

Getting Started with Fiction

Note: You can find this course online at <http://www.writershuddle.com/mini-fiction-intro/>

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Introduction: Why Write Fiction?

Since you're taking this course – or at least glancing at the introduction! – I'll assume that you're interested in writing fiction.

So let's start with a couple of definitions:

Fiction consists of novels and short stories – any piece of writing that's essentially “made up”

Non-fiction is everything else.

Fiction is important. As readers, we love to immerse ourselves in an imaginary world – for a few hours, we put ourselves into the book and become the characters we're reading about. As writers, we do something similar – but in a deeper, more abiding, way. Fiction can be an escape from life, or a way to make sense of it, for both the reader and the writer.

You can probably remember novels or short stories that you read years ago – ones that made a lasting impact on you. Fiction can be extremely powerful – and a lot of fun to write.

This mini-course is for short story writers and for novelists. We'll be covering:

- Coming up with ideas
- Plotting
- Characterisation
- Setting
- Beginning the writing

How “Getting Started With Fiction” is Structured

This course is broken into six short lessons. You can use the table of contents at the start of this document to move between them.

Most of the lessons will have an exercise at the end to get you to try out a technique, or to help you move forward with your writing. I've also included further resources – links to useful information or tools on other websites, plus some book recommendations.

If you get stuck at any point – or if you just want to let us know how you're getting on – then just pop on over to the [mini-course forum](#) to talk to me and to your fellow Writers' Huddle members.

Lesson #1: Ideas

One question that a lot of authors get asked is *where do you get your ideas?*

There's nothing magical about ideas. Fiction-writers often draw on daily life: perhaps something that happened to them (or a friend of a friend). They might create a character that represents a particular facet of them. They may have a lingering image for years before crafting a story around it:

[The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe] all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: Let's try to make a story about it.

– C.S. Lewis, "It All Began With a Picture...", *On Stories*

If you want to write and you're stuck for an idea, though, here's some ways to get going:

- **Enter short story competitions.** These often have a particular theme or starting line as a prompt.
- **Flick through the newspaper.** Yes, you can call this "research" or "inspiration"! News stories may not have many details – which can give you plenty of room to fill in the blanks.
- **Read widely.** If you're planning to write in a particular genre or for a specific publication, get a sense of what's already been done.
- **Ask "what if...?"** This works especially well for sci-fi/fantasy writers, but it's also a powerful question for mainstream fiction. What if you were trapped in a room with someone you hated? What if you won the holiday of a lifetime? What if you witnessed a murder? (Obviously, in all these, "you" can be the main character of your story.)
- **Think of a classic plot** – perhaps from a fairytale or from Shakespeare – and set the story somewhere completely different. There's no copyright on ideas – and you'll often hear writers say that all the basic stories have already been told.

Exercise:

Get hold of a notebook, or start a document on your computer, for idea-gathering. Jot down any ideas that are currently bubbling around in your mind.

If you don't have any ideas at the moment, use the resources below and spend 10 minutes brainstorming.

Resources:

[Writing Comps](#) on Prize Magic lists mainly UK-based writing competitions.

[Creative Copy Challenge](#) has twice-weekly challenges (Mondays and Thursdays) with 10 words to include in a short story.

[Creative Writing Prompts](#) has over 300 different prompts to get you going. Just hover your mouse over one of the numbers to get a new prompt.

[Weekly Writing Workshop](#) was a category on Pamela Wilson's blog, with images to help trigger your imagination. She's isn't posting many new prompts now, but you can find the archived ones through that link (scroll down the page a bit).

Lesson #2: The Three Key Elements of Fiction Explained

Welcome to the second lesson of *Getting Started with Fiction*. We're going to take a quick look at the three key elements of fiction, before moving on to examine them in more depth during the next three lessons.

Those key elements are:

- Plot
- Character
- Setting

These are quite abstract concepts, so you might want to think of them as questions:

- Plot – what happens in your story?
- Character – who is involved?
- Setting – where does it take place?

Often, you'll hear people talk about a "plot-driven" story or a "character-led" one. You might have wondered whether plot or character is more important – or which should come first.

It's not really possible to separate plot and character. As Henry James pointed out:

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?

In fact, you can see all three major elements as entwined:

Plot, character, story, theme and setting should bond with one another like the molecules in vulcanized rubber.

- Maeve Maddox, [First Steps in Plotting a Novel](#), DailyWritingTips

Some writers start off with a plot idea: they think about an event, or a series of events, and then work out the characters who will be involved and affected.

Other writers start off with a character. They create a vivid person, and then set him/her loose in a particular setting – and the plot unfolds from there.

All three elements – plot, character, and setting – are vital for any piece of fiction, however short or long. A trilogy of novels will play out on a very different scale from a 500-word piece of flash fiction – but both will share underlying features.

Exercise

Grab a piece of paper. Jot down one (or more!) novels or short stories that you've read for each of these categories:

#1: The plot kept you hooked

#2: A character has stuck with you

#3: The setting was especially powerful

Spend a few minutes working out *why* the plot, character and/or setting was so strong. You might want to discuss this in the forums.

Lesson #3: Plot

I always think “plot” is an interesting word. If one of your characters was “plotting”, you wouldn’t necessarily expect anything good to arise ...

As the story-teller, your plotting is supposed to verge on the villainous. You need to put pressure on your characters, creating conflict and tension within the story. When you plot, you’re constantly looking for ways to make things worse, to raise the stakes, to cause problems for your characters.

There are three key types of conflict:

- Internal
- Interpersonal
- Environmental

Internal conflict takes place inside a character’s own head.

It might be a conflict between two different desires (respect for parents versus wanting to find one’s own path in life). It could be a struggle between doing what’s right and doing what’s easy. In some stories, internal conflict could even be a battle with mental illness.

Interpersonal conflict takes place between two (or more) people.

This might be physical – a fight or struggle. Often, though, interpersonal conflict plays out in dialogue – perhaps a shouting match, perhaps passive-aggressive behaviour. The conflict doesn’t necessarily need to be deliberately antagonistic: two people may be in conflict because one thinks they know “what’s best” for the other.

Environmental conflict arises from the setting.

If your characters are North Pole explorers or survivors of a massive nuclear disaster, their surroundings are likely to be a threat. On the less extreme level, bad weather, isolation, discomfort and other circumstances can all add to the tension and conflict in your story.

When you plot, keep all three levels of conflict in mind. A short story may need only one, but a longer piece will be enriched by multiple layers of conflict.

Creating Your Plot

How much of your plot should you have before you start writing? Some novelists have detailed chapter-by-chapter notes. Others just dive in without doing any planning at all (this latter camp are often called “pantsers” as they’re engaged in “seat-of-the-pants” writing).

I tend to find that my plot emerges gradually while I’m writing, and you might be the same. I’d suggest that before you begin, you’ll want to know:

- Where your story starts
- Roughly how it ends
- What major conflicts are involved
- A few major events along the way

With a short story, you’ll probably need a clear sense of your plot before you begin – especially if you’re working to a tight word limit. For a novel, you may want to jot down a sentence or two describing each of the first few chapters, and a few more sentences covering the rest of the plot.

Outlining Your Plot

There are lots of different ways to physically construct your plot. You could:

- Write summaries of individual chapters / scenes on index cards and arrange them on a cork board
- Draw a mindmap showing the links between particular characters
- Use a Word document or similar that you can easily update as you get new ideas

... or pretty much anything else you can think of!

Exercise:

Come up with an outline for a story.

It doesn't need to be detailed, but you should have a sense of the beginning and the end – and a few ideas about what big events might occur in between.

Resources:

[Plot & Stories](#) – a great, in-depth article on Tameri with clear explanations of the difference between plot and story, and a detailed look at a typical plot arc.

[First Steps in Plotting a Novel](#) – article by Maeve Maddox, on DailyWritingTips, with some thoughts about plot and some tips for getting started.

Lesson #4: Characters

Readers tend to latch on to characters more easily than to plots or settings. If you're writing a series of novels then your *characters* will generally stay the same from book to book, even though each book will have a different plot and may have a different setting.

Your characters need to be:

- **Human:** with flaws and failings and inconsistencies
- **Interesting:** they should be people who we're intrigued by and who we want to spend time with
- **Sympathetic:** that goes mainly for the good guys in your novel – but we can sympathise and understand villainous characters too
- **Active:** avoid writing characters who passively accept whatever life throws at them – readers want to see characters take charge of their own destiny
- **Capable of growth:** in really good fiction, at least one character should change and grow throughout the course of the story

Some writing books or classes will give you character questionnaires that you're supposed to fill out. Personally, I don't think these are especially useful: it rarely matters what colour hair your character has, or when her birthday is, or how tall she is.

To develop good characters, ask yourself deeper questions like:

- What is he most afraid of?
- Who does he secretly hate/envy/love..?
- Under what circumstances would he lie?
- What drives him – what is his goal or desire?

This last question is particularly important, because thwarting your characters' goals creates tension and conflict within the plot.

Don't just think of your characters as individuals – consider how they'll get along (or not!) as a group, and how one person's behaviour may affect another. You might want to deliberately put two characters into one another's path to watch the sparks fly...

Exercise:

Create a character.

If you've got a piece of fiction currently underway, use that; if not, come up with a character for something new.

Stuck? Take 30-year-old Thomas as your character. Write a brief description of him – you can use the questions above as a starting point, if you want.

(You can put Thomas in any setting – which we'll come on to in the next lesson. Past, present, future; all of time and space is yours to play with...)

Resources:

[Create a Character Clinic](#) by Holly Lisle – a fantastic ebook on character-creation, with lots of questions to get you thinking.

[The 100 favourite fictional characters... as chosen by 100 literary luminaries](#) from The Independent newspaper – a great way to see which characters stick in readers' brains, and why.

Lesson #5: Setting

All stories have a setting. In some, that setting is critical to the plot or the mood of the piece. The Harry Potter books would be totally different if they were set somewhere other than a wizarding boarding school.

Your story idea may come with a setting attached: a sci-fi piece about two guys who go crazy while working together on a remote outpost is *about* the setting. Sometimes, though, you'll need to decide between several possible locations for your action.

Think about:

- **When your story is set.** Would it work best as a contemporary narrative? Is it near-future sci-fi – or historical fiction?
- **What country you're writing about.** Most authors find it easiest to stick with their home country to begin with (or one that they've lived in for a reasonable length of time).
- **Where your characters live.** Do you want them in a big city or in the countryside? Are they in nice neighbourhoods or run-down ones?
- **What specific locations you might use.** If you're writing a short story, the whole thing might take place in one area – like a house, a shop, a theatre, a supermarket...
- **Whether your character is there by choice.** (If so, why? If not, why not?) Where would they rather be?

If your characters don't all live in the same area, you might want to plot out their positions on a map. (I wish I'd done this before I started my novel – I ended up doing some last-minute rewriting to move characters around.) You may need details like how far it is from one character's house to another's, or where three characters might plausibly meet up.

Whatever location you choose, it should throw up trouble for your characters. Whether it's a crime-stricken inner-city neighbourhood or an isolated cottage in the countryside, there's plenty of potential for drama.

Exercise:

Decide on the location(s) where the bulk of your story will take place. Write down possible environmental conflicts that could arise as a result.

Resources:

[Fantasy World-Building Questions](#) – by Patricia C. Wrede. If you're creating a fantasy or sci-fi world, dip into these to help you. (You may want to copy and paste them into a document, as the text on the site is quite hard to read.)

[Setting](#) – an article by Lori Handeland. Several great points to consider and tips for using the setting to enhance your story. Aimed at contemporary novel-writers, but there's good advice here for everyone.

Lesson #6: Starting Your Story

It can be surprisingly hard to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) when you're about to start writing a new story, or a new chapter of a novel. You might feel daunted by the task ahead; you might doubt whether you've got the ability or the courage to write the story that's rattling around in your head.

This is completely normal, especially if you haven't written much fiction before, or if you've had a break from it. It's not "writer's block" – just writer's reluctance! In this lesson, we'll be looking at three ways to get going. You can use just one of them, or all three.

Tip #1: Set Aside Time to Write

Make yourself a writing appointment – and keep to it! It's much easier to work on fiction when you know you've put the time aside.

On the day I wrote this lesson, my only diary entry was "Fiction – work on short story about happiness". I didn't feel like getting started at all, but I wanted to keep the promise I'd made to myself. I wrote more than 500 words on a new short story, which is the first fiction I've written in a couple of months. (And then I went on to some non-fiction writing, as you can see...!)

Tip #2: Write for Just 10 Minutes

You can do anything for 10 minutes, however stuck, blocked or reluctant you feel. Set a timer (you can use [Tick Tock Timer](#) online) and promise yourself that you'll write until the timer goes off.

Don't worry if you feel that your writing isn't great. You might well have to rewrite your first few sentences or paragraphs later – the important thing is that they get you moving.

You'll almost certainly find that after a few minutes, the story is starting to flow.

Tip #3: Don't Start at the Beginning

Sometimes, we get stuck because we don't know where a story should begin. Perhaps you're debating about whether or not to include a prologue at the start of your novel, or you don't know if you should introduce Character A before Character B.

Instead of starting at the beginning, choose a scene or section that you feel confident about, and write that. You may even find that this becomes the start of your story – it's usually good to begin in the middle of the action.

Exercise:

Get started! Spend at least 10 minutes (and preferably 30) on the actual writing of your story or novel.

If you're finding it hard to get going with your story, [jump over to the forums](#) and chat to other Writers' Huddle members. You might want to tell us a bit about your project – and make a commitment to getting started, so we can help keep you accountable.

Resources:

[Tick Tock Timer](#) – an online timer you can use for timed writing. Warning: the gong sound is quite loud!

[Dark Room](#) – a free application for Windows users. This gives you a full-screen writing environment with no distractions.

[WriteRoom](#) – the Mac OS program that DarkRoom is based on.

Congratulations on completing *Getting Started With Fiction*. I hope you've enjoyed this mini-course and that you've had a chance to try out the exercises.

If you've not tried out the Writers' Huddle forums yet, [come and chat here!](#) We'd love to hear what you're working on.