).

Note that you're not writing a *story* about these individuals—that is, you don't have to come up with a **plot** that features **conflict** or **suspense**. These characters don't have to have a **quest**, except what emerges naturally from your description/presentation of them. I simply want you to zero in on the individuals in question, and tell us, step by step, for 500 words, what you envision them wearing, doing, and thinking.

You will be demonstrating their characters by means of **showing** or **telling**. If you give us their **dialogue** and **action**s without a great deal of explanation, you'll be mostly **showing**. If you describe their **dialogue** and **action** in your own voice, you'll still be **showing** them to us, but through a more **tell**-heavy approach. Your third option, of course, is simply to **tell** us critical information about these characters. As you'll learn more formally in the show vs. tell unit, for which this unit is meant to be a practice run, pure telling doesn't work if that's all you do for a whole story—it leaves nothing to the reader's imagination, and can get quite abstract. ("Mindy was sad." Sad *how*?) But you can't only write scenes, either, as that can get quite laborious and lengthy. The best writers use both tools. Knowing when to use which is the great talent that writers work a long time to develop, and what we'll be practicing throughout this year.

Before you get started, read through the following examples for a little additional guidance.

1. SHOWING-THROUGH-TELLING:

> They loaded the grocery bags into the trunk; Mindy dumped hers, earning a scowl from her father. Their mint-green Honda touched off slowly. Mindy's father always said you saved the most gas if you accelerated gradually. On those rare days when Mindy had the car to herself, she

gunned it with everything the little two-door had. Now, she sat quietly in the passenger seat as her father told her again: Slow when the light changes. Every little bit counts, Mindanao. His stupid nickname for her. It was some island in the Philippines. Her dad burned a whole lot more electricity watching the History Channel than she did gas running the car. But he never turned his big-saver eye on himself. And how many times did he have to tell her to keep it slow when the light changed?

This car has barely left the supermarket parking lot! I used every little thing that happens when a car pulls out of a parking spot at the supermarket—bags of groceries, gas pedal, etc.— to think of *how* Mindy and her dad might feel about it.

In this type of showing, all the information is presented by the author. But he isn't just telling us that "Mindy is annoyed with her father" or that "Mindy's father is frugal." He is showing us by *telling* us what Mindy is thinking: she is fuming about her father constantly warning her to accelerate slowly so as not to waste gas.

(The example I just gave you draws the character of Mindy and her father from Mindy's perspective, by telling us what Mindy's thoughts are. So here's a pop quiz: Is this a first- or third-person narration? You're right if you answered third—a narrator is telling us the story, not Mindy. But you'll agree that this is a pretty all-knowing narrator if he can climb so deeply into Mindy's secret thoughts. There's a name for a third-person narrator with this kind of access—a ***close*** **third-person narrator**. Hopefully the terminology makes sense: It's a third-person narrator with very close access to a character's thoughts. More on this in this level's lesson on various kinds of point of view.)

2. PURE SHOWING

Here's another way to do this assignment:

> The mint-green Honda touched off.
> "The toy store first, honey?" Tami said.
> "I need to change the oil," Eric answered.
> "If you take that shortcut on Alps, we'll pass the toy store first."
> "If I don't take the shortcut, we'll pass the gas station first."
> "I'm not buying the toy for me, Eric. I'm buying it for our child. Our child. My child and your child."
> "A hundred dollars for a bear that sings?"
> "That's rich. It's the kid's birthday. How many times a year do you change that oil at twenty bucks a pop? Rick next door does it himself. He'd do it for you at half price if you asked him."
> "I don't exactly use this car for joy-riding," Eric said, pointing at the baby seat in the back.

Here, we have a couple quite obviously involved in a passive-aggressive argument even though the author never tells us that. Does this behavior suggest any permanent personality characteristics of either? Deeper problems in the relationship? If this were your assignment, you'd have 369 more words to build out these characters and let us know.

The information is revealed not through the narrator's description, but through dialogue, with little explanatory context from the narrator. He's not telling us anything—he's just reporting what is being said. We may be witnessing a couple on the verge of divorce or a typical weekend spat indicative of nothing overly serious. The narrator doesn't elaborate for us, and while we can deduce a good deal from the signals in this segment, we need to see more before we arrive at conclusions.

You'll notice that this narrator isn't "close" in the way of the first excerpt; he's simply transcribing the dialogue, giving us no clues to the private thoughts of the characters. He could be sitting in the back seat with "record" pushed on his recorder.

3. A COMBINATION OF SHOWING AND SHOWING-THROUGH-TELLING

Here's a final example, rendering some of the same information as the first (and some of the plot details of the second), through a combination of **showing** and **showing-through-telling**.

> They turned off Berdan and headed to the mall. Their little mint-green Honda had looked hideous since Mindy had kissed the rear end of a parked Pathfinder on a recent snowy night. It had been hailing so hard she could barely see inside the car, let alone past it. Her father parked at the far edge of the mall lot, so no one would see. Everyone in town knew that Honda by its color. Mint Chocolate Chip, Mindy's classmates called it when she drove to school. Little Green Giant.
>
> They tried Nuts for Tots, but even a talking bear was a hundred dollars. "Con artists," Mindy's father growled. At Serious Munchkins, they had a 2-for-1, but who could afford even the 1? Finally, at Big Bright Sunshine, Mindy's father strode up to the clerk and said, "What if you just give us some of that wrapping paper you use for the gifts? They ran out at the other store." Mindy looked away. The clerk handed it over, raising his hand to say: No charge.
>
> "Let's see what your mother remembers from that origami class," Mindy's father said as they crossed the parking lot back to the car.

This form of showing combines the more explanatory style of the first segment—though it still doesn't tell the reader something explicit like "Mindy's father was concerned about appearances"—with some of the unexplained action that dominated the second example up above.

What do I mean by unexplained action? Simply, the narration doesn't go into a great deal of justification or context. Take, for instance, the phrase "…parked it at the edge of the lot." There is no explanatory follow-up such as "No way to fix it until his bonus came in from the shop at the end of the month. He knew half the town would be at the mall now, and he had no great desire to show how the Smiths were doing on this eve of the holiday season."

The narration above stays pretty much on the surface, mostly giving us the play-by-play and hoping we can understand the message between the lines. This happened, then that happened.

As for character, the individual personalities here become less noticeable than the general struggle of their lives. You could say the character here is the family rather than the individuals. Even so, we can tease out that the father, while perhaps irritable, loves his family and wants whoever the gift is for—probably Mindy's younger sibling – to have something. Meanwhile, Mindy is embarrassed about having such reduced means. Her father is concerned about appearances, too—he claims to have bought a gift at the other store so his request for the wrapping paper doesn't seem paltry – so maybe it runs in the family.

Now, it's your turn.

CHALLENGE EXERCISES

1. There are lots of other ways to do this exercise. Draw a character for your reader using the perspective of a first-person narrator. The described character could be the narrator herself, or merely someone observed by the narrator.

2. Write one of the scenes above from the perspective of another character, using either close third-person or first-person narration. Mindy's dad might be a wise, angelic man, if we don't have to view him through Mindy's eyes!

AGAINST TYPE

Purpose: To create characters who don't fit expectations.

We all know what stereotypes are: Simplistic ideas about types of people, such as "all cops eat donuts," "all jocks are dumb," "old people are crabby." Some might argue they serve a useful purpose—a usually correct shortcut to figuring out how you feel about someone without having to spend time to get to know them. I couldn't disagree more. Everyone—everyone—is interesting, surprising, and complex. It's your job—as a human being and, especially, as a writer—to dig down and find that complexity. Sometimes, the interesting bits might be unknown even to the person in question— some people play into stereotypes because it's what's expected of them—but that doesn't mean that you have to go along.

One of a writer's most important—and interesting—obligations is to create characters who go **against type**. That doesn't mean creating characters who are the *opposite* of type (an old man who jumps off cliffs, or a pitcher for the Cleveland Indians who is also a Ph.D. in molecular biology). Don't get me wrong—those characters would be interesting, but they would also be exceptional. Fiction works to disprove

stereotypes, but not by demonstrating their opposite; rather, it aims to describe people in all the richness of their selves—their ideas, quirks, fears, etc.

Let me give you an example. Recently, I was sitting in a café (working on this book!). It was early afternoon, when most people are at work, so I was surrounded by senior citizens—an elderly couple (both of them with walkers) and about a half-dozen of their friends (all male). The men were arguing about baseball while the woman sat quietly. The part of my brain used to stereotypes immediately jumped to conclusions: Men talk about sports, and women don't. That was when the woman finally spoke up. And not only did she speak up, but she delivered a set of opinions about various players and team prospects that put the men to shame!

This is what I mean by **against type**. The elderly woman who's a whiz about baseball; the captain of the football team who introduces himself to the shy, new girl in school; the airline pilot who joined up not because he's fearless and always dreamed of flying, but precisely because he's terrified of heights and hoped to overcome it this way—all these are characters who defy type.

Have you ever watched the television show *Friday Night Lights*? Every character on that show both embodies type and defies it. The coach, Eric Taylor, can get gruff and loud, but he's a soft touch at home, and at heart he deeply loves and cares for his players. His wife is a responsible mom and takes care of some traditional duties at home, but she is also a career woman who's risen to principal of Dillon High School. Tim Riggins, the fullback, embodies some of the worst stereotypes of a dumb jock, except that he can also be tender, nervous, shy, and generous.

Creating characters who work against type isn't the same as creating characters who harbor contradictions. We'll do that next year. Simply, it means figuring out the ways in which they depart from cultural norms like "senior citizen," "jock," or "mom."

Your job this week is to create a character who goes **against type**. You don't have to write a full scene featuring this character. Instead, you can *describe* the scene you would write or the person in question.

Here's an example, using my baseball-expert pensioner:

> Barbara Gold is 76 and has gout, which requires her to use a walker. It's an especially embittering illness for her because as a girl, she used to run marathons. In her hometown in New Jersey, she was the first woman to have ever run a marathon alongside the men. Now, she is reduced to spectatorship. She doesn't care so much what she watches—baseball with her husband, curling with her son, football with her grandson. She just loves her sports. Once, when she and Marc, her grandson, were watching the Jets, Barbara shared her mind about the quarterback's throwing arm, how it compared to his predecessor, and why the team was completely failing to utilize the man's height. The boy was shocked. At his college, he helped run a website devoted to professional sports. He came to his editor-in-chief with the world's greatest idea: His grandmother, blogging. Just give her a shot, he pleaded. It was crazy enough that the editor-in-chief went for it. Monday mornings now, Marc calls up Grandma and writes down what she has to say about Sunday night's game, transcribing it word for word, including the cussing. Within a month, she had 10,000 readers.

Barbara Gold is a typical pensioner in many ways: Her health is failing, her movement is limited, and, well, she's a bit crabby about those football players. However, she is also an avid sports fan and a budding blogger! Not things you expect to hear about a 76-year-old woman on a walker. (Notice also that even though I started with nothing more than a series of facts about Barbara in narrative form, they inevitably steered me toward the premise of a story: Barbara as a blogger.)

Your turn. **In 250 words, create a character who runs against type.** Do so in narrative form—as opposed to bullet points—as I have above with my baseball-whiz pensioner.

CHALLENGE EXERCISE

1. Write a scene—using dialogue, action, and so forth (look back at Week 2 for examples)—that demonstrates the kind of person your against-type character is.