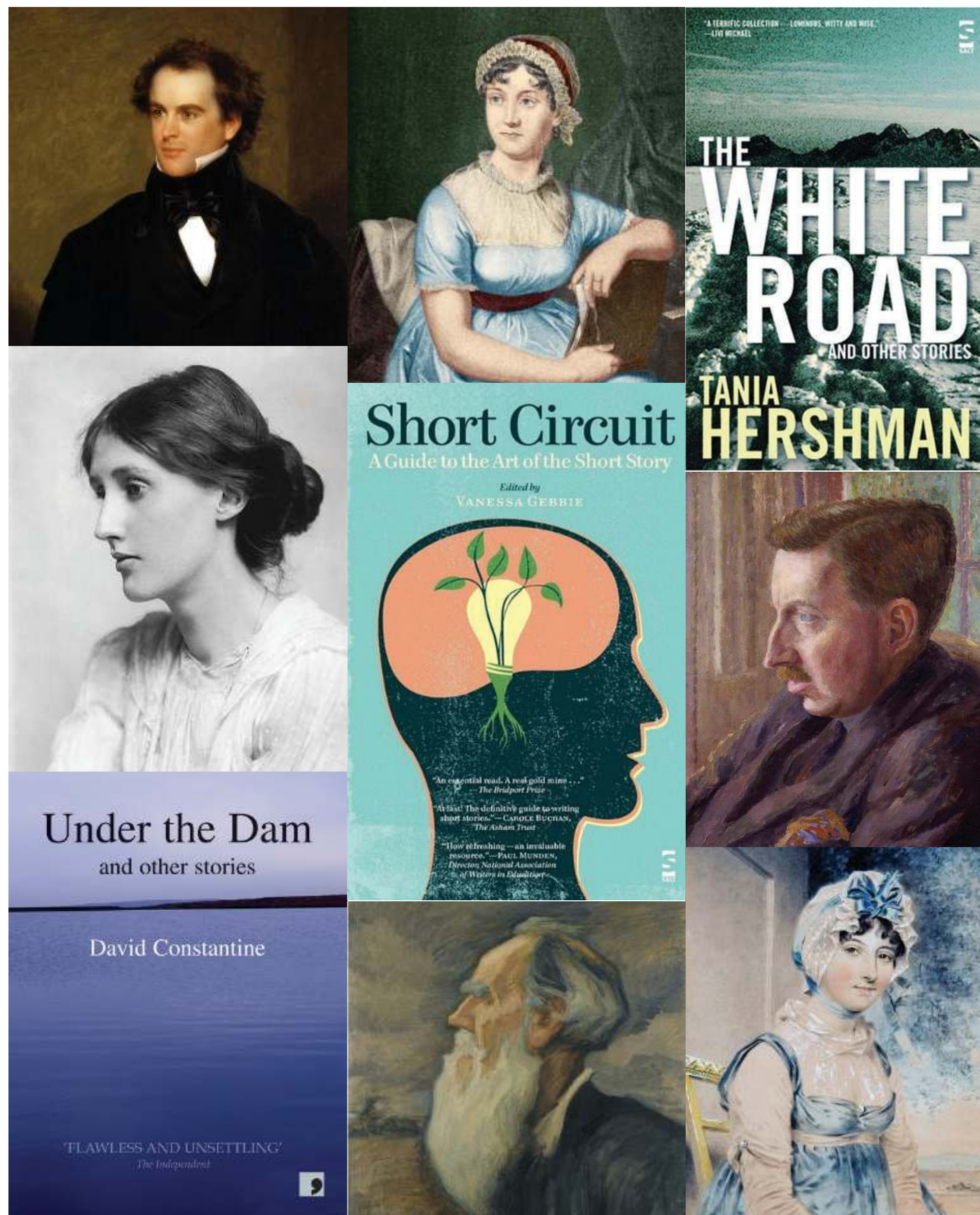
Creative Writing 2

Writing Short Fiction



Level HE5 – 60 CATS

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Front cover, clockwise from top right:
Cover *The White Road,* Tania Hershman
E. M. Forster, Dora Carrington, 1924
Maria Edgeworth, John Downman 1807
Leo Tolstoy, Leonid Pasternak
Cover, *Under the Dam*, David Constantine
Virginia Woolf, George Charles Beresford, 1902
Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Osgood, 1804
Jane Austen, 1873
Cover Short Circuit First Edition, Vanessa Grebbie

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Before you start

Welcome to ***Creative Writing 2: Writing Short Fiction***. Your **Creative Writing Student Guide** should be able to answer most questions about this and all other OCA creative writing courses, so keep it to hand as you work through the course.

Course aims

The aim of this course is to inspire and encourage you to practise independent creative writing within the genre of the short story. You'll look at the formal requirements and ongoing practice of the genre as well as the historical and theoretical background to contemporary short fiction.

On successful completion of this course, you'll be able to:

- demonstrate an understanding of structure, form and technique in short fiction in a creative body of work
- show discrimination in drafting and editing self-generated texts, and in your reflective commentary, in response to your tutor's critical feedback
- show evidence of wide and critical reading in both your own writing and your theoretical work
- critically review a contemporary collection, movement or writer of short fiction.

By the end of the course, you'll have built up a folio of short fiction writing which has undergone critical appraisal and revision.

Your tutor

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you're clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your **Student Handbook**.

If you haven't already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – for example your experience of writing so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope or expect to achieve from it. Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help him or her understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you'll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you're waiting.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your **Creative Writing Student Guide** at an early stage in the course. For assessment you'll need to submit a cross-section of the work you've done on the course:

- your three best redrafted course assignments (2,500 – 3,000 words each) together with the original tutor-annotated versions
- your creative reading commentary (2,000 – 3,000 words) (Assignment Six)
- your final reflective commentary on the course (1,500 – 2,000 words)
- your tutor report forms.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

Pre-assessment review

If you decide to have your work formally assessed, you'll need to spend some time at the end of the course preparing your finished work for submission. How you present your work to the assessors is of critical importance and can make the difference between an average mark and an excellent mark. Because of this your tutor is available to guide you on presenting your work. You'll find more information about the pre-assessment review in Part Six of this course guide.

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you're going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you've completed in your writing diary, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses and taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment.

Assessment criteria points

- **Presentation and technical correctness** – Grammatical accuracy, punctuation, layout, spelling, awareness of literary conventions, and the ability (where appropriate) to play with these conventions and fit them to the your needs.
- **Language** – Its appropriateness to genre, subject matter, and characters. Avoidance of cliché, employment of a wide vocabulary, awareness of the rhythmic powers of language, and an ability to make appropriate use of imagery. Above HE level 4 (i.e. OCA Levels 2 and 3), we are looking for the development of an individual voice.
- **Creativity** – Imagination, experimentation, inventive exploration of subject matter, originality and empathy.
- **Contextual knowledge** – Evidence of reading, research, critical thinking and reflection. Engagement with contemporary thinking and practice in the specific genre (i.e. short fiction).
- **Craft of writing** – Technical competence in your chosen genre (in prose, areas such as narrative, plotting, setting, voice, tense, characterisation).

Your writing diary

Your writing diary is an integral part of this and every other OCA creative writing course. Your writing diary is where you work reflectively, recording your thoughts on your writing and how your thought processes relate to your growing battery of skills. When you are generating creative writing texts, you may be learning on an intuitive level; the writing diary will help your understanding of how this learning process works for you. As you add to the diary, be it daily or sporadically, you'll form a record of your writing journey. This record is for you alone; you won't have to show it to anyone, so you can write from the heart about the highs and lows of becoming a writer. This can be online, as a blog (which you can use the blog settings to keep private), or in a paper-based journal.

Plan ahead

This Level 2 course represents 600 hours of learning time. Allow around 20% of this time for reflection and keeping your writing diary. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 12 hours each week on it. You'll find the course much easier if you've already completed a Level 1 writing course.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You'll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

Writing Short Fiction is divided into six parts, corresponding to the six course assignments. The first assignment will enable your tutor to get to know you, review your work so far and decide how best to help you in future.

Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into a series of projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers research, reading and exercises to encourage writing. The exercises slowly build up into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

The assignments offer flexibility as to style and content and are designed to help you develop your own creative style and voice. Each assignment will ask you for up to 3,000 words of short fiction writing. You'll also submit a short reflective commentary (around 500 words) with Assignments One to Five, describing the writing process and your experience of that part of the course. These are for your tutor only and will not be submitted for assessment. At the end of the course, you'll write a longer reflective commentary (1,500 – 2,000 words) on the course as a whole and this will be submitted for assessment if you decide to go down this route. You'll submit this as part of Assignment Six, along with your creative reading commentary (2,000 – 3,000 words) on a short story collection, a writer of short fiction or a movement in short fiction.

Reading

You'll be provided with a copy of the course reader, which you'll need to refer to throughout the course:

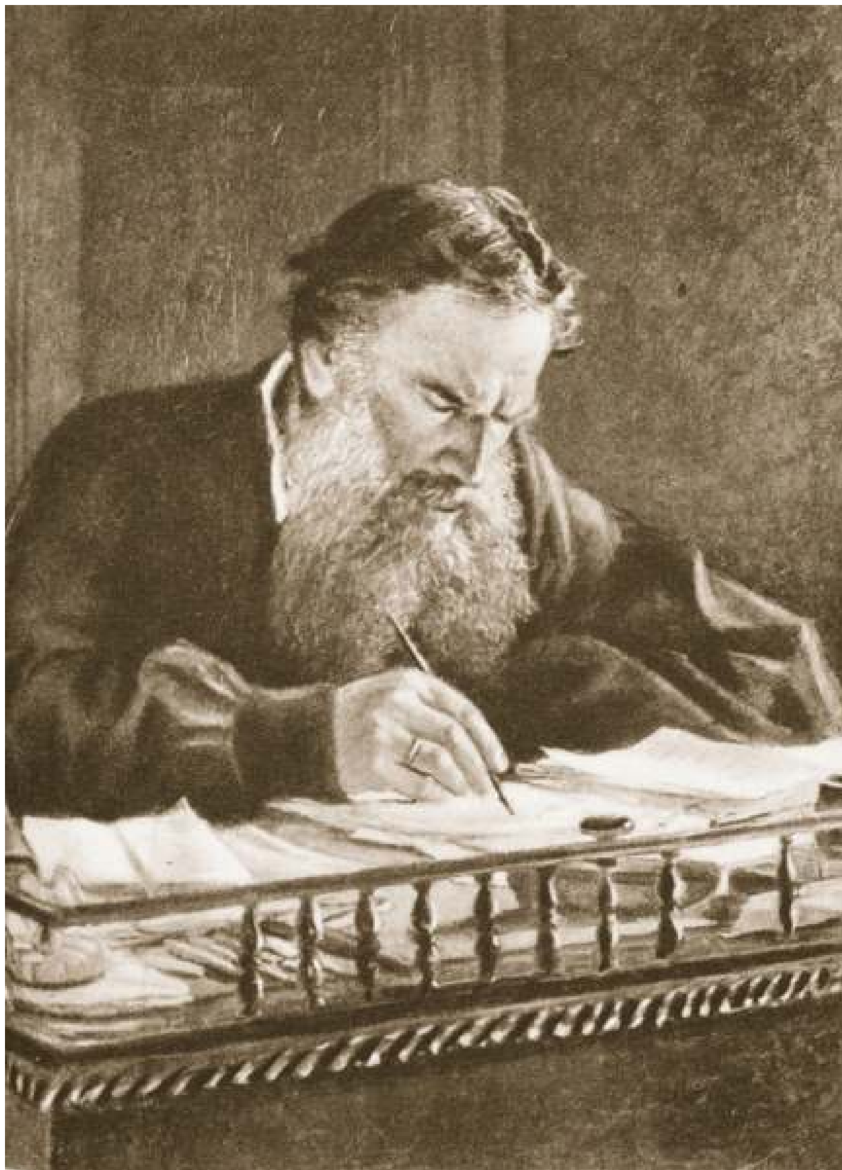
Gebbie, Vanessa (2013) *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story.* London: Salt Publishing

A reading list for the course is available at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website. The reading list recommends key texts and gives suggestions for further reading. You'll find that reading about the process of short story writing and reading creative short fiction by other writers will help to develop your own research and writing skills. Record your thoughts, reactions and critical reflections on your reading in your writing diary; this will be helpful when you come to work on your creative reading commentary and your final reflective commentary (Assignment Six). The online reading list on the OCA website is updated regularly, so check this for recently published recommendations.

Referencing your reading

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this you should use the Harvard system of referencing – see the **Harvard referencing system guide** on the OCA website. Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event. Referencing other people's work accurately will also help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.

Part one
Starting to write short fiction



Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Nikolaevich Ge,

Introduction

> *"If you are having trouble getting started, look out the window. The whole world is a story, and every moment is a miracle..."*
>
> Bruce Taylor, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC) Professor Emeritus of Creative Writing

The short story is a form of literature in its own right, and is loved because it is able to strike directly into the heart and mind without preamble. The compulsion to tell stories is a very powerful and ancient one which continues to have a place in our modern culture. Commuters across the world still read the latest magazine short story, as readers did a century ago, proving just how strong a means of expression the short story is.

Short stories demonstrate how diverse, funny, sad, illogical, cruel, rapturous, shocking and mysterious the human experience can be.

During this course, you'll have the opportunity to conjure these small moments out of your own imagination; by the end of it, you'll have gained the skills and strategies to create pieces of short fiction. You'll have completed at least five fully-realised short stories, and you'll probably have elements of many more. Even though you may not have a single theme or idea ready to work into a short story at the moment, these course materials will provide you with the stimulation and tools to start, improve and complete short fiction.

Before you begin, skim through the entire course, noting how it is laid out and the sort of challenges you'll face. You may like to do some of the research slightly ahead of time, especially if you haven't previously come across some of the terminology used.

Re-read the **Creative Writing Student Guide**, looking especially at the section on 'Managing the course components'. Re-acquaint yourself with the essential tools: the writer's notebook, the writing diary and the commonplace book. Also check that you know what is meant by 'freewriting'. This was covered in the Level 1 course ***Writing Skills***, but you can research the technique by Googling the word.

Project one **What defines short fiction?**

Defining a short story can be like trying to describe a colour. Everyone knows red – but try explaining it. Of course, a short story sets out to entertain, engage and possibly inform the reader, but so do most other forms of creative writing.

It is often said that a short story should provide a snapshot of a moment of illumination – that it should be enclosed in a capsule, entire to itself, drawing its being from a single point of emotion or wonder. This suggests a short passage of fictional time, a small cast of characters, a single theme and a tightly drawn plot. Or, to quote the writer Isobelle Carmody:

> *"Short stories do not say this happened and this happened and this happened. They are a microcosm and a magnification rather than a linear progression."*

http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/628526-short-stories-do-not-say-this-happened-and-this-happened

This is a strong recommendation to bear in mind as your make your first attempts at short story writing.

Crucial to the short story are convincing characters, a central theme and an ability to provoke empathy or inspiration. Every word has to count as the narrative demonstrates a coherent progression towards its conclusion which, by definition, is never far away.

These are not fixed rules, but rather guidelines. Many a fine short story has successfully handled a bevy of characters, an extended timeline, or an ending that lacks closure. It might even appear, at first glance, to be a collection of vivid but disjointed impressions. But the story still has to be rigorous in its construction; it must be a whole.

There is only one rule that can never be broken, and that is length. A short story has to be short. But how short? Are there minimum or maximum word counts that short fiction must sit between?

This is how the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford Paperback Reference, p.307) describes the short story:

> *"A fictional tale of no specified length, but too short to be published as a volume on its own, as novellas sometimes and novels usually are. A short story will normally concentrate on a single event with only one or two characters, more economically than a novel's sustained exploration of social background."*

This isn't just a good definition, it's great advice: concentrate on a single event with only one or two characters. Doing this, at least to begin with, will help you avoid many of the pitfalls that lie in the short story writer's path.

Exercise

Sorting through a miscellany of clippings and picture cuttings will give you plenty of ideas. If you've never started a commonplace book, find an old shoe box or empty file and begin to fill it by rifling through things you might have stored around your house: photographs, newspaper cuttings, postcards, flyers, or any other material that may at some point be of interest in your writing. Buy the weekend's broadsheet newspapers and their supplements and cut out whatever catches your eye.

Open your notebook and freewrite the first thoughts that come to you around this miscellany of ideas. Freewrite for as long as you can without stopping, even to think much.

Read through what you've written and continue to allow the ideas and the freewrite to grow in your mind.

Research point

Using all the media available to you (your local library, the internet, your own collection of information, etc.) investigate what other writers believe to be the accepted word count for a short story.

Now assess the length of as many short stories as you have to hand; also visit the library. Read completely the shortest short story and the longest short story you can find (even if you've read them before). Reflect on your own preferences for reading and writing various lengths. Make notes about this in your writing diary.

How long?

As you've probably discovered, there is no agreed definition of the length of short fiction. Richard Brautigan is said to have written almost the shortest story, *The Scarlatti Tilt* (from *Revenge of the Lawn: Stories 1962–1970*):

> *"It's very hard to live in a studio apartment in San José with a man who's learning to play the violin." That's what she told the police when she handed them the empty revolver.*

Twitter has arguably curtailed short fiction even further, to 140 characters, but long before Twitter, Ernest Hemingway wrote a 'teeny tiny story' of just six words (see Part Three, Project Three). Whilst the minimum size has dwindled almost to nothing, the maximum size remains contentious. Some will say that short stories end where novellas begin – between 20,000 and 30,000 words. Others would argue that a novella can be no less than 40,000 words, and that anything shorter is short fiction. But many contend that a story you couldn't easily read in one sitting – over about 10,000 words – cannot be short fiction.

For the purposes of this course, the short fiction you produce for assignments must fall within the word counts proposed in the assignment guidelines at the end of each part of the course. You can, of course, experiment with longer stories, and you'll be encouraged to write very short stories as the course progresses. You may find you've produced satisfying stories that are too short or too long to submit to your tutor. Don't dismiss these; short ones will be useful in Part Three, longer stories can be reworked after the end of the course.

At first, you should attempt to produce rough drafts without thinking too closely about the word count. The more rough drafts you start, even if you don't finish them, the sooner you'll be able to gauge with your 'writer's mind' the sort of word count a story might finally arrive at.

Research point

Using your library or free downloads from the internet, read several of Ernest Hemingway's short stories. *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (1987) contains all his collections, including his 1933 classic *The Snows of Kilimanjaro.*

Note how Hemingway uses simple prose to create clean lines, how he describes his settings and how his dialogue shows depth of character. You might notice that Hemingway sometimes departs from the guidelines set out above: sometimes he employs many characters and sometimes his endings are unresolved. But his mastery of narrative urges you to read on.

Exercise

Look at the place you are presently in and recall a single event that took place there. This can be a very minor event; it could be something that happened only moments ago, or some years ago. Write a brief account of this event, like a diary entry, concentrating on the person it happened to. If this is yourself, write in the first person if you wish

Next, introduce one further character into the writing. This person is a new and fictional development. Allow a dialogue to develop, growing out of the original event – something that might have happened. Focus on the emotions of the two characters. What's going on in their minds? This conversation can be as trivial or as meaningful as the original situation suggests. Continue with this interaction and see where it goes.

Once you've written between 500 and 1,000 words, stop and read your work through. Can you see a single theme emerging? Could this be a story about a moment in time? How long might this story be if you were to write on? Could it be different lengths depending on how you continue – which story path you take, or what structure you choose? Or, to quote the dictionary definition above, will the length depend on whether you stay with the "single event with only one or two characters" or open the writing out into a "sustained exploration of social background"?

Make notes in your writing diary. Continue with this embryo story in your own writing time, if and when you feel driven to do so.

You may also like to attempt the exercise that starts on p.65 of your course reader.

A slice of life

The story extracts below are the beginning and the end from a story of around 1,000 words, *A Day's Wait*. Like most of Hemingway's stories, this seems to be nothing more than the recording of a 'moment of time', but leaves the reader with much to ponder. Read the extracts below, then see if you can find the entire story; it's available in anthologies and on the internet.

He came into the room to shut the windows while we were still in bed and I saw he looked ill. He was shivering, his face was white, and he walked slowly as though it ached to move.

"What's the matter, Schatz?"

"I've got a headache."

"You better go back to bed."

"No. I'm all right."

"You go to bed. I'll see you when I'm dressed."

But when I came downstairs he was dressed, sitting by the fire, looking a very sick and miserable boy of nine years. When I put my hand on his forehead I knew he had a fever.

"You go up to bed," I said, "you're sick."

"I'm all right," he said.

When the doctor came he took the boy's temperature.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"One hundred and two."

Schatz refuses to sleep once put to bed, and tells his father that he doesn't have to stay "if it's going to bother you". It's not until both the reader and the father, who goes out hunting to shoot ducks, return to the scene of Schatz's bedroom, that the implications of his earlier words becomes clear: the boy thinks his temperature is too high to sustain life.

He had been waiting to die all day, ever since nine o'clock in the morning.

"You poor Schatz," I said. "Poor old Schatz. It's like miles and kilometers. You aren't going to die. That's a different thermometer. On that thermometer thirty-seven is normal. On this kind it's ninety-eight."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," I said. "It's like miles and kilometers. You know, like how many kilometers we make when we do seventy miles in the car?"

"Oh," he said.

But his gaze at the foot of the bed relaxed slowly. The hold over himself relaxed too, finally, and the next day it was very slack and he cried very easily at little things that were of no importance.

Writers often consider this sort of story by Hemingway to be a *tranche de vie,* or slice of life. This term usually refers to a 'cut-out' portion of a larger series of events in the development of a character. Slice of life stories may seem to have no dramatic lift, or tension. Even though they may be well-written and interesting, they don't feel as if they've taken you anywhere; they may even feel like anecdotes. But excellence in this form keeps its secrets until after its conclusion, while the reader is still thinking about the story.

A Day's Wait appears to have a theme of miscommunication, especially between father and son. Another easily spotted theme is innocence. But try to imagine Schatz's emotions as he waited through that day, having sent his father away. Think about how his perceptions, as a nine-year-old, will have changed because of the experience – even though it was a 'non-experience'. The story also reminds us that children often try to protect their parents.

Look at the final sentence. Does Hemingway intend to demonstrate that, when we believe we will die soon, everyday life pales into insignificance, or did he mean to suggest that the experience affected Schatz more than the child let on? You can see that this story represents a considerable moment in a child's life, and a wonderful comment on the human condition.

So when you start to construct a short story, remember that you can create one out of almost nothing: a misunderstanding, a day's sickness. But also bear in mind that there's a world of difference between a short story and an anecdote. Don't mistake Hemingway's intense moment of illumination for an anecdote the father might have told, chuckling about his son's mistake over dinner.

Tip

An anecdote is an account of a probably true, often humorous, possibly exaggerated incident. A short story has a narrative arc which builds tension throughout or towards the end and finishes with a resolution.

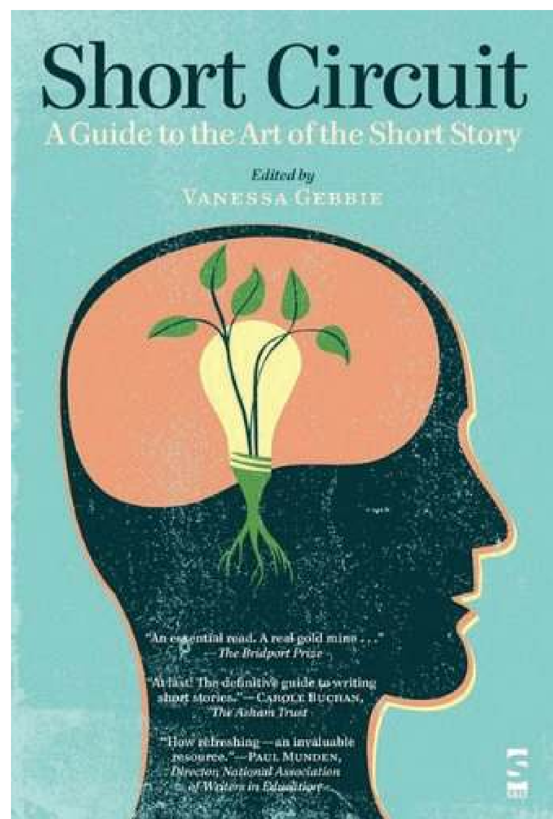
Exercise

Use the inspiration that reading Hemingway will have given you to start a new piece. Allow your ideas to grow via any motif in his stories (such as the shooting of the ducks in *A Day's Wait*). You could also use any theme you note, for instance a story of a day's sickness, or the relationship between father and son.

Spend some writing time creating the first rough draft of a short story. Try to remain in a moment of illumination; don't add irrelevances about general life.

Research point

Read the first two or three pages of Vanessa Gebbie's essay 'Leaving the Door Ajar' in your course reader.



Book cover *Short Circuit (First Edition)*, Vanessa Gebbie. Grebbie writes novels, short stories and flash fiction. Her novel *The Coward's Tale* won the Telegraph Book in a Year Competition in 2007.

Project two **Creating characters**

> *"Character is to voice is to theme is to plot is to story. Learn to trust that left to his or her own devices, your character will deliver."*
>
> (Zoe King in *Short Circuit*, 2009, p.249)

We are a gregarious species and it is people – what they do and what motivates them – that fascinates us. We are drawn to reflections of our own natures; what a writer shows in a story may disturb us by revealing our darker selves or inspire us by reflecting our capacity for altruistic love. Characterisation is possibly the most important element when writing a successful short story; this course will return to the subject time and again. The exercises in this project will give you the opportunity to attempt the creation of a character from your imagination. You can use this character, if you wish, in the final short story you'll submit for Assignment One.

Believable and engrossing

To engross the reader, characters should 'leap off the page' and yet be perfectly believable. There are ways of approaching intimacy with character, but there is also a certain *je ne sais quoi* about the way a character seeps into the mind of a reader. The people you write about should speak directly to your reader – get under their skin. Think of the stories you love, and how you identified with the characters, were entranced by them and even worried about them. You may not remember the ending to a short story, but a good character will stay with you.

Exercise

Start with a name. You could use a book of first names written for prospective parents or search the internet for similar sites. For names associated with specific ages and social classes, try using the births, marriages and deaths section of newspapers, or social network sites.

Decide on a full name for the character you will build.

Tip

1. When polishing the final draft of a story, check through the character names you've chosen. Look for:

- *alliteration or assonance – readers get confused if names are too similar*
- *unintentional comic effect – you may enjoy playing with character names, but choose wisely.*

2. Choose names to create period and cultural detail.

3. Create a collection of names, but be sure to note the source for each one, so that you don't use the full names of living people in your stories.

Creating character through description

Characters should trigger a strong reaction – first in you, then in your readers. The more vivid the description, the more powerful that reaction will be. It's a good idea to practise writing about people you know or who you've observed at first hand. This will help you to develop a writer's eye for detail and, eventually, create fictional characters much more convincingly. There are many ways of describing characters. Here are four:

- physicality and mannerisms
- clothing and possessions
- actions
- speech.

All of the above can be represented on the page in one of two ways – the mundane (Sally was a red-haired girl with attitude) and the extraordinary ("My eyes aren't really green," Sally admitted, "the contact lenses accentuate my hair colour.") Both are relevant when building character. As you probably realised, the first example described physicality and the second was speech.

Read carefully the excerpt below and consider how the four basic methods of description are used.

Bailey didn't look up from his reading so she wheeled around then and faced the children's mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied round with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbits ears. She was sitting on the sofa, feeding the baby his apricots out of a jar. "The children have been to Florida

before," the old lady said. "you all ought to take then somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to east Tennessee."

The children's mother didn't seem to hear her but the eight-year-old boy, John Wesley, a stocky child with glasses, said, "If you don't want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay at home?" He and the little girl, June Star, were reading the funny papers on the floor.

"She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day,'" June Star said without raising her head.

Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* (from *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, 1953)

Research point

Can you think of any further categories for building character? If so, note them down in your writing diary along with the four above, and add any notes, or snatches of writing, that support your list.

Revise your understanding of description using simile and metaphor. Where does O'Connor use simile and metaphor in the passage you've just read?

Flannery O'Connor, 1947,
C Macauley at en.wikipedia

Exercise

Describe the character that you named earlier. First, visualise the character – don't be afraid to use photos or pictures to inspire you. Now find active ways of describing your character. Start with the four basic description categories plus any others that you've noted down. Write a few hundred words in all.

Practise both mundane and extraordinary descriptive representations. Try out some metaphor and simile.

Allow your descriptions to stimulate your imagination of how this person might 'work' in a story of their own.

What you've created in the exercise above is a basic character sketch. Create sketches to help you visualise your characters, but don't overdo it and use long passages of character description in your stories. Note how O'Connor uses the story itself to describe her characters. She blends visually descriptive details with action and dialogue, and in doing this, suggests strongly what the characters are like as well as what they look like.

Short people for short stories?

Are characters in short stories different from those in longer fiction? After all, if a short story is a snapshot, and enclosed in a capsule, then the characters may behave differently – may be more caught up in their own 'moment in time'. Think about some characters you've enjoyed reading about. Make notes about them in your writing diary. Do you notice any differences between characters in shorter and longer stories? Would a short story character be equally comfortable in a novel, or vice versa?

Building a character into a person is a daunting task. Characters must have recognisably human traits, whether these are admirable, less worthy, or even flawed. And you don't have the luxury of being able to spill everything you now know about your character onto the page; you only have room for the essence.

Perhaps the difference is not in the characters themselves, but in the way they will have to be represented. Let's take the protagonist in *The Rain Horse* by Ted Hughes, in which a young man out walking is pursued by a horse. He reacts with disorientation, fear and violence. This story originally appeared in Hughes' collection *Wodwo* (1971) and is reprinted in *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories* (ed. Malcolm Bradbury). It should be available to read online, or hear it read at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b01d7gmh/Twenty_Minutes_The_Rain_Horse/

Once you've listened to or read the story, think about what you know about the young man. It feels as if we have entered into his mind and soul, and can identify with him as a vulnerable being, but we actually know almost nothing about his past, his present, or any other part of his life. That doesn't mean that Hughes didn't know at least some of these things before writing the story, but when encapsulating for short fiction, it's more important to be able to impart the essence of a character than to fill the pages with the minutiae of their lives.

Project three **The blank page**

The blank page or screen can represent a terror to many writers, not just writing students. But there are strategies you can employ to overcome any problems with writer's block. This project will separate these into three main issues and look at them in turn.

Memory, imagination and 'what if?'

Memories are an excellent source of writing material but you don't have to remember an event precisely. While relating events accurately is essential to memoir or biography, in the short story form it's better to be fluid and flexible when using memory, rather than sticking too closely to a remembered chronology of events. Sometimes the crux of remembering is that it inspires ideas and offers characters who are emotionally charged – you already know how they responded to certain situations. Use memory as an elastic tool to revamp issues, people, events, emotions and conversations to create a satisfying story structure.

Exercise

Recall an incident from your life. This doesn't have to be a major incident, but it should be one that can still raise emotions in you. Take several steps away from the memory. Alter your perspective, for example by:

- writing from a third person point of view (he/she)
- renaming yourself
- changing your age and/or gender
- changing the era – if your event happened in the 1990s, set it now or during World War II
- changing the setting or landscape.

Write about this incident, using memory elastically to create your fiction.

Don't forget to use your imagination. Keep asking 'What if?' as you write. You'll find yourself imagining whole new scenarios and creating unique characters by asking this simple question.

> *"The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a What-if question."*
>
> (King, 2000, p.196)

Research point

Read Alex Keegan's game of *So What?* in his essay '24: The Importance of Theme' in your course reader. Apply this question to your budding stories in the same way and you may get very different ideas as a result.

Exercise

Return to the character you named and described in Project Two. Using the character sketch you created, ask 'What if this character had a particular fear? What if they didn't even know they had this fear until confronted with it? What if a problem or situation suddenly confronted them with this fear?'

Create a single event, as Ted Hughes did in *The Rain Horse*. Write an opening passage about this, allowing it to extend if possible.

Bear in mind that confronting fears and problems leads to choices, and these choices will lead to consequences. Chew over all of this as you write, constantly asking 'What if?'

Tip

Using memory, imagination and 'What if?' can result in powerful, believable stories, but you must keep control to prevent a plot from becoming being unreal or specious. You can ask 'What if?' in ludicrous or weird ways to help stimulate your imagination as many times as you want, then pick the ideas that feel right. If your tutor uses the word 'contrived' to describe any part of your story, you'll know you've allowed implausible inventions to creep in uncontrolled.

Writing what you know

The old writers' adage, 'Write what you know', isn't quite what it seems. After all, many writers create vivid pieces after researching a subject from scratch. Writers invent new worlds, or set stories in historic periods they haven't experienced. How does this fit with the notion of writing only what you know?

'Writing what you know' means drawing on your experience, memories, knowledge and passions and using this to develop your fictional characters. You can use the things you understand about yourself, and what you remember about your own past, as well as what life has taught you about other people, to enable you to empathise with them. You can also draw on fiction that means a lot to you. Writing 'what you know' can lead to startlingly varied and imaginative worlds.

Nathan Englander, critically acclaimed short story writer, says:

> *"Write what you know isn't about events. It's about emotions. Have you known love? jealousy? longing? loss? Did you want that Atari 2600 so bad you might have killed for it? If so, it doesn't matter whether your story takes place in Long Island or on Mars – if you're writing what you know, readers will feel it."*

Go to http://www.nathanenglander.com/videos/ to listen to the full podcast.

In Englander's award-winning story, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* (2012), from the collection of the same name, an Israeli couple, Yerucham and Shoshana, are visiting friends in Florida. Debbie used to be friends with Shoshana before the couple emigrated and, as an American Jew, is sure she will gain inspiration from meeting them. Her husband, the narrator, doesn't take to the couple and adopts a more cynical approach. The characters sit around the kitchen table, getting drunk. They play the 'Anne Frank Game'.

Towards the end of the story, Yerucham tells his hosts of a coincidence his father experienced: two elderly Israeli men discover that their tattooed numbers, from the concentration camp they survived, are only digits apart. Here are the final passages of the story:

Around the world, surviving the unsurvivable, these two old guys end up with enough money to retire to Carmel Lake and play golf every day. So I say to my dad, 'He's right ahead of you,' I say. 'Look, a five,' I say. 'And yours is an eight.' And the other guy looks and my father looks and my father says, 'All that means is, he cut ahead of me in the line. There same as here. This guy's a cutter, I just didn't want to say.' 'Blow it out your ear,' the other guy says. And that's it. Then they get back to putting on socks."

Deb looks crestfallen. She was expecting something empowering. Some story with which to educate Trevor, to reconfirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity, forms. So now she's just staring, her mouth hanging on to this thin, watery smile.

But me, I love that story. I'm starting to take a real shine to both these two, and not just because I'm suddenly feeling sloshed.

"Good story, Yuri," I say, copying his wife. "Yerucham," I say, "that one's got zing."

Yerucham hoists his himself up from the table, looking proud. He checks the label of our white bread on the counter – making sure it's kosher. He takes a slice, pulls off the crust, and rolls the white part against the countertop with the palm of his hand. He rolls it up into a little ball. He comes over and pours himself a shot and throws it back. And then he eats that crazy dough ball. Just tosses into his mouth, as if it's the bottom of his own personal punctuation mark – you know, to underline the story.

"Is that good?" I say.

"Try it," he says. He goes to the counter and slings me, through the air, he pitches me a slice of white bread and says, "But first pour yourself a shot."

I reach for the bottle and find that Deb's got her hands around it, and her head's bowed down, like the bottle is anchoring her, keeping her from tipping back.

In an interview with *The New Yorker,* Englander happily admits that he used the structure of a story by Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love:*

"I first wanted to work with the picture that had formed over the years and turned into memory, this sort of faceless visual of two couples at a table with a bottle between them, talking as a day slipped by."

Asked whether the Anne Frank Game exists, Englander says:

> *"The truth is that the idea for the game comes from the fact that my sister and I have played the game forever and ever...And she invented it."*

http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/12/this-week-in-fiction-nathan-englander.html#ixzz2Q2suYKVX

Englander spent five years in Israel before settling back in the US, so in this story he is writing 'what he knows'. He is able to revisit and re-form his experiences by exploring the cultures of the two couples through their conversation.

You might like to read both Englander's and Carver's stories, and compare them.

See: http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2011/12/12/111212fi_fiction_englander and
http://www.pageout.net/user/www/m/j/mjknndy/WhatWeTalk%20about%20When%20We%20Talk%20about%20Love.htm

Interior with Self-Portrait, Elizabeth Blackadder, 1972

Exercise

Walk around your house, moving from room to room with a notebook in your hand

Try to note down observations you haven't really considered before. Do the floorboards squeak on a stair? Does a fluorescent light flash as you switch it on? Does the tap water taste of chlorine? Does the spare bedroom smell of things forgotten? Don't be afraid to see 'around the corner' of the information you might decide to include. See if you can move through all five senses in each room.

Now drop your invented character into the mix. Write for as long as you can, fictionalising as you go.

The big idea

You may be wondering why so far in this project, you've been asked to tackle small ideas, things that in themselves don't amount to much – saving postcards, walking around your own house. You may be keen to get on with writing your 'idea of a lifetime'. Don't be in too much of a hurry to do this, for the reasons below:

- Keeping things local, personal, focused and tight enables you to gain the reader's attention.
- By concentrating on the particular you can, by example, symbol and theme, examine the larger issues.
- Maybe you are destined to write this 'idea of a lifetime'. But hone your skills first.

In *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)*, Marcel Proust said:

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

You may discover your 'idea of a lifetime' whilst writing the inconsequential, the everyday, the ordinary. The trick is to see these things with 'new eyes'.

Exercise

Start with something about as mundane as you can get. Go to a kitchen drawer – the one most in need of a tidy! Alternatively, choose something that's filled with a jumble of haphazard, random items – an old vase, your car's glove compartment.

Take out every item. Look through them, and choose one that draws your attention. Make a list of the practical uses of this item.

Now make a list of things this item could be no practical use for whatsoever. For instance, a paperclip can't be used as a boat.

Choose one impractical use from this second list. Let freewriting take your imagination on a spree as you put this item to its ingenious use. For instance, straighten the paper clip, stick a square of paper through it and push it into a piece of cork and use it as a toy boat.

You've tackled the implausible and impossible and had some fun. Now return to the first list. Remembering how you had to stretch your mind to 'see' that second list and write about it, choose an item on the first list. Try to follow Proust's advice and 'have new eyes' as you work on this idea. For instance, a paperclip might hold together the details of a decree nisi...

Project four **Opening your story**

The opening of a story is crucial to compelling the reader to move on. In the first lines, you have to get the reader longing to know what happens next, capture their attention and establish where you're taking them. On the other hand, summing up the story to come is usually a bad idea – try not to do this.

Don't get bogged down with beginnings. The first few lines are often the most difficult but don't let that hold you up. Get them down as best you can and write on. You'll probably work on those first lines time and again, but don't do this yet; until you complete the story, you can't really tell what your first lines should be.

The first sentence in a story can vary enormously yet still have impact by suggesting the mood generated throughout, so that the reader understands subliminally, via the tone, what style – or even genre – the short story will be. It might be zany, intriguing, enchanting or a simple, uncluttered statement. It might be long, convoluted, or intense, even abrupt.

Research point

Here are some first sentences from great exemplars of the form. Read them and try to guess the type or genre of the story before checking the answers:

1. *It is a very common thing, in my experience, to find papers shut up in old books; but one of the rarest things is to come across any such that are at all interesting.*
2. *On my right hand there were lines of fishing stakes resembling a mysterious system of half-submerged bamboo fences, incomprehensible in its division of the domain of tropical fishes, and crazy of aspect as if abandoned forever by some nomad tribe of fishermen now gone to the other end of the ocean; for there was no sign of human habitation as far as the eye could reach.*
3. *Fugi is a fish caught off the Pacific shores of Japan.*
4. *In Melton Mowbray in 1875 at an auction of 'curiosity and worth', my great-grandfather, in the company of M his friend, bid for the penis of Captain Nicholls who died in Horsemonger jail in 1873.*
5. *Across the lagoon an eager new life was forming, drawing its spectrum of colours from a palette more vivid than the sun's.*
6. *The only thing that moved upon the vast semicircle of the beach was one small black spot.*

Answers:

1. *Two Doctors* by M R James, a notable writer of ghost stories.
2. *The Secret Sharer* by Joseph Conrad, exponent of the adventure tale.
3. Kazuo Ishiguro's black comedy, *A Family Supper.*
4. J G Ballard's *Dream Cargos,* science fiction.
5. *Solid Geometry* by Ian McEwan, experimental short fiction with an edge of magical realism.
6. Virginia Woolf's *Solid Objects.* Woolf was a modernist and this story is widely considered to be a literary masterpiece.

Portrait of Virginia Woolf, 1902
Virginia Woolf wrote the famous statement in 1929, "*A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction*."

It's unwise to categorise short stories quite as tightly as this exercise might suggest – they often overlap in style and genre. For instance, *Solid Geometry* may be described as black humour, and also as an examination of feminist literature from a masculine perspective.

Choose some short stories. (It's fine to return to stories you've already read.) Which openings:

- create mood or hint at genre?
- use very short sentences or extended sentences?
- illuminate, shock, enchant or intrigue?

Daniel R. Blume, USA, via Wikimedia Commons

Exercise

Pick up any newspaper and choose a sentence (or headline) at random. Use this as a first line to a new story.

Use freewriting to let yourself go as you explore ideas. Write for as long as you can. Put the freewriting to one side and return to it at the end of this project. At that point, take any elements you wish from it and continue to write.

Expressing narrative

In Part Two, you'll look further into how narrative works, but at this early stage in the course begin to think about how fictional narrative is often broken down into parts – set methods of expression used to communicate, each with its own purpose and conventions. Theorists separate narrative in different ways, but for the purposes of the work you'll be doing at this level, try thinking of narrative as having expression via *exposition, dialogue, action, description* and *introspection.* When polishing the opening of your short story, it can be useful to ask yourself, 'How have I expressed this opening?' Knowing and choosing aspects like this puts you in charge of your story.

Here are some examples:

Exposition

When Gregor Sams awoke one morning from troubled dreams he found himself transformed into a monstrous insect.

Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (2007, London: Penguin Classics; first published 1915)

Dialogue

'Yes, I know all about that, Tom,' the Adjutant said through a mouthful of stew. 'But technical qualifications aren't everything. There's other sides to a Signal's officer's job, you know, especially while we're still pretty well static. The communications are running themselves and we don't want to start getting complacent. My personal view is and has been from the word go that your friend Dally's a standing bloody reproach to the unit, never mind how much he knows about the six-channel and the other boxes of tricks. That's a linesman-mechanic's job anyway not an officer's. And I can tell you for a fact I mean to do something about it, don't you see?' He laid down his knife, though not his fork and took three or four swallows of wine.

Kingsley Amis, *My Enemy's Enemy (*from *Collected Short Stories,* 1987, London: Hutchinson)

Action

One day, when my father came home from work, he put his briefcase away behind the door and stripped down to his vest and pants in the front room. He spread the pink towel with the rip on it on the floor. he got onto his knees – and he was by no means a flexible man – placed his arms beside his head, and kicked himself into the air.

Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990, London: Faber & Faber)

Description

> *The restaurant is ageless, which is part of its appeal. The room's proportions are high, generous, and not of this epoch. The painted seascapes on the walls have the patina of time, cigar smoke, decades of intimate conversation.*

Ronald Frame, *Fruits de Mer* (from *A Woman of Judah*, 1994, London: Hodder & Stoughton)

Introspection

> *It's not only about looking good. If you're just looking good, you'll probably be able to get a cone or a soft pretzel, but definitely not an Orange Julius.*

Myla Goldberg, *Going for the Orange Julius* (from *Fiction Gallery*, 2004, London: Bloomsbury)

Some of these stories are also available online.

Research point

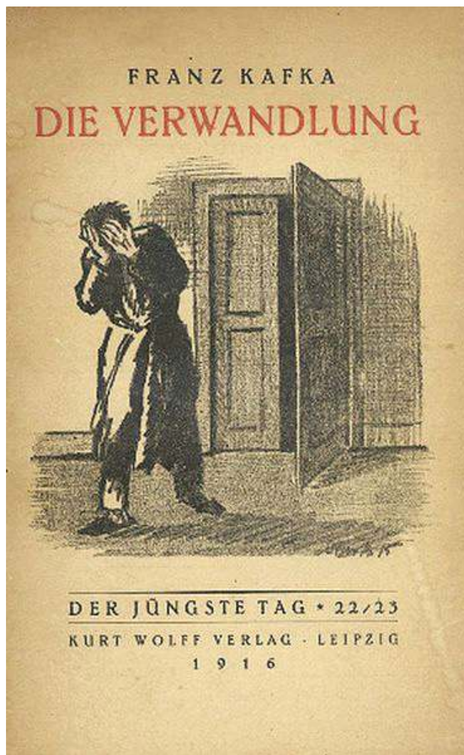
On p.74 of *Short Circuit,* Clare Wigfall suggests that "*Your first sentence should raise a question*". Check the openings of short stories you've read in Part One and ask if each first sentence does this. Now check the openings of any short stories you've written to see if the same is true. Perhaps you don't fully agree with Wigfall. In that case, make an argument for openings which don't pose questions.

Now check the openings quoted by Vanessa Gebbie on pp.17–18 of your course reader.

In medias res

From classical times, it's been known that starting any story as far in as possible is a powerful way to structure your story. The Latin term is *in medias res,* which is generally translated as *in the middle of things*. On p.9 of *Short Circuit*, V S Pritchett is quoted as saying that a short story should capture a character 'at bursting point' and this might be true of your opening too. To achieve this, try these strategies:

- Don't give away too much until you have to.
- Start your story at an intense moment.
- Start at a 'point of change' in your protagonist's life.
- Get to a moment of conflict as soon as you can.



Book cover of *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka, 1916
This novella was first published in 1915. It is regarded as one of the most important novels of the 20th century.

Research point

Take one or more of the stories you've read fully, and try to imagine how it might have looked if the author had chosen to begin it further back in the story. For instance, should Kafka have started *The Metamorphosis* the evening before, so we could see Gregor Sams before he was transformed? Make notes in your writing diary.

Exercise

Return to any (or all) of the stories you've begun so far and ask yourself if you could open the story further in. Could you start at an intense point of change, or at a moment of conflict?

Now take one of the openings you've written. If it opens as exposition, try changing this to introspection, or dialogue. If you've opened with introspection, try using action or description instead.

Make notes in your writing diary.

Project five
From first draft to first assignment

It is quite normal to produce rough drafts that have problems. A draft might:

- be too thin – dissipating before it gets going
- have no heart, or fail to say what you wanted
- need to be filled out or unpacked
- read like the synopsis to a novel
- run out of word count before your characters have developed.

These problems can be solved. You'll solve them in the way all writers solve their problems – by reading and researching, learning your craft through writing draft after draft, and accepting and using feedback on the work. Redrafting your short fiction will be the key to your improvement.

This project helps you get a story (or maybe two) ready for Assignment One. You'll return to the subject of revision and redrafting in Part Six, but in the meantime, here are some strategies that you can use right away – and use as your template for all the parts of the course.

Although you obviously want your story to be as good as it can be for your tutor, it doesn't have to be perfect. That is what your tutor is there for – to help you tackle weaknesses and shore up your writing strengths. After all, this is the first assignment. You probably won't submit this story for assessment at the end of the course. If it turns out to be your weakest story, that will suggest that you've improved as the course went on – which is exactly as it should be.

David Michael Kaplan, the American writer (1998, p.10), says:

> *"I think you revise for style (saying it in the most graceful way, which is often all people think revision is), and you revise for structure (saying it in the most coherent and dramatically effective way), and you revise – and here comes the way you might not have thought about before – for meaning, for discovering what you really wanted to say in the first place, and what the story's really about."*

Exercise

By now you should have a collection of beginnings, stories with a middle but no end, and some finished rough drafts. Print them all out and paper-clip them into individual pieces of writing. Sit down with a drink and read right through.

Have with you a red pen and a highlighter pen. (If you've completed ***Writing Skills*** you'll already be familiar with this way of working.) As you read, draw a red line through or under any passage, line or word that you think is out of place, or not needed at all. Highlight any passage, line or word that you really like.

Bear *style* and *structure* in mind. *And meaning*? That's sometimes harder, and we'll look at it below.

Core truth

As you work on the revisions to your stories, you'll slowly come to see what the meaning of each one really is. It's not a failure on your part to have missed this previously. Think of a sculpture. A sculptor has an idea in their head as they start to chip away at stone, but can't possibly know how the piece will turn out until they've finished. It sometimes takes quite a bit of chipping to fully realise the true core of the story. One way of thinking this through is by attempting to sum up your story in a single, objective sentence.

The core truth doesn't necessarily come early in the process of writing. Occasionally it might come first ('I'd really like to write a story about poverty of emotion'), but mostly writers have to search for what they were actually trying to say. The core truth is not set in stone from the start. But writing down what you believe your story to be about can help whittle all those disparate thoughts down to a single essence and help you tie up the threads of your narrative and polish the entire piece, lifting your narrative so that the essence of what you're saying shines through.

Research point

The core truth is also sometimes called a vision, premise, theme or thesis. Read Alex Keegan's section on theme in *Short Circuit*. In your writing diary, reflect on his suggestion that theme is what a story 'says'.

Exercise

Return to the copies you've been working on. Read through each one slowly again, this time just looking at what the meaning might be – the core truth.

Try to summarise one completed story in an abstract sentence, i.e. a sentence that doesn't mention the characters or plot.

Now look at the ending of your completed story. Has summarising the story in this way helped you see how the ending might be?

Continue this by looking at the other pieces you red-penned and highlighted, searching for the meaning and writing it out in one abstract sentence as a core truth.

Brewing your redrafts

You might imagine that redrafting a story ready to present as Assignment One is all about working on a screen, typing and re-typing your copy. But it is also about thinking, brewing your ideas to make the story better.

You've highlighted things you like about your work and red-penned things you don't. You've created a core truth for all your completed short stories and some of the half-completed ones. Now put the hard copies to one side and think about them. You might imagine that it's best to do this one story at a time, but sometimes the true meaning of what you wanted to say can come when you compare, link and even amalgamate snippets of stories.

Nina Milton, one of the authors of this course, has this reflection to offer about one of her stories, *The Illuminated Back*:

A short while ago, I started writing a story about Jordon, a professional soldier, serving in one of the recent conflicts. The story was focused on a home leave, when he agrees to meet a girl he'd been corresponding with. I wanted to examine how a soldier might think back to the conflict he's fighting in:

...A place of sand yellow. The ground is sand. The high walls are bricks of sand. The men have faces of sand and clothes the colour of wet sand. Our backs are against the wall, tight to its solidity. The man in front turns. Flicks his fingers. No words. The hands speak. An infantryman runs forward, head down. The weapon across his back is long, black. He puts the toe of his boot against the irregularities of the wall and shins up it, with some help from a colleague's shoulder. He's our best.

Recon. A shitty job, to shin up the wall and peer over it. If a bullet takes your face, you have no chance. When he drops down, he is layered in sweat, but smiling. Good news. Good recon. He pushes back his helmet and rubs his forehead...

I wasn't happy with this story. I was tackling 'big themes' and 'grand ideas' without encapsulating them, and I was writing well outside 'what I know'. The resolve at the end wasn't working, partly because I couldn't pin down a core truth. At about the same time, I'd begun a story of aromatherapy, something I do know about, but this wasn't offering up a core truth, either. I had this passage in a notebook:

...Skin is the story of our life. From the moment we hit air and bawl, it absorbs everything first. New love, new hope, shattered dreams, burning hate. The rooms we pass through, the landscapes we breathe, the touch of each person we meet. All this enters first through our skin. No wonder our skin starts out so soft and full of moisture, then dries up as the years pass, until it is as flaky as an old pasty, and as thin as silk, barely covering the blood vessels below...

I needed an interesting client for the aromatherapist: a clash between two characters. In walked Jordon, with the story of his battle memories. I'd created Jordon partly through description, visualised a tattoo of his regiment that covered his back; when my aromatherapist pulls off the towels, she's confronted by it.

It was at this moment that I realised that my aromatherapist – my protagonist – needed something to make her believable and engrossing: a conflict in her life, a fear she must confront. I knew she felt that aromatherapy was the first thing she'd achieved in her life that she was proud of, so I introduced some magical realism, which is a lot of fun to play around with. When she lays her hands on people's skin, she can 'read' them...feel what they are thinking...and this has tainted her love of her job. Jordon's tattoo throws her into his memories of battle.

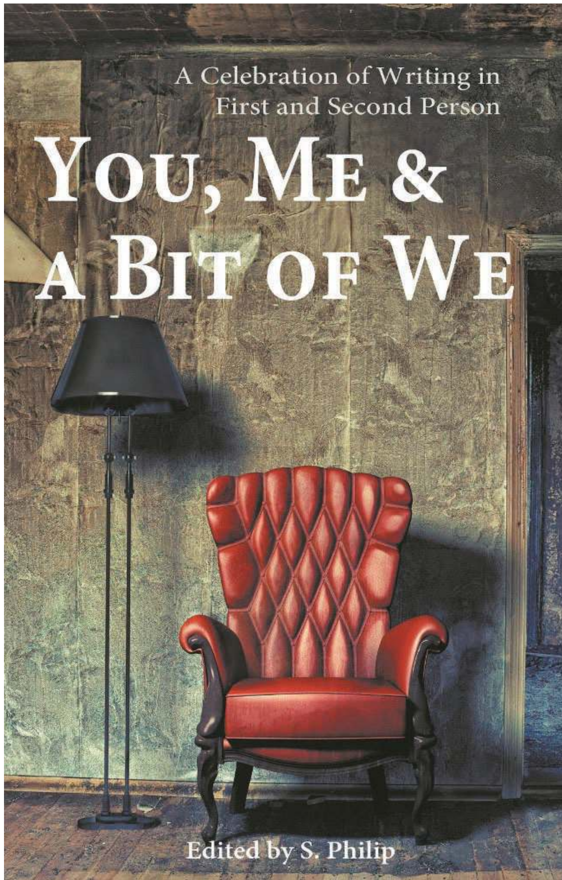
By creating a 'moment of illumination' within an hour's massage, I am able to tell the reader about Jordon's world at the same time as confronting the fear of my protagonist. Finally, I discover my 'core truth'...we can't know about others until we know about ourselves. My aromatherapist has never tried running her hands over her own body. When Jordon leaves, she strips off:

...I poured the rest of Jordon's bottle of oil onto my hands and watched it spread. It smelt medicinal.

I started with my feet, fingering the spaces between the metacarpals, circling the ankle bones. I worked up; gastrocnemius, quadriceps, hamstrings, sartorius, gluteus. I ran my oiled fingers along the intercostals, over my breasts and across my shoulders. Bi's, tri's, pecs. I pull both hands behind my neck, searching out the deltoids, then upwards over the trapezius, feeling the stretch of the sternocleidomastoids, pushing into my face; triangularis, masseter, orbicularis, frontalis.

My hands and my history combined. A story of me I had never thought to ask. I closed my eyes and reached for my back.

(Philip, S. (ed.) (2013) *You, Me & A Bit of We.* London: Chuffed Buff Books)



You can read OCA tutor and course author Nina Milton's story *The Illuminated Back* in, *You, Me & A Bit of We*

If you attempt it, fuse and amalgamate stories, characters, plot ideas, etc., with a controlled hand. It's easy to end up with bits of story that feel 'grafted together'. Think of baking a cake rather than ending up with a dog's dinner.

Research point

Look at Lane Ashfeldt's generous sharing of rough draft work in your course reader (from p.89).

Exercise

'Brewing' can help create something out of almost nothing by working with what you've already got.

Spend time thinking about and brewing the work you've developed. Take the story you're most happy with and redraft it, referring to your red pen marks and highlights. Read through, thinking about what might need to go, and what might need to be added to get this story to its best. Check that you have:

- a moment of illumination
- a story, not an anecdote
- characters who are believable and engrossing
- a protagonist who has to confront a fear, need, flaw, desire, etc.
- an understanding of your opening and what impact it might have
- a core truth.

If any of these are missing, think about how you can work to improve your story.

Preparing for Assignment One – story titles

You're almost ready to write your first assignment story. Although you probably won't submit this first attempt for assessment, it's a good idea to get into the habit of thinking carefully about your story title because titles serve a number of purposes. The title can provide:

- a hook
- a statement
- an introduction
- a conclusion
- a summary
- a symbol
- a mystery
- a clue
- a (double) meaning
- a unifier
- an evocation
- a preview.

Can you think of any more?

You might start with a title which then sparks an idea in your mind for a plot or a setting or a character to get a story going. Or you might not know the title until the end. If you start writing your story without knowing the title, use a working title. A title, even a working title, gives a story an identity and an existence which makes it easier to write. Don't get too bogged down thinking about titles at this stage – you'll get plenty of practice as you progress through the course. It's useful to get into the habit of reflecting on the titles of the stories you read, though, and the final exercise in this part of the course will help you to make a start.

Exercise

Choose three titles from existing short stories, preferably where the reason for the title is not particularly obvious. Consider where the title comes from. Why do you think the author chose it? Which of the functions listed above does the title serve? What 'set-up' does it give to the story? How does it inform your reading of the story? Is the reason for the choice of title clearer by the end of the story?

Think of an alternative title for each of your three chosen stories and write a sentence or two explaining your new title.

Now draft an outline of a *different* story with the same original title.

Assignment one

Drawing on the work you've done for the exercises in Part One, develop a short story of between 2,500 and 3,000 words. Remember to provide a suitable title(s).

If you haven't generated sufficient material to create a single short story of this length, you can send your tutor two shorter stories, so long as the final word count is no more than 3,000 words.

Before completing the final draft, check back to your **Creative Writing Student Guide** to see how you should lay out and present your work.

Now write your reflective commentary. This should be no more than 500 words. Focus on describing what you're trying to achieve within your story and what changes you decided on during writing and redrafting, with particular reference to structure, point of view, language and the redrafting process. You should also document any problems you've had. Finally, comment on any books you've read which are pertinent to the course. (There's more on writing reflective commentaries in Part Six.)

Your total word count should be up to 3,500 words, including your reflective commentary.

Note

This is your first assignment so your tutor won't be expecting to receive a fully-polished piece. As you work through this course, the important thing is to start developing your ideas into short fiction that really works for the reader and you shouldn't be worrying overmuch about polishing your work to publishable standard. You'll get the opportunity to review all your work on the course when you come to the final part of the course and start preparing your work for assessment. However you do have a word count to consider so you may find it useful to take a quick look ahead to Part Six now so that you can start to apply some of the tips included within it to your course assignments.

Reflection

Don't forget to review this assignment against the assessment criteria. Review how you think you have done against the criteria and make notes in your writing diary.

Make sure that all work is labelled with your name, student number and assignment number. You don't need to wait until you've heard from your tutor before continuing with the course.