

Appendix A: Student Exercises for Writing Fiction

Most of the following exercises come from the planning books of Dr. Dianne Ashley of Yorktown High School, Arlington, Virginia. They are “tried and true” lessons for her students (as well as for herself) that she has accumulated during her 30 years in the classroom. Some exercises last only a few minutes; others, a class period. Some are specifically for prose; others will work for poetry or for prose or for helping to start the juices flowing. They are described in brief below; you may need to provide some direction or background to your students. Feel free to use them, modify them to suit your style and students, and to pass them along to others.

1. Write a dialogue between you and someone who wants you to do something that you don’t want to do.
2. Write some sentences that contain the following words: *satiate*, *water*, *black*, *lash*. (You may, of course, vary the list. Dr. Ashley likes to select a Latinate word, an ordinary Old English word, a color, and a word that could be a noun or a verb and that can suggest violence.)
3. Write rapidly for 10 minutes—a stream of consciousness—about the rain.
4. Describe a smell.
5. Describe a color, giving a strong impression of the color without naming it.
6. Write about your clothing and how you feel about it, but do not sign your paper. (After the papers are handed in and redistributed, have the students read them aloud and guess whose is whose.)
7. A writer’s block breaker: Write a letter to your muse, asking for guidance. Be sure to give your muse human qualities. Write a response.
8. Write a letter to a novelist about one of his or her characters.
9. Organize the class into groups of four, and give each group the beginning of a story. Each group adds a paragraph and then passes it along to the next group for another addition. The stories are labeled “thriller,” “serious psychological drama,” “comedy,” and “fantasy.”

Sample Thriller Beginning

I knew he was my enemy the moment I saw him. We were in a crowded room and I came upon him quite by chance. To everyone else he looked like an ordinary person, but I understood the dreaded connection between us. I will tell you how I knew.

Sample Serious Psychological Drama

He walked across the bridge, his long coat billowing behind him. He leaned into the wind and deliberately touched every baluster of the railing, every post, every pole. His dark eyes cried out to tell his dark story.

Appendix A, cont'd.

Sample Comedy Beginning

Let me tell you the trouble Pipski caused me my whole life long.

Sample Fantasy Beginning

In that windswept landscape people could not exist without strange adaptations. The light was painfully bright at all hours.

10. Retell a story that has circulated in your family or neighborhood.
11. Write a page of your autobiography. Choose a time when you were five or younger or 80 or older.
12. Write about your favorite word.