

Introduction to Flash Fiction  
(Five 45min – 1h workshop lessons)

### Learning Outcomes for workshop students:

- Be able to explain what flash fiction is, and cite a few examples of the genre
- Understand the benefits of free writing exercises as a warm up to creative writing and stimulating creative flexibility
- Understand the basic technical points of a piece of flash fiction (POV, tense, genre ...)
- Be able to use a visual or verbal prompt to create a story
- Understand there are no ‘wrong’ answers in creative writing and evaluating creative writing

### Online Resources (journals and venues for and by high school students)

ELAN – An International Student Magazine <https://elanlitmag.org/>

The Apprentice Writer <http://www.apprenticewriter.com/>

Polyphony H.S. <http://polyphonyhs.com/>

Tunnel Zine <https://tunnelzine.com/category/words/flash-fiction/>

Teen Ink <https://www.teenink.com/>

Young Writers Project <http://youngwritersproject.org/>

### Overview

Lesson ONE: What is flash fiction?

Lesson TWO: Getting started, finding inspiration

Lesson THREE: Writing Practice – tackling a longer story

Lesson FOUR: Revision techniques

Lesson FIVE: Rewriting, writing

## Lesson ONE: What is flash fiction?

Flash Fiction is a very short story (up to 750/1000 words) that still includes a beginning, middle, and a resolution. It is not a fragment of a larger story. It has a complete shape, and often alludes to a larger story that remains off the page.

### Activity 1:

What is one of the most famous flash fiction stories of all time? The American writer Ernest Hemingway has been attributed with the following six-word story:

For sale. Baby Shoes. Never worn.

Some other examples of six-word stories:

Sorry soldier, shoes sold in pairs.  
Knife hidden. He rings the doorbell.  
First sentient robot. "Turn me off."  
Please help, he said. I smiled.

Ask the students to come up with their own 6-word stories. (A warm-up exercise, a kind of free-writing, and moves the students into a creative frame-of-mind.)

If the students are willing to share, write their ideas up for everyone to see. Classify them by genre (mystery, sci-fi, humor, romance, etc). You can ask them to write a second 6-word story but in a different genre.

### Activity 2:

Early examples of flash fiction come from Greece, India, China, and many other places.

- Two examples (which are in the Flash Fiction Reading Packet):

Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare"

"The Golden Mallard" from *The Jataka*

- Questions/Discussion:

Identify the beginning, middle, and the end

How are the different characters described?

How does each character influence the plot?

Ask the students to write a fable or very short flash fiction. 300 words max. With a beginning, a middle, and an end. If there is time, ask if they are willing to share.

## Lesson TWO: Getting started, finding inspiration

### Activity 1: Reading and Warm-up

- Warm up: Read Annie Mc Mahon's "Secret Mission" (In the Flash Fiction Reading Packet)

#### Questions/Discussion

What is the setting for this story? What kind of details create the setting? What details are left out? How does the setting change? How does that change influence the plot/story? Did you enjoy the story reversal?

This story came out of a writing prompt (a single line of dialogue). Ask the students to brainstorm single lines of dialogue. Maybe something they said to a sibling or a friend that day, or the day before. Just a single line. It can be anything. Try to get about 5 or 6 lines up.

Ask the students to brainstorm three objects. It can be something in the room, something they saw that morning on their way to school. Nouns, and the more specific and unusual the better. Not just "tree" "dog" "telephone" but ask them for things like "SIM card" "graffiti" "tentacle". Try to get about 10 words up.

### Activity 2: Writing

Writing time! Use the words and lines of dialogue as writing prompts. The students can choose either one line of dialogue or one cluster of three words. Extra fun if they choose a line of dialogue and three words and get both into their story. (Sometimes its easier for the teacher to choose three words and give the students the constraint, sometimes it works to let them pick three words out of the ten – depends on the class.)

Take about 15 – 20 minutes to write a short story – up to 500 words if they'd like – using the prompt. If you'd like to do the prompt as well, great.

Ask the students if anyone would like to share. (If no one wants to share, perhaps share your own.) Remind them there is no way anyone can write a perfectly polished flash fiction in 15 minutes. The point is to have fun, get something on the page, look at what comes out and generate discussion.

#### Questions /Discussion

What was hard about the exercise?

How did the prompt work for creating the story?

Did you manage a beginning, middle, end?

Besides writing prompts, ask the students where else they can find inspiration for a story (memory, photograph, magazine image, a line from a song, an overheard conversation ...)

## Lesson THREE: Writing Practice - tackling a longer story

### Activity 1: Reading

- Read Jonathan Schneeweiss's "Mermaid" (In the Flash Fiction Reading Packet)

### Questions/Discussion

Who are the characters? How does the writer make you feel sympathy for the characters? What is the setting? What are the emotions described in this story? What is the genre? Where is the point of greatest tension? How does the dialogue work? (Is there inner dialogue, external dialogue?) Does the story feel historical or contemporary or both?

### Activity 2: Warm-up and creative flexibility

Ask the students to imagine a forest and then to imagine they are walking alone through that forest.

Have them free write for 5 minutes about their forest and what it feels like – colours, sounds, weather, what's in the forest, where is the forest. Remind them to practice description, observation. Get as many words on the page as possible, nothing needs to be grammatically correct or even in complete sentences.

Now ask them to add another person/animal/character and write several lines of dialogue between themselves and the new arrival to the scene.

Now ask them to go back to an earlier part of the writing and pick out four of their descriptive sentences and change them – change the season, change the landscape, change what they might be wearing in the scene, change the emotional tone

### Activity 3: Writing

Story building time. Take 20 – 30 minutes for the students to draft out a 750-word story. They can build upon part or all of their free writing piece or use one of the stories they started in an earlier workshop. The idea is to encourage experimentation. Nothing needs to be perfect. They can start again.

## Lesson FOUR: Revision techniques

### Activity 1 – Steps for revision (Identify/Diagram, Question, Rework)

Go back to “The Mermaid” and identify it:

Is it a mystery? Is it a love story? Is it a thriller? Who is the narrator? Is it a sad or a happy story? Is it set in the past or in the future? How many characters are there? Who is the main character, who are the secondary characters? What is the setting? What are the visual themes? What are the emotional themes?

Then diagram it:

Write out plot points. Write out its timeline – mark out the beginning, the middle, the end. Use color coding to show highlights, moments of tension. Where is the exposition, where is the dialogue? How much time is given to each character?

Remember – sometimes the “middle” or the “end” (or any part) of a flash fiction piece can be one sentence only.

NOTE: If there are student pieces (300 words or shorter) that you can talk about here, please do. Use one of the student pieces, or your own story, and have the class “identify” it in the same way.

### Activity 2 – Diagram /Question your own text

Ask the students to take one of the pieces they’ve already written, and either on their own or in pairs (if you think they’re comfortable working in pairs on their writing). Ask them to:

- 1) identify/diagram it
- 2) question it

Questioning a text is about trying to understand what it is trying to do? Sample questions:

What emotion do I want my reader to feel when she finishes my story? Are my visual themes coherent? Do my emotional themes change or stay the same? How do the parts of my story interact? Do they interact? Do any of my characters need more description? Do any of my characters need less description? Is my setting clear? Have I used dialogue?

Once you have answers, you can often SEE your text more clearly and start revisions. Also, reading a piece out loud is one of the best ways to understand it. Listen to the rhythms, notice unnecessary words and sentences, etc. Students may prefer to read their pieces aloud in private.

## Lesson FIVE: Rewriting, writing

The goal of the final lesson is to give the students the time and a supportive environment to apply the tools they've learned in previous workshops to their pieces.

### Activity 1

Free-writing warm up for creative flexibility

Ask the students to remember where they were the day before at 9 am (adapt to suit the class). Take three minutes to list the details – place, weather, any surrounding sounds, alone or with people, can they remember four objects. (Tell them they will share their lists, so they're prepared to share)

Ask them to pass their list to someone else. Now with the new list, ask them to write for 5 minutes. At the end of the 5 minutes, ask them to pass the list one more time and now they must add two things from the second list to their writing piece.

### Activity 2

Time to write – in groups or on their own. Time to re-work their previous material or work on new material. Time to ask questions to the group about story problems or questions. Sometimes it can be nice to brainstorm together, find solutions to issues of voice and plot.

If possible have more examples of flash fiction around (“Artichoke Heart” in the reading packet, for example) or ask the students to browse the online journals and look for more material. Sometimes reading a 100-word piece can generate an immediate reaction and a 100-piece from the student.

### Alternate activity – Group drafting

Use a writing prompt like the following line of dialogue: He said, “Only if you get the wolf,” and turned back to the bookshelf.

Put the students in groups of three or four. The first student writes the first line and then passes the paper. They pass the paper around, each student writing a sentence until there is a paragraph or two. Read the stories aloud and see what has been produced.