



The Creative Writer

Level Four: Becoming a Writer



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The Creative Writer

Level Four: Becoming a Writer

by Boris Fishman



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PREFACE

Whether you've been with *The Creative Writer* series from Level One or you're picking it up for the first time, you're about to embark on the most exciting part of the ride. *The Creative Writer, Level Four: Becoming a Writer* reviews the skills covered in Levels One through Three and introduces new, more advanced ones. It also offers guidance on the writing life: How to find time to write during a busy schedule; how to maintain discipline; how to deal with rejection; how to submit to literary journals.

That last will be the goal you'll be working toward all year: A story and poem polished enough to submit to a literary journal.

In the opening weeks, just as in previous levels of the series, we'll review what we've learned so far. Then we'll move on to new skills. As always, the first 18 weeks will be devoted to fiction, and the next 18 to poetry. Each lesson proceeds in the same style as previous levels of this series: A discussion of the week's subject is followed by an exercise (sometimes in several parts), followed by a challenge exercise should you wish to push yourself further.

Unlike previous levels, Level Four does not have a separate section of guidance for your mentor. By this point, you're ready to act like a writer--which means that you're ready to work on your own. But don't forget that all writers need editors. When you work on a project for days, weeks, or even months, you get so close to it that you lose sight of its flaws. You need a sympathetic outside reader to help you make a good piece of work even better.

A NOTE TO MENTORS:

By this point, the writer has developed sufficiently to grasp the relevant craft concepts, and make use of brainstorming guidance, largely on his or her own. But that doesn't mean the mentor is no longer useful. My hope is that mentors will read and use this book alongside their charges. Some writers prefer to work in solitude, but some, and beginning ones especially, can use soundboards.



Even though writers typically don't like others coming in and meddling with their ideas or prose, editors are indispensable. In order to achieve true understanding of their material, writers must get *very* familiar with it. (I spent three years on the novel I've just finished, hardly the longest time ever spent on a novel. In that time, I've come to know my characters better than my own family, and can recite significant portions of the novel by heart. You get *close*.) But the closer a writer gets, the less objective his or her eyes become; the writer *needs* that outside eye, supportive but fair, that can discern immediately whether something sounds false, unbelievable, or plain awkward.

For parents and teachers: This level is intended for more mature student writers, and the reading selections reflect this. If you are working with a younger student, please preview the student's assigned readings.

One more thing: Plan ahead. In the fiction section, Weeks 12, 15, and 17 will require the writer to visit the library; so might Week 14 of the poetry section.

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FICTION



FICTION

INTRODUCTION

WEEK 1



REFRESHER

Purpose: To review skills developed in Levels One—Three.

If you worked on the previous levels of this series and someone asked you to describe, in as few words as possible, what they taught you, what would you say?

In thinking of the answer, I hope you remembered the Holy Grail, the answer to all questions! That's right: The 5 Essentials.

1. Plot
2. Characters
3. Dialogue
4. Point of view
5. Setting

A story needs something to happen. (**Plot.**) It needs **characters**. Presumably, those characters will have things to say to each other. (**Dialogue.**) You'll have to figure out who's telling the story. (**Point of view.**) And where it takes place. (**Setting.**)

This week, you're going to come up with these basic aspects of a new short story. First, I'll ask you to come up with a one-sentence **story idea**. Then, I'll ask you to develop it into a paragraph-long summary of what happens in the story. (One of these two first steps will probably involve you figuring out *where* the story is taking place.) You'll need to come up with brief profiles for each of the characters in the story, and also fill a page of your notebook with sample dialogue between them. Finally—though perhaps you'll end up figuring this out sooner—you'll need to decide who's telling the story.

So, step-by-step, here's what you need to do. (I'd suggest reading all the way through the next six points, down to the assignment summary, before you start working.)

1. COME UP WITH A ONE-SENTENCE SHORT STORY IDEA. (TWO SENTENCES WOULD BE FINE, TOO.)

Lots of things can make a story interesting or memorable—an irresistible lead character, a beautiful writing style, an atmosphere so realistic you can feel it in your bones—but in terms of plot, the best way to get the reader to turn the page is to make him wonder what happens next. That's called **suspense**. So, make sure your story idea is something that will make a listener (you can try it out on your mentor) say, "Hm, I wonder how that will turn out."

Examples:

- A. A group of friends goes to a secluded lake cabin that turns out to be haunted.
- B. Lily and Cassandra are each other's only friends. Cassandra's father has to move the family for work.
- C. No one in the town of Wortham speaks.

Let's put these story ideas to the "I wonder what will happen next" test. **Story Idea A** is a classic horror-movie setup, and if horror movies know how to do one thing, it's how to keep you on the edge of your seat. You have no idea who the main characters are yet, but aren't you dying to find out what happens at the cursed lake cabin? (Later this year, we'll practice writing horror stories.)

Story Idea B plays with a different kind of suspense. How will Lily—and Cassandra—deal with the other's disappearance from her life?

Story Idea C sounds like a slightly fantastical story. The premise—that no one in town speaks—makes me think that something is going to happen to challenge this age-old fact (a mysterious new arrival? some kind of natural catastrophe?). Something is going to make this town start speaking, and the suspense is in what is going to ensue when it does. Or: The suspense could be in what made this town fall silent in the first place, a mystery that some new arrival in town has to solve before being able to move forward in his journey.

2. EXPAND THE STORY IDEA INTO A PLOT.

Many authors don't like this step. They say that you shouldn't overplan what's ahead—you should figure it out as you go. The great novelist E. L. Doctorow has a saying to this effect: Writing a novel is like driving at night: You can see only as far as the headlights illuminate, but you can make the whole journey that way. In other words, you only need to know what happens next, and you can worry about what happens after that when you get there.

Some authors can work this way, but just as many plan out—at least in general—what their story or novel will be about. That's what I want you to do here. Give me one paragraph of several sentences expanding the one- or two-sentence story idea. For example, using Story Idea B:

"The story opens with a girl named Cassandra having to leave her beloved friend Lily because her—Cassandra's—father has to move cities for work. After Cassandra arrives at her destination, she and Lily hatch a plan to run away from their homes and meet in some third place, where they will live together, without the adults. Despite difficulties and danger, they reach each other, only to find that as 11-year-olds, they have no means to live on their own, away from the adults."

Alternative:

"The story opens with Lily, a lonely girl in Town X. Lily has no friends because she's shy and awkward. Soon, Cassandra moves in next door. Cassandra is a misfit, too, but for the opposite reason: She's brash and explosive. In fact, that's why her family has had to move—she was kicked out of her previous school. Somehow, these two odd ducks are just right for each other, and, through a series of experiences, become the best of friends. But their joy at having found the other comes to an abrupt end when Cassandra's family has to move yet again, this time because her father, who hasn't been able to find a job in Town X, receives one elsewhere."

Notes:

Before we proceed with this week's assignment, an aside about some details in the example above:

Note how different the stories above are. In one, the separation happens at the beginning and in the other, at the end. The story that separates the girls at the beginning places less **emphasis** on why they're so close—the story essentially asks the reader to take it for granted—and **more** emphasis on what they will do to remain close. The story that separates the girls at the end does the opposite: By spending the whole story providing examples of—in other words, **showing**—what has made the girls so tight—the revelation at story's end that the girls will have to separate is meant to strike the reader like an anvil to the heart.

What you have here are different **structures** for a story about the close friendship of two girls. As you can see, different structures can lead the story in very different directions.

Emphasis is critical within stories, too. The first story idea might choose to spend time on how the two girls got to the destination they escape to, or it might choose to skip over that in order to focus on what happens to them when they get there. Or it might detail both. Everything depends on what the author is trying to say. The author can emphasize the depth of the girls' friendship by focusing on everything they went through to be together, or on everything they endure after they meet.

Note as well that the **alternative** plot comes up with brief **character** sketches for the girls.

3. CHARACTERS

Let's stick with Lily and Cassandra. What is each like? Are they similar or different? What do they like about each other? Why don't they have any other friends? What kind of adjectives would describe them? Imagine each separately in the same situation; how would each act? List their likes and dislikes. These are some of the questions I'd try to answer in order to get a better handle on the girls.

Then I'd have to decide whether anyone else will play a large role in the story. Will the parents be major characters or just background noise because the true focus of the story will be Lily and Cassandra?

To sum up: Write a few sentences describing Lily and Cassandra—say, 50 to 100 words each. Then describe any other major characters using at least one or two sentences.

4. DIALOGUE

If I've done a good job with Essential 3, my dialogue will reflect the personalities of the girls. So, if Lily is shy and Cassandra is brash, a brief exchange might go like this (note that surrounding details accompany the dialogue; I'm imagining a whole scene):

As they approached the overgrown garden, the elephant ears of the squash swaying lightly in the hot wind, Lily reached up and took Cassandra's hand. Cassandra let her keep it there, though she didn't like holding hands, not with her mother, not with anyone. But if she had to do it with someone, she minded it least with Lily. When they got in the garden, Cassandra took off for the long row of tomatoes, which looked like pinpricks of blood on the great blue-green hide of the garden. When Cassandra took her hand away so she could tear the tomatoes off the vine, Lily moved her hands to the hem of Cassandra's t-shirt.

"You want to stay long?" Lily asked, her face pale.

Cassandra peeled herself away from the tomatoes. "What's *with* you?"

"Nothing," Lily rushed to say. "I've never been here before, you know."

"You've never come to the garden your daddy keeps?" Cassandra said.

"So what?" Lily said.

Cassandra considered Lily for a long moment. "So you've been missing these tomatoes," she said, and, grinning, smashed a half-eaten tomato into Lily's nose, squirting juice down her shirt. Lily's eyes got big, her lips twitching. Then she noticed an overripe tomato next to her foot. She snatched it and slammed it into Cassandra's nose, though she got her cheek instead, splattering seeds everywhere. The girls stared at each other for a moment and exploded into laughter. They rolled around the baked earth and squealed, the big elephant ears swaying like bearded giants above them.

The segment above is only about 250 words, and only about a quarter of them are pure dialogue, but I needed to draw a **scene** in order come up with ideas for the dialogue. I'd gotten it into my mind (from my alternative plot idea above) that Lily is shy and Cassandra bold, so I asked myself what kind of scene could demonstrate that. Then I remembered wandering one dusky evening into a family garden on a farm where I was volunteering; it was so large and thick with vegetables that it felt nearly impenetrable in the gathering twilight, and a little frightening, too (for a countryside novice, at least). So I decided to make Lily frightened of the garden and Cassandra not. But I also wanted the experience to end up bringing them together rather than dividing them. And that's when the dialogue started to flow.

That's your task: Think of a scene, and start describing it. Your dialogue should flow from there. Aim for 250 words total, at least. Don't worry about whether or not the scene will end up in your story—just concentrate on letting your characters speak.

5. POINT OF VIEW

Refresher: First-person narratives have an “I” narrator, who is usually part of the story. Third-person narratives have a narrator who refers to all the characters as “he,” “she,” or “they,” and may or may not be part of the story.

As you can see in the **dialogue** exercise above, I went with a third-person narrator, I think because this isn't Lily's or Cassandra's story—it's about them both, and it felt like it should be told by a third party. (Whether that third party is someone off-stage, or perhaps one of the girls' parents—that's one more choice to make.) You would have a different story if Lily was telling it, and different again if Cassandra was. None of these approaches is right or wrong; they would just lead to different stories, and you might have to try more than one before you find what works. In the novel I recently finished (which I revised 12 times), I started in the first-person (“I work at a magazine”). Somewhere around Draft 4, I changed to third-person (“Slava works at a magazine”). Several drafts later, I went back to first. And for Draft 10, I switched yet again. Writing isn't a science. Your understanding of the work evolves, and so do your creative decisions.

So now finish this step: Write down which point of view the story will use—and, if appropriate, who is narrating it.

6. SETTING

Where is this story taking place and is setting important? It's up to the author. I might choose to specify where the girls are located (that Cassandra says "daddy" rather than "dad" or "father" makes me think we're in the South; the garden makes me think we're in a rural location), and where Cassandra's father has to relocate, and where the girls decide to run away to. But I might also choose to keep all these descriptions very general ("the farm," "the city") because it might be a way of universalizing this story. It wouldn't be only about these specific two girls in some specific place, then; it would be about everyone who's ever had to give up a friend.

All right, your turn. Write 50-100 words describing the setting.

Here's a summary of what you should accomplish in this lesson:

Your assignment: Following the cues above, come up with a story idea, expanded plot, characters, dialogue, point of view, and setting for a story of your choosing.



FICTION • SECTION 1

POINT OF VIEW

WEEKS 2 - 3



HEY, YOU!

Purpose: To learn more about second-person (“you”) narration.

In our first section this year, we’re going to practice doing more with point of view.

In earlier levels of this series, we practiced writing from the first-person and third-person points of view. Now it’s time to consider how stories with second-person narrators work. Here’s an example:

You’re not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning.

(That’s the opening line of a famous novel called *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney.¹)

Why do authors use second-person? What does it give us?

In *Bright Lights, Big City*, the narrator is **narrating his own actions, or addressing himself**. But couldn’t we achieve that with a first-person narrator? Let’s see:

I’m not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning.

1 McInerney, Jay. *Bright Lights, Big City*. (New York, NY: Vintage Contemporaries, 1984), p. 1.

Don't the two sentences sound different? The first one is a little chiding, the second one a little defensive. Readers might disagree about which works "better," but you'll agree they suggest different feelings.

For me, there's something about the (imagined) split into two creatures that makes Jay McInerney's version, the second-person version, sound more believable and less precious. (Don't you often find yourself saying, for instance, "When you ask her for a break, she never agrees!" when you literally mean "When I ask her for a break, she never agrees"?) It's also a handy device for addressing younger or older versions of oneself. So you might call second-person a **device**—a gimmick—that enables authors to create characters who are narrating their own actions or addressing themselves.

But do they have to be? Couldn't they be **narrating the actions of, or addressing, some actual "you"**?

By the time you read this, I'll be gone.

This sounds like a parent addressing a child, or a friend addressing another friend, or one half of a couple addressing the other. You might ask: But couldn't we achieve the same effect with a third-person narrator? Let's try it.

By the time Marnie read his letter, he would be gone.

That's a completely different story! What started as a narrator's direct, immediate, intimate address of another character became a somewhat impersonal observation by some third-person narrator. And whereas we still don't know who Marnie is—daughter? wife?—the narrator is forced to say more about the "you" in this third-person version, whereas in the earlier example, he could keep that mystery going for as long as he wanted.

To me, third-person feels far less immediate and intimate. (On the other hand, it's less confining. A third-person narrator can see everything; a second-person narrator must usually focus on one person: "you," possibly in addition to him or herself.) There's also something creepy—effectively so—about narrating someone else's actions in second-person. If you're writing a horror story about someone spying on someone else, or a detective story about a private investigator constantly tailing a mark—any story

involving a very intense, close relationship where observation by one party of another is key—second-person may be what you want.

A second-person narration doesn't have to narrate the activities of, or address, oneself or another. It could also **address the reader**. Here's the opening line from Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*.²

How about that for direct? In my own novel as well, which is (currently!) written in third-person, the narrator periodically does what's known as "breaking the fourth wall"—that is, he breaks the wall between narrator and reader and addresses the reader directly. What advantage does this bring? It involves the reader more actively in the narrative. Imagine if Calvino opened his novel with:

The reader is about to begin reading...

How stiff and formal this alternative seems by comparison, doesn't it?

It's important to note that few authors use second-person because it's so limiting, especially in novels—300 pages limited to an address of some "you," whether oneself, another character, or the reader, can come to feel very confining. But if your mission is to do any of those things, there's no device more effective than second-person.

Your assignment: In the three second-person-narrator examples above, "you" can refer to:

1. the narrator of the story
2. another character in the story, or
3. the reader.

Pick one and compose 500 words of a short story on any subject using that point of view. If you're flailing for an idea, use your idea from last week, only modified to

² Calvino, Italo. *If on a winter's night a traveler*, trans. William Weaver. (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p.3.



second-person narration. (Using my example from last week, that might mean 500 words of Lily addressing Cassandra in a diary entry.) Don't worry about how unrealistic or unlikely the 500 words sound—you don't have to finish the story, so you can get your second-person narrator into all sorts of trouble!

CHALLENGE EXERCISE:

Do the same thing for the other two forms of address.

WHO, WE?

Purpose: To learn more about collective (“we”), or first-person plural, narration.

As you saw last week, switching to a second-person (“you”) narrator from the more traditional first- and third-person gives the author some freedoms (and some restrictions, too). This week, we’ll explore the fourth, and last, major point of view—the collective, or first-person plural, narration.

Collective narration refers to stories told by some kind of—you guessed it—collection of people. (These are distinct from stories with multiple narrators—that is, stories with one section told from one person’s point of view, another from another’s, and so on.) Collective narrators are almost as uncommon in fiction as second-person narrators, but many well-known authors have made use of them. Perhaps the best-known example of collective narration comes from William Faulkner’s short story “A Rose for Emily,” about a Southern town’s relationship with a mysterious recluse in its midst, which opens this way:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral.³

And here is the opening line from a more recent work of fiction, the novel *Then We Came to the End*, by Joshua Ferris, about employees of an advertising firm:

We were fractious and overpaid.⁴

3 Faulkner, William. *Selected Short Stories*. Random House, 2012, p. 47.

4 Ferris, Joshua. *Then We Came to the End*. (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Co., 2007), p. 3.

(Do you know what “fractious” means? If not, look it up. Make that your habit throughout this volume. If you encounter a word you don’t know, look it up, even if I don’t explicitly instruct you to. You might want to devote a specific part of your notebook to this vocabulary list. This should be your practice outside this series as well: Any time you come across a word you don’t know, whether in someone’s speech or in a book, note it and look it up. And don’t be afraid to ask people what the words they’re using mean. No shame in not knowing—shame only in not asking!)

From these examples, what can we say about the kind of purpose and advantage collective narration serves? Joshua Ferris’ novel is, in part, about the dehumanizing effects of corporate employment. And so, he brings to life this notion—that sometimes it’s hard to feel like an individual in a corporate workplace—by taking away individuality from his narrator. In this way, his **form** mimics his **content**. **Content** refers to what the book says; **form** refers to how the book says it. So, Ferris echoes his content (a book about the dehumanizing effects of the workplace) in his form (a story told from the perspective of a collective narrator, not an individual with character and personality and *humanity*).

William Faulkner chooses the collective narrator for symbolic reasons as well. “A Rose for Emily” touches on the power of conformity—the enforcement of like-minded thinking—in places like Faulkner’s rural South. So if you’re writing a story about something having to do with individuals vs. the group, you might consider a collective narrator.

“We” narrators can serve other purposes as well. Have you ever read a Greek play? You might remember the presence of a Greek chorus, or a collective voice that offers a commentary on the play’s events. The chorus can be involved in the story’s events, or not; it can serve as a voice of reason, or of herd mentality. The options are many—it all depends on what you’re trying to achieve.



But does a collective narrator offer any advantages in terms of craft? Let's take one of the sentences above and re-write it as both first-person and third-person sentences:

Original: "We were fractious and overpaid."

First: "I was fractious and overpaid."

Third: "They were fractious and overpaid."

What do we think? All three approaches have their value, but each comes at the story from a very different perspective. What do collective narrators have that other narrators don't? If you said anything like, "Well, they're collective," you're right. They have the power of numbers. A number of voices has greater authority than a single one. It may be an unhealthy kind of authority, so perhaps we should say "power" instead of "authority."

Collective narration is sleight of hand: It gives only the *illusion* of many voices. If you read any of the stories/novels mentioned above, you'll see that the collective voice speaks in unison; it doesn't squabble within itself. That's the trick: Collective narration makes it sound as if the story carries with it the power of many, but the uniformity of opinion of one.

Are you ready to try your hand at creating a collective narrator? This week's **assignment** is to write 500 words of a short story from the perspective of a group. The 500 words could consist of pure narration, or it could contain a combination of narration and scene, and even dialogue. However, it might seem funny to write things like "No, thank you, we said." Whenever collective narrators enter the action, they tend to do so not in a group speaking in unison (unless we're talking about a Greek chorus), but via one of its members, though his experiences continue to be narrated from the group's perspective. ("When Josiah, the old farmer by Huppert Pond, rose to speak, we stood behind him. 'Settle down, now,' he said.") It's as if the narration briefly switches to third-person.

Below is a short example of collective narration by me, followed by an analysis. After reading it, try your hand at your own.

So what if we don't stay here year-round, or we started buying homes around here only in the last generation? That means we don't have a say at

all, or half a say? Our pipes freeze, and our roses get chewed up by the deer, too: This is our place as much as anyone's.

But when Telco Gas came offering to dig up half the earth in town in exchange for a couple of checks, Duke Jenner, his red hunting cap askew, got up at the town hall and said what was on everyone's mind, anyway: "Nobody who don't live here full-time gets a say." Well, that was when the wheels came off. We? We weren't going to let that go by without comment. Now it was out in the open. Now, we would do something about it.

Analysis: What do you make of this story opening? It seems to pit two camps: Old-timers and newcomers to a (so-far) unnamed town. The newcomers are narrating the story and doing so from a collective perspective. Their camp consists of individuals, of course, but the old-timers tend to see them as one undifferentiated group—the newcomers—and so the story brings that to life through collective narration. (Of course, you could have an individual narrating a story about the very same thing—it would simply read and feel differently.)

Your turn.

Your assignment. Write 500 words from the perspective of a collective narrator. Your first step should be no different from any other story excerpt, except you might spend a little time thinking about story ideas involving groups. What's a group? These are all groups:

- The cool kids at school
- The adults
- The animals in the woods
- The gods of Greek mythology
- The day laborers in town

Then you might think about what kind of story idea would take advantage of their perspective as a group rather than as individuals. Previously, I've encouraged you to individualize your characters as much as possible, to make them as unique and complex as real-life people. Collective narration allows us to do the opposite—to highlight an entire group's preoccupations, for better or worse. And so if you wanted to write a story about what it's like to be a strawberry-picker from Mexico in a mostly white town,

you could do it through a story about the friendship between an individual Mexican migrant and an individual “townie” (with a first- or third-person narrator) or through a collective narration where the narration is done either by the “Mexican migrants in town” or “the townies.” This collective story still needs as distinct a plot as any other, but the collective narration allows an author to talk about a group’s experience without resorting to generalizations, which never work well in any kind of writing.

CHALLENGE EXERCISE:

Are you interested in reading more collective narration? Check out these titles in the library:

- *The Virgin Suicides*, by Jeffrey Eugenides
- *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia*, by Joan Chase
- *Our Kind*, by Kate Walbert





FICTION • SECTION 2

WORD CHOICE

WEEKS 4 - 5



THE THESAURUS EXERCISE

Purpose: To expand our vocabulary.

Those of you who have been with this series since the first volume may remember an exercise called “If I could count the ways,” which asked you to write the same sentence 10 different ways. This exercise is similar, but I wanted to include it as this series’ version of the pencil markings parents make on doorjambs to measure how much their kids have grown. In other words, I want you to see your progress. If you have Level One, go back after you’ve done this exercise, and compare your work then to your work now.

But let’s back up. What are we doing this week? Once more, we’ll practice ways of saying the same thing in different ways.

Why? Especially in a long project, it becomes really important for an author not to use the same words and phrases over and over. (Certain actions—“erupted in laughter,” “droned on,” “fell silent” —have a way of creeping into a novel over and over.) This is because no “eruption” of laughter is like another, and deserves to be described specifically rather than generically. Also, repetitive writing is not very fun for readers!

Good writers constantly work on expanding their language skills, imagination, and instincts. They do so by reading a lot (and not only fiction) and practicing their writing a lot. As many teachers of writing will tell you, you can’t “study for” originality; you can only prepare for it to visit you, your laptop or notebook open in front of you, by practicing over and over.

A thesaurus can be great—when all you can think of is “frustration,” it can help you realize that the word you’re actually looking for—the thing your character is *actually* feeling—is “chagrin.” But I don’t know any writers who study vocabulary cards. It’s

fun and useful to learn new words, but it's overkill to make it a mission because then, inevitably, your short story is going to be full of words like "gormless" and "pietistic." And that sounds very mannered—not to mention alienating to the reader. Sixty-four dollar words should appear in moderation, if at all, in a short story.

For the purposes of this exercise, though, you should feel free to flip through a thesaurus as much as you want.

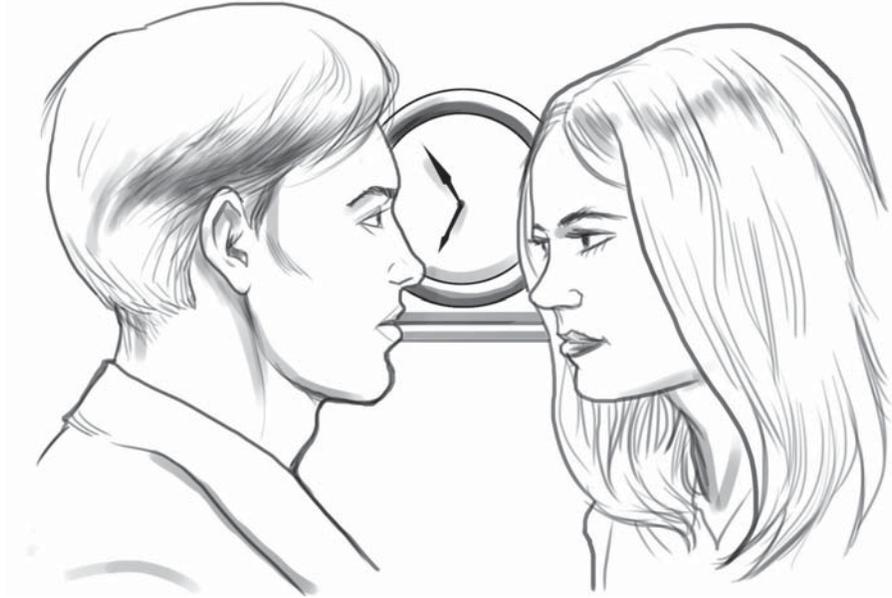
Below you will find five descriptions. Sometimes, they appear as complete sentences, sometimes as fragments. Your job this week is to say each another way. So, for instance, I might give you something like:

"They stared at each other a long time." (If I had a nickel for every time someone stared at someone else for a long time in my novel, I wouldn't be writing this book, as I'd be busy relaxing at my castle in the Mediterranean.)

Your job is to pretend that you're at the second point in your story or novel where someone is about to stare at someone else for a long time. You've already used "They stared at each other a long time." Your mission now is to come up with a new way to describe the same action. But that's not all! After you come up with a fresh description, you have to do it again—and again: A total of three times. (Because people are going to stare at each other a long time in your story more than once again.) What might your answers be? I give you one more than required below.

1. They looked and looked at each other.
2. They kept their eyes on one another for minutes.
3. Each considered the other as the clock ticked on the mantel.
4. A long silence passed, their eyes on each other.

Obviously, you don't have to change every word in the line; just change enough to make the sentence sound different. Help yourself by identifying every key element in the sentence—the staring, the staring *at one another*, the long time doing it—and render each in a fresh way. (If you find yourself wanting to add a new element, that's fine.)



Of course, the trick is to do so without making the sentence sound ridiculous—as my #2 does a little bit. (It reads like the characters are participating in a bug-out contest.)

Your assignment: Below are five descriptions. Please come up with three variations on each.

1. The sun rose.
2. ... tapping on the table impatiently with his fingers.
3. The airplane blinked its way through the star-studded sky.
4. The assembled erupted in laughter.
5. Tossing the pebble into the water...

CHALLENGE EXERCISE:

Take five published books from the shelf, open each, close your eyes, and pick a spot with your finger. Re-write the sentence your finger landed on in three ways. If you happen to choose a not very substantial sentence, choose another one.



ADVERBS INTO DESCRIPTIONS OR ACTION VERBS

Purpose: To learn how to work adverbs into action verbs.

This week, let's start with a quick grammar refresher: What's an adverb? An adverb is a word that describes *how* an action is performed. (Adverbs often end in *-ly*.) If someone is taking her time to say something, she's speaking *slowly*. If she's thinking a lot about her words, she's speaking *carefully*. And so forth. Literature uses adverbs all the time. I just opened a novel at hand, Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, randomly to page 45, and had to read only about a dozen lines before arriving at: "Take that cigarette out of your mouth when you're talking to me,' the policeman said *gruffly*."⁵ [Italics mine.]

So, what's wrong with adverbs? If they're good enough for Albert Camus, a legendary writer, they're good enough for us, right? Yes and no. Imagine if Camus' line had said: "Take that cigarette out of your mouth when you're talking to me,' the policeman *sarled*." You would take away the same things from the sentence, wouldn't you? The difference is that "gruffly" —an **adverb**—explains to you that the policeman is gruff. "Sarled" —an **action verb**, in that it's a **verb** (sarle) that describes an **action**—**shows** it to you, allowing you to conclude it for yourself. The difference is subtle but critical. With "sarled," the author gives the reader the tools and the reader builds an impression using them. It's a collaborative effort—the author invites the reader to participate

5 Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 45.

in the moment. Over the course of a short story or a novel, this serves to involve the reader much more deeply in the story than a list of I'll-explain-it-to-you adverbs. Adverbs tend to leave the reader out in the cold; action verbs bring the reader in.

It would be very difficult, and silly, to write a story or novel without adverbs. But an excess of adverbs can make a novel less exciting because over time, it starts to feel like the author keeps telling us what we should feel about a given moment rather than allowing us to make up our minds for ourselves. Take our segment about two friends, Lily and Cassandra, from Week 1. The original appears below, followed by a Version B. Please read both, paying attention to what's different.

Original

"You want to stay long?" Lily asked, her face pale.

Cassandra peeled herself away from the tomatoes. "What's *with* you?"

"Nothing," Lily rushed to say. "I've never been here before, you know."

"You've never come to the garden your daddy keeps?" Cassandra said.

"So what?" Lily said.

Version B

"You want to stay long?" Lily asked fearfully.

Cassandra peeled herself away from the tomatoes. "What's with you?" she said condescendingly.

"Nothing," Lily said defensively. "I've never been here before, you know."

"You've never come to the garden your daddy keeps?" Cassandra said skeptically.

"So what?" Lily said roughly.

I made six changes in Version B. Can you list what they are? (Don't look at the answers below until you do your best.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Here they are, in bold (I number the lines so we can discuss them later):

1. "You want to stay long?" Lily asked **fearfully**.
2. Cassandra peeled herself away from the tomatoes. "What's **with** you?"
3. **she said condescendingly**.
4. "Nothing," Lily said **defensively**. "I've never been here before, you know."
5. "You've never come to the garden your daddy keeps?" Cassandra said **skeptically**.
6. "So what?" Lily said **roughly**.

Let's discuss a couple:

1. In the first line, I changed "her face pale" to "fearfully." These indicators do the same work—they alert you that Lily is afraid. But "fearfully," the adverb, spells it out for you, whereas "her face pale" —a **description**—*shows* it to you. Lines 4, 5, and 6 work in a similar way.

2. Adverbs also make a story more wordy. Arguably, "What's with you" does everything necessary to clue in the reader that Cassandra is puzzled by her friend. To help things along, I italicized "with," so the reader hears an emphasis on that word.

“What’s *with* you?” makes it pretty clear: Cassandra is puzzled, maybe even annoyed by her friend. “She said condescendingly” is both unnecessary and shuts out the reader in the way discussed in #1.

Descriptions like “her face pale” and **action verbs** like “snarled” do the same work—they show the reader what’s going on. Sometimes, even *they* are unnecessary—a really good line of dialogue makes clear what’s going on without any help, whether it’s from action verbs, descriptions, or adverbs. But if you want to give the reader an extra nudge, you want to use those adverbs sparingly and lean on descriptions and action verbs instead.

Before you go on to this week’s assignment, let’s practice converting this segment, which features either dialogue-only or dialogue-with-descriptions, into dialogue with help from action verbs only.

So, the first line in this version could read:

“You want to stay long?” Lily **shivered**.

The second line might read:

“What’s *with* you?” Cassandra **squinted**.

Notice the space-saving work performed by the action verb. Cassandra squinting—an indication she’s perplexed, or annoyed—saves the author from having to “peel herself from the tomatoes,” a description meant to indicate reluctance.

Can you re-write the next three lines so they feature action verbs instead? Your first step should be to look at the **dialogue tag**—for instance, in the next line, “rushed to say.” Here, we already have an action verb, so the sentence can stay as is or you can try to think of another action verb, such as “shrugged.” Let’s look at the next sentence. No adverb here, only the verb “said.” In most cases, this would be a fine choice—the plainest, least glitzy verb is often the best because you don’t want the reader to think you’re trying too hard. But for the purposes of this exercise, let’s practice. What action verb could replace “said” here to indicate Cassandra’s surprise and/or confusion?

Same goes for the third sentence.

“Nothing,” Lily rushed to say. “I’ve never been here before, you know.”

“You’ve never come to the garden your daddy keeps?” Cassandra said.

“So what?” Lily said.

We’re working with dialogue here, but I should note that the adverbs-into-action-verbs-or-descriptions rule applies just as readily to narration. Here’s Camus again: “So it was a relief when we closed down and I was strolling *slowly* along the wharves in the coolness.”⁶ (Italics mine.) Arguably, Camus doesn’t need the adverb because he already has an action verb on his hands—“strolling.” “Strolling” means “walking slowly.” (I should point out here that I’m relying on a translation, as I don’t speak French. Perhaps the original doesn’t commit this “sin.”)

Note as well that plenty of adverbs are both useful and guiltless. Take one last sentence from Camus’ novel: “I took a flying jump, landed **safely**...”⁷ As I mentioned before, the goal isn’t to avoid all adverbs, only enough to involve the reader in the story in the way described above.

Now, on to **your assignment**: Below appear 10 sentences, five of them dialogue, five narration. Each one ends with an adverb. For each of the 10 sentences, do two things: Outfit it with a description that replaces the adverb; then outfit it with a more vivid action verb in place of the present bolded verb. I’ve done the first one for you so that you know what I’m looking for.

1. The principal stood **quickly**.

The principal stood, his fingers twitching with exasperation.

The principal leaped up.

2. “This is the last time I can give you this kind of warning,” he said **sniffily**.

6 Ibid, p. 32.

7 Ibid, p. 31.

3. Malcolm looked at the older man **sneeringly**.
4. “I would like a reply,” the principal said **sternly**.
5. “You didn’t ask a question,” Malcolm said **nastily**.
6. The principal sat down **heavily**.
7. “Malcolm, how long will this go on?” he said **wearily**.
8. “You’re the boss,” Malcolm said **indifferently**.
9. The principal looked out the window **distractedly**.
10. Malcolm looked at the ceiling **aimlessly**.

Note:

One sentence-improvement solution this exercise doesn’t consider is the removal of the adverbs without replacing them with anything. Really good dialogue will make clear what’s happening without the aid of descriptions or action verbs, and it’s often hard to improve on the straightforward simplicity of “said,” the most invisible of all the verbs, as I mentioned above. But once in a while your sentence will need a little bit more and that’s what this exercise practices.

CHALLENGE EXERCISE:

Make this lesson unnecessary. Write a 10-sentence fragment of a story—five sentences of dialogue, five sentences of narration—that makes what’s going on so clear that no descriptive aids are necessary—not adverbs, not action descriptions, not action verbs. In fact, no dialogue tag other than “said” should appear in the fragment.