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# DISCUSSIONS

Active learning almost always starts with getting students talking. The exercises in this opening section—which include several classic activities with time-honored track records—are designed to do just that. Ranging from a simple around-the-room discussion starter (with a twist) that will work in any classroom, to more complex and in some cases multistage group activities, these exercises are designed to train students in the critical skills that make for effective, even transformative, classroom conversation: how to enter a discussion, how to listen to your peers, how to frame a useful question, how to develop a supportable argument, and how to work together to create an illuminating analytical synthesis.

The section begins with three general, easily adaptable exercises. "The Sixty Second Game" and "Fishbowl" involve everyone quickly and help normalize a discussion-based classroom in which all are counted on to contribute, while "Read, Reread, Close Read" creates a community of careful readers through close listening. All three exercises model discussion as a collaborative activity rather than a sequence of loosely related comments funneled through the instructor. The next three activities use the students' own questions to organize discussion, whether those questions are prepared ahead of time, as in "Put the Question" and "It's Time We Talked," or generated during class itself, as in "Reverse Entropy." Each exercise in this set also helps students recognize what makes a good question in the first place. The final two activities, "Debate" and "Leader, Skeptic, Scribe," turn from pointed questions to arguable answers, asking students to produce and defend interpretive claims about literary texts. Adaptable to any genre and almost any class size, these eight exercises will help turn even the quietest students into lively, engaged participants.

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# ESSENTIALS

This section features essential exercises that work well with almost any literary work. Of easy or moderate difficulty, they can serve as key building blocks for training students to look carefully at the meaning of words and passages, lines and titles, or definitions and themes. Because the exercises work with more than one genre, they can also be used and reused across courses, whether your focus is on literary formalism, literary periods, or literary history. Arranged in order from the small to the large, and the specific to the general, these are classic exercises that everyone should try.

"The Blow Up" and "The Cut Up" each teach the essentials of close reading, but from two different directions: the first works through deduction (taking a text apart), while the second operates through induction (putting a text back together). In both cases, students learn to produce a coherent and cohesive literary interpretation.

The next pair of exercises, "The One-Liner" and "The New Title," shows students how to multiply a text's meaning and how to widen the interpretive frame. These exercises emphasize both the way literary texts contain many meanings and the way readers actively participate in the construction of those meanings.

The final set of exercises, "The Descriptive Word" and "The Common Thread," continue to move from a close-up view to a long view. Ideal for the start or end of a course, such overview exercises are perfect for taking stock, particularly of big-picture subjects like genre or period. Whether these six essential exercises aim to teach patient close reading or to demonstrate careful consideration of larger themes, they all show students the importance of slowing down.

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# The Blow Up

*Wendy Lee*

A classic exercise in the closeness of close reading.

Genre: *any, especially fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *25 to 35 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose a passage of no more than two hundred words from the text that your class is reading. It may help to choose a particularly idiosyncratic passage that can stand apart from the rest of the book, like a dream sequence in *Jane Eyre* or a single conversation in *Pride and Prejudice* that reads more like a film script than a novel. Format the passage on a handout so that it looks like a page from a children's book: 14-point font and at least half-inch margins all around the text. Feel free to experiment with the way the passage looks on the page. (Get creative with that Microsoft Word toolbox!)

After distributing the handout, instruct your students to take advantage of all the white space to mark up the passage with any observations or associations that come to them during the exercise. Then call on a student to read the passage aloud. Direct the student to read "very slowly and very loudly." Immediately after she or he is finished, call on a second student (preferably with a very different voice) to read the same passage, also very slowly and loudly. After the second reading, give students a few minutes to respond by marking up their passages. (You might show them a sample of a heavily marked-up handout that looks like graffiti so that they are not afraid of the page.)

When students have finished circling words and jotting down comments on the page, go in a circle around the room and invite each student to make a comment about something they noticed (an interesting word, a curious turn of phrase, a notable repetition, an arresting metaphor). If the class is large or time is short, you can instead move straight to framing the discussion according to your needs. For students who need practice close reading, you



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might begin with purely formal observations: Who is speaking? To whom? How do you know? Do any words repeat? What kinds of sentences are being used? When you are ready to conclude the exercise, have students find the passage in their books. Does resituating the text yield any surprises?

## REFLECTIONS

The point of this exercise is to get students to see and hear the text in a new and focused way. It allows students first to forget what they know about the book and then revisit it from the angle of a carefully examined and *spoken* snippet of text. Changing the actual form of the passage—by enlarging the letters and creating ample white space around them—can transform an otherwise recondite text into an accessible and inviting piece of language.

The exercise works equally well to reframe an all-too-familiar passage. For example, students who devotedly recite the first line of *Pride and Prejudice* by heart ("It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife") are often surprised and discomfited to see the succeeding sentence blown up so starkly on the page: "However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters." In contending with these grammatically complex sentences, some students were drawn to the abstract nouns ("truth," "minds," "property") while others circled the weighty adjectives attached to them. They noted that "universal truth," "fixed minds," and even notions of "rightful property" all become the moving targets of the narrator's unsparing but still ambiguous irony. The "Blow Up" format allowed my students to confront directly the nuances of Austen's style—which they variously and precisely described as "powerful," "enigmatic," and "potentially hostile"—while also providing them with the literal, material space to draw out, write around, or even deface Austen's own destabilizing prose.

Part of the enchantment of this exercise derives from rendering a written text into an oral experience. Through the two oral readings, you can extend to your (especially quiet) students a low-stakes, seemingly straightforward opportunity to participate and have their voices heard in class. What surprises me is how the shyest students, who shudder to offer a "literary critical" comment, can read aloud with the most uninhibited flair. "Blow Up" enables lively impromptu performances, in which students must unwittingly make important interpretive decisions about pacing, pauses, cadence, and volume, sparking a discussion about elements such as character and scene. (The direction to read loudly and slowly creates a baseline of elocution, making performers' decisions even more pronounced.) Students are listening to

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and learning from each other, inevitably provoking such observations as "I hadn't realized how funny that part was!"

"The Blow Up" emphasizes the closeness of close reading, but it also grounds and enlivens more general discussions in the text—removing parts from the whole and putting the whole back into conversation with its parts. After having extracted, magnified, transformed, performed, and resituated individual sentences, students will feel more authoritative when the conversation widens to larger themes and ideas. They will also not be afraid to take apart the text, to zoom in and out of any page, drawing in or blocking out what they already know for the sake of testing new claims or ideas. Students will not only feel comfortable referring to specific passages, but they will find it easier to refer to one another's readings as evidence and counterevidence. Most importantly, they will enjoy the opportunity to converse freely with each other (instead of answering the instructor's questions), tracking their own interpretative moves and choices in a collective and creative encounter.

# The Cut Up

*Diana Fuss*

A warm-up close-reading exercise that invites students to repair rather than dissect texts.

Genre: *poetry or prose*
Course Level: *introductory or intermediate*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *early*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *30 to 50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose a short poem or a short prose passage—nearly any poem or passage will suffice. For this simple exercise, which invites students to take up pieces of a text and put it back together again, the text you select will depend largely on the level of challenge you want to present. In fiction classes, students will

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have a much easier time with contemporary examples written in a familiar language or style than with the elongated sentences and complicated syntax of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stories. In poetry courses the exact opposite holds: early poems (ballads, sonnets, odes) that have a fixed meter and rhyme prove easier test cases for students than do free verse poems that have fewer auditory or visual signposts. In either case, no more than eight to ten sentences or verse lines work best.

Reproduce your poem or prose passage on a handout and keep this in reserve. Then digitally cut the text into parts: for poems, make the cuts after every line break; for prose, make the cuts after every sentence. Place each individual line or sentence on a separate page and be sure to increase the font size (to 20, 30, or whatever size font your single page will bear). Before printing out each isolated enlarged line or sentence, format the page on its horizontal (landscape) side for more room. (You can use smaller slips of paper instead, though students working and standing in groups find the larger sheets easier to see.) Shuffle all the sheets so the lines are in random order.

In class, separate students into groups of three or four and give each group a full set of the cut-up passages. You might disclose in advance the author's name, but if you are using a poem, do not identify which of the lines is the poem's title. You can give every group the same text or different texts, depending on your needs.

Now ask each group to reconstruct the text. Tell them that, without the aid of electronic devices, their mission is to place the cut-up lines in their proper order. Invite groups to move around the room and use any surface: table, wall, floor, blackboard. Tables work best, providing a flat surface and ample room for students to stand and shuffle the sheets as they debate different sequencings. Taping the sheets to the wall (you will need to provide painter's tape) or writing on blackboards and whiteboards works almost as well. Allow fifteen to twenty minutes for students to experiment with different line placements and arrive at a possible order.

Let groups strategize on their own, discussing among themselves the best way to put the mystery text back together. Part of the point of the exercise is to alert students to some of the more subtle formal features that convey style and carry meaning, so resist the impulse to give them clues. As they grapple with what might go where, you will see them suddenly start to look carefully at punctuation marks, listen for aural resonances, or check for verb tenses. Sit back and watch, taking notes for your own purposes on the things that seem to puzzle them most.

When the students are reasonably confident of their final order, mark off for them exactly which of their lines are in the right places. Give them a couple more minutes to try to reorder the text one more time with this new information in hand. For groups that have put all or nearly all of the lines in the wrong place, offer them the first and the last line of the poem or passage.

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For groups that have succeeded in reconstructing all or nearly all of the text, move directly to the final phase.

Hand out the original text and let each group discover exactly how close or how far they came to getting everything where it belongs. Reconvene the whole class and begin a conversation. If a particular group did well, ask them how they did it—what did they look for and what clues did they follow? If they were off base, ask them what obstacles they encountered or misdirections they followed, and why. Reassure students that "getting it wrong" can be as instructive for this exercise as "getting it right." They will know, either way, what formal features to look for next time.

As students reflect afterward on their experience suturing (Frankenstein-style) small pieces into functional wholes, keep a record on the board of every formal feature they mention: language, tone, punctuation, and so on. This listing activity is especially crucial. It allows you to bring the exercise to a satisfying close by doing a group close reading that uses the terms on the board as a checklist of sorts, thus guiding the class to a more sophisticated understanding of how literature works.

## REFLECTIONS

Most close reading exercises deploy a method that students often label "dissection": taking a whole poem or passage and breaking it into parts. "The Cut Up" inverts this method by deploying a strategy not of dissection but of repair: beginning with the parts and putting the whole back together. This shift in emphasis productively subverts expectations while offering an alternative approach to understanding literary formalism. It works especially well early in the semester as a warm-up exercise.

For example, in a poetry survey, I like to begin the course by using cut-ups of Emily Dickinson poems, which provide a particular challenge because of her twisty syntax and unconventional punctuation (the Dickinson dash). Recently I handed out cut-ups of two poems, "Pain—has an Element of Blank" and "I've seen a Dying Eye," each lyric containing eight lines (two quatrains) and little or no end rhyme. Student groups had no trouble sequencing the first two lines of these poems correctly, but they had a much more difficult time with the last lines—interestingly, not unlike Dickinson herself, whose manuscripts include more textual variants at the ends of poems than at their beginnings.

Deprived of rhyme as an obvious guide, students tried other strategies to identify underlying patterns. They focused on internal sounds (listening for both alliteration and assonance). They measured line lengths (fixing on a long/short pattern I later explained was ballad form). They talked about tone (asking if certain sequencings produced a more solemn effect). They counted beats (wondering if particular rhythms might regulate the flow).

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And they looked for narrative elements (searching for a buried story that organized the whole). Later, when I asked them which tactic they tried first to make sense of the jumbled lines, all the groups agreed that, without even thinking about it consciously, they turned to basic grammar as their point of entry, initially attempting to sequence lines by subject-verb-object or another syntactical pattern.

The exercise proved to be an exceedingly quick way to introduce students to several key features that distinguish Dickinson's poetry: the problem of reference (those confusing "it"s), the challenge of mechanics (those seemingly random capitalizations), and the puzzle of parataxis (those repeated line openings "and then. . . and then"). It also proved to be an even more useful exercise for introducing students to the general properties of almost any poem. By the end students had generated a rather full checklist of formal features, which they listed in this order: grammar, referent, rhyme, syntax, sound, content, rhythm, meter, punctuation, tense, parallelism, story, imagery, form, tone, closure, diction, speaker, personification, and theme.

To drive the lesson home, I have also immediately repeated the exercise, this time cutting up the poem by stanzas rather than by individual lines, and putting a strict ten-minute time limit on the activity. Dickinson's "Grief is a Mouse" is a great candidate for a stanza cut-up because each of the poem's four stanzas begins with a different definition of grief: grief is a "Mouse," a "Thief," a "Juggler," and "Tongueless" (and a "Gourmand" too, one learns later in stanza three). With much less time, students zeroed in on figuration and personification to try to determine an internal logic that would make sense of these implied similes. No group got the stanza sequence exactly right, so after the big reveal I invited them to look harder at what the different personifications of Grief had in common and what precisely Dickinson might be saying about the lived experience of grief. The students concluded that mouse, thief, juggler, and gourmand are all active but silent figures; as one student phrased the poem's point, "Grief may render us speechless or tongueless but it is always industrious." Another student noticed a completely different set of figures organizing the four stanzas: Breast, Ear, Eye, and Tongue. She wondered if the cut-up stanzas, with their cut-up body parts, offered another perspective on grief's deep physical and emotional toll: "Grief mutilates and transforms bodies and language."

Inductive in method, "The Cut Up" offers a nice departure from the more common deductive approach to analyzing texts. It challenges students to get inside a writer's mind-set and reminds them of the infinite choices—in word and design—that any writer must negotiate. For me this approach to teaching close reading has felt liberating, perhaps because it carries a more creative and consequential feel overall: it combines the sportive play of solving a puzzle with the serious task of creating something meaningful.

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# The One-Liner

*Kimberly J. Stern*

A slowing-down exercise that encourages students to reflect on the importance of style.

Genre: *drama or prose*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy or moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *25 to 35 minutes*

## EXERCISE

This exercise is all about style. In class, invite the students to spend some time flipping through the pages of their short story, novel, or play. As they peruse their reading assignment, ask them to take note of three or four sentences (they need not be consecutive) that catch their attention, writing each of these down on a separate sheet of paper. They should be sentences that are especially powerful, complicated, funny, or in some way idiosyncratic.

Now instruct your students to examine the style and grammar of each sentence, focusing especially on questions of syntax, tense, diction, and voice. Encourage them to label parts of speech, underline punctuation marks, circle suggestive words—in short, annotate each sentence. At this point, they should try to generate as many observations about the grammatical and stylistic details of the sentence as possible. As a final step, consider inviting students to select one of their chosen lines and paraphrase it, retaining its meaning but changing its style. Allow ten or fifteen minutes for students to select their lines and annotate them.

Next, invite the students to share their findings with the class. (For large classes, students can divide into pairs or groups of three; for smaller classes, proceed straight to the full-class discussion.) The class discussion portion of this exercise unfailingly generates striking insights into the relationship between literary style and content. It can be useful to copy or project a few of the students' sentences up on the board, so the class can examine and annotate the text collectively. This serves the secondary purpose of showing

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the students visually how many different details might contribute to their analysis of a single sentence. As arrows, circles, notes, and question marks fill the board, the students begin to realize that a lot happens at the level of the sentence.

## REFLECTIONS

Students frequently tell me that prose is easier to interpret than poetry because it more closely approximates the language they use every day. Of course, familiarity sometimes breeds complacency. A student who eagerly devours the plot of a Charles Dickens novel may inadvertently miss some of the book's stylistic nuances. The first benefit of this exercise, then, is that it makes students slow down. In so doing, it reminds them that prose can be every bit as strange, performative, and meaningful as a ballad or a sonnet. Advanced students will find here a tool for engaging more rigorously with the text; less advanced students will find a way to enter the conversation and develop their analytical skills.

A single sentence can yield a variety of interpretations, often sparked by the word "why?" When reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, my students spent several minutes examining that famous first line: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Why, students asked, does Austen begin her sentence with the impersonal subject "it"? Aren't all truths by definition "universally acknowledged"? Why not say a "wealthy bachelor" instead of a "single man in possession of a good fortune"? Why, in other words, does Austen use twenty-three words to say something she might just as easily have expressed in four?

For students less practiced in close reading strategies, the paraphrase step of this exercise can reap great results. Consider the example of Algernon Moncrieff, who remarks in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." Stripping the sentence of its most noticeable stylistic elements, one of my students revised the sentence in this way: "Style is more important than sincerity." From here, we began to ask questions about how this version of the sentence differs from the original. What does Wilde's introduction of words like "vital" and "grave" (words that seem to frame this as a matter of "life or death") add to the sentence? Is it significant that Wilde uses the phrase "not sincerity," thus not only prioritizing style but actually dismissing the value of sincerity?

The great reward of this exercise is that it allows students to pursue a focused and formal reading of the text while also inviting multiple interpretations of it. A single word or sentence does not simply move a plot forward or help to build a larger narrative structure. It can harbor many potential

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meanings, some working together and others openly contradicting one another to complicate and enrich the interpretive process. "The One-Liner" raises questions, performs meaning, and multiplies our perspectives on the text. To this extent at least, style is indeed the "vital thing."

# The New Title

*Johanna Winant*

A simple exercise that teaches students to identify important themes and images by asking them to retitle a text.

Genre: *any*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *before class or in class*
Close Reading: *low to medium*
Estimated Time: *10 to 20 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Once a class is familiar with a text—after students have read a poem or are at least partway through a novel or play—ask them to choose and write down a new title for the text. This can be done as homework or in the first few minutes of class time.

It's fine to leave the assignment open-ended, but depending on the level of the class, the themes of the course, and the genres under discussion, you could offer a number of different guidelines for choosing a new title. If you're discussing a novel, you could ask students to choose a single word that could work as an alternative title. Or ask them to choose a quote that a character says. Or ask them to choose a noun, an adjective, or a verb. If you're discussing a poem, suggest finding a line in the poem that could work as a title. To make it more difficult or to review different poetic terms, require the quotation be a metaphor or an iamb.

After everyone in the class has written down a new title for the text, ask students what their titles are and why they chose them. List them on the

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board for all to see. For example, if you are teaching Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, students might suggest "Liars! Liars! Liars!," appropriating Mrs. Turner's quote from the end of Part I, or such thematic titles as "The Library." If you are teaching John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," students might suggest titles based on quotations, such as "Cold Pastoral," or formal or thematic titles, such as "Questions and Answers" or "Ars Poetica." If you've asked students to use quotations as titles, it is easy to segue into a close reading of the passage that includes the quotations they have chosen. If you have asked students to choose titles that are not quotations, this can lead to a broader discussion about the text's themes and images.

## REFLECTIONS

The first goal of this exercise is to teach students that texts are not natural objects but rather are deliberately made artifacts. Students often forget or ignore that literary texts are the results of purposeful decisions. While I do not encourage students to interpret the author's intention as the meaning of the text, I find that reminding them that the text was intentionally created improves their ability to interpret it. Asking students to choose a new title for a text reminds them that a title was carefully chosen in the first place. Students are fascinated to learn whether a text had an earlier or provisional title—such as *Mrs. Dalloway*'s initial title, "The Hours," or *A Raisin in the Sun*'s working title, "The Crystal Stair," or *The Waste Land*'s pre–Ezra Pound title, "He Do the Police in Different Voices"—and to think about how Virginia Woolf's novel or Lorraine Hansberry's play or T. S. Eliot's poem would have been different with a different title. The first benefit of this exercise, then, is that it shows students how every piece of a text, even a supposedly straightforward title, is open to interpretation because it is the result of deliberation.

The second goal of "The New Title" is to teach students that identifying the themes and images they consider important in the text can be the starting point for their own independent literary analysis. By choosing a quotation or a word they think could be titular, students are making a judgment about what is significant in that text and, as a result, how to understand it. One of my students who thought he had nothing to say about *Much Ado About Nothing* contributed the title "Beatrice and Benedick." Even that fairly uncreative title led to a discussion about why *Much Ado* is not named after its lovers the way that *Romeo and Juliet* is and why, more generally, the comedies are not named for characters the way the tragedies are. This student eventually came to the conclusion that *Much Ado* is a transitional play, a comedy that veers toward tragedy because of the lovers' excessive self-satisfaction.

This exercise works with nearly any text, although I would not try it with poems shorter than sonnets. I also would not use it with texts that students

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find very difficult: it does not make a frustrating text easier but rather shows how apparently easy aspects of stories, poems, or plays are actually rich with significance.

I have used "The New Title" with great success teaching everything from Renaissance plays to postmodern novels. Every time I do it, I find that students talk and listen and learn from one another. They are surprised that the titles chosen by their classmates differ so much from their own. They laugh at the funny titles and compliment the insightful ones. And they learn that they each approach the text with their own invisible subtitles.

# The Descriptive Word

*Erwin Rosinberg*

An exercise that both solicits and questions students' preexisting ideas about a literary genre or period.

Genre: *any*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy or moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *first day and last day*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *none*
Estimated Time: *10 to 20 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Disrupt some of the usual opening-day classroom protocols by instead engaging directly with what students may already know about the course's topic. Choose a key term that the course will revisit and refine throughout the semester, and ask students to share any descriptive words that immediately come to mind. In a period-based course, you might ask students what adjectives they would associate with the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Victorian era, and so forth; in a genre course or a topic-based course, you could ask them to think about how they would describe the ideas and images suggested by, for example, "Gothic" or "Romance."

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You can further encourage and direct your students' feedback by asking them to think beyond literature to other forms of expression that they associate with the period or genre under examination, such as art, architecture, or music. It's helpful to reassure students that you're simply soliciting their preexisting impressions, which may come from anywhere: a Hollywood film about medieval knights, a television serial set in Victorian London, an abstract painting they once saw in a museum.

Keep track of your students' responses on the board. As they continue to contribute descriptive words, begin grouping their thoughts into categories of affinity, linking similar responses to one another. Ultimately, you can use the variety of responses generated to show that periods and genres are not monolithic entities and that students will be engaged in confronting the complexities and contradictions inherent in their assumptions throughout the semester.

This exercise is also worth returning to on the last day of class as a way of demonstrating to students what they have learned, both individually and collectively, about the topic at hand. Remind students of their initial impressions of the key term you selected at the beginning of the semester, and ask them to reconsider their earlier responses: Do the descriptive words that first came to mind still apply? How have their impressions of the period or genre evolved in response to the course material? What unexpected new impressions have the texts generated?

## REFLECTIONS

I find this exercise valuable for two reasons: first, it gets students in the habit of talking on the first day of class, and second, it encourages students to let go of the idea that studying literature is about "locking in" particular definitions or creating airtight aesthetic and historical categories. By asking them to contribute the knowledge they already bring to a course from a variety of cultural sources, and to see how their own assumptions may differ from those of their classmates, you can begin to give your students a sense of the course material as a living body of work, however much it may be rooted in the past.

I use this exercise most frequently in my courses on modernist literature. I ask students for adjectives that communicate what "modern" or "modernism" mean to them. Most often, the descriptive terms they contribute tend to fall into two main categories, almost perfectly in contradiction with one another: some students associate modernism with a pared-down aesthetic, using adjectives like "simplified," "direct," or "minimalist," while others convey a sense (or a fear) of challenge and intricacy, using adjectives like "fragmented," "dense," and "difficult." After the board is covered with an array of terms, I ask students to reflect upon the definitional categories they have

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created. How is it that both groups of terms can be equally relevant to the study of modernism? Does modernism still cohere as a movement or a period if it is grounded in such contradictory aesthetics? Such complex questions, generated from the students' own insights, provide a rich entry into the semester's reading.

Student feedback may also prompt questions that move beyond aesthetic complication, addressing the social and cultural circumstances of literary production as well. For example, in one course students offered the terms "avant-garde" and "democratic" in response to my query about modernism. Again, both ideas are relevant, since modernist writing frequently finds itself answering to charges of exclusivity or elitism while, at times, advocating a radically egalitarian social renewal. We continued to address this apparent contradiction throughout the semester. Indeed, the efficacy of this exercise lies, I believe, in foregrounding contradiction rather than ignoring it. Our definitions of literary periods and genres only remain "true" if they also remain open to complexity and revision, and so soliciting and discussing students' preexisting definitions helps set an agenda for literary study as a continued act of discovery.

# The Common Thread

*Simon Grote*

A versatile exercise in comparative thinking that enables students to analyze multiple texts when time is short.

Genre: *any*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *early, midterm, last day*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *low to medium*
Estimated Time: *20 to 60 minutes*

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## EXERCISE

Choose some theme, subject, formal quality, generic category, or other characteristic that you want students to analyze across several texts (the "common thread"): the elegiac qualities in a set of poems, for example, or demagoguery exhibited in a variety of speeches, or the relative impartiality of several historical narratives. Concepts such as *elegy*, *demagoguery*, and *impartiality*, which admit of degrees, tend to work best, since the exercise eventually involves asking students to assess the degree to which the common thread is present in each text.

In class, after listing the relevant assigned texts on the blackboard, announce the common thread and ask students to describe its essential qualities in the abstract, so that they can approach the texts with a shared set of criteria. As you write their responses on the blackboard, you may wish to prime them to notice particular features of individual texts by asking them about relevant essential qualities they may have overlooked.

When the students seem to have a reasonably robust understanding of the common thread, ask each student to list the texts on a piece of paper in rank order, according to the degree to which the common thread is present in each. This may take them longer than a few minutes. As they make their lists, encourage them to keep the shared criteria in mind and to write a few notes justifying each text's placement in the list. (Naturally, the ranking process goes more smoothly when students have read carefully in advance. I sometimes find it helpful to announce the common thread before class or even ask students to read with it in mind.)

Once everyone has finished writing, tally the results on the blackboard. Now the stage is set for discussion of the texts. Begin by proposing that the class try to agree about the correct ranking. Whether or not the students ultimately reach a consensus, the difficulties they encounter along the way should produce vigorous and inclusive discussion. As students defend their choices and get drawn into a comparative analysis of the texts, their movement from text to text may become too fast for comfort, in which case I usually insist that they anchor their judgments in particular passages from each text and test those passages against the criteria they established together at the outset.

## REFLECTIONS

In many courses, especially survey courses, multiple texts often need to be discussed in a single class meeting. In such situations, when time is short and the agenda is long, this exercise ensures that no text—and no student—gets left out.

The exercise is also designed to help students practice several skills: comparative analysis, attention to nuance, definition of key terms, and the

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application of general concepts to concrete cases. Ranking all the texts in a specific order requires students to pay attention to small differences in degree rather than comparing in broad strokes. Discussing the meaning of the common thread, and then returning to the results of that discussion when the students' rankings are up for debate, can illustrate the value of defining analytic categories precisely and in a way that others, after perhaps a little persuasion, are willing to accept.

This exercise works particularly well after students have built up a repertoire of readings suitable for comparison, and it can help them identify important course themes, such as in preparation for a test or final exam. A more time-consuming variation of the exercise, in which you solicit a common thread from the students instead of determining it yourself, can also serve this purpose.

That said, the exercise can also be useful early in the semester, especially when the concepts or key terms that students are asked to define at the outset provide them with a common thread not only through the texts up for discussion during that particular session but also through the rest of the course. As the semester continues and students move on to other texts, they can be encouraged to add those texts to their initial ranking and progressively refine their understanding of the common thread.

For this reason, if you use this exercise early in the semester, the common thread is worth choosing carefully, with a view to its usefulness later in the course. I discovered this after asking students in the second week of a Western civilization class to rank a group of four texts (Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, and the first four chapters of the Book of Genesis) by the degree to which each text portrays God or the gods as just. We spent a good fifteen minutes constructing a pair of definitions and descriptions for the two terms I thought most relevant: *justice* and (in order to clarify *justice* by contrast with its opposite) *tyranny*. As students volunteered elements for our description of each term, prompted sometimes by my questions about issues I knew might come up in our future readings and discussions (Is nepotism necessarily characteristic of a tyrant? Is mercy necessarily at odds with justice?), I wrote their contributions on the blackboard and observed most students copying my blackboard scrawls into their own notebooks. Justice and tyranny proved to be frequently recurrent themes in our course, and throughout the semester I noticed students flipping back to these original notes to defend their use of the terms in class discussion. Sometimes they even made new annotations in the margins of those old pages on occasions when, I imagine, discussing new texts had expanded or otherwise changed their understanding of the old terms.

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# STORIES

Prose fiction is at once the most familiar literary genre and also the least well understood. Stories, after all, can feel almost transparent in their effects, especially when compared to the linguistic challenges of poetry or the performative dimensions of drama. It's all the more important, then, to be able to help students recognize the distinctive elements through which novels and short stories create those effects, from the macro level of narrative, plot, setting, and structure, to the micro level of characterization and point of view, to the heightened dynamics of beginnings, endings, and—when the stakes are at their highest—ethics.

The fifteen exercises in this section instruct students in the art of storytelling. The first four activities on narrative and plot ("The Six-Word Story," "Narrative Rounds," "Splicing," and "Is It in Your Body?") ask students to think broadly about the nature of narrative itself: what makes a story a story, what it means to fictionalize experience, how narratives revisit (and rewrite) other narratives, and how stories end up inside readers. The exercises on setting and structure ("Mapmaker," "Diagram This," and "Bridges") maintain a wide perspective, helping students visualize and theorize the often hidden ways in which authors put stories together. The next four activities tighten the focus, to consider some of the most consequential choices storytellers make, including the representation of individual characters ("Intersectional Reading" and "Proust Questionnaire") and the perspective provided by the narrative's point of view ("Understanding Point of View" and "Flip the Script").

The three exercises in the next-to-last set ("First Paragraphs," "Script Doctor," and "Alternate Endings") zero in on two of the most distinctive components of any narrative—how it begins and how it ends—to highlight the ways stories create expectations and achieve closure. The final exercise ("The Great Debate") zooms in and then pulls back out, bringing to light powerful moments of conflict that offer no easy answers, in order to help students probe the ethical wagers of, and the diversity of values within, literary narratives. Taken as a whole, these exercises will ensure that even the most experienced readers will no longer take the workings of fiction for granted.

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# The Six-Word Story

*Jacquelyn Ardam*

A collaborative exercise that explores narrative condensation.

Genre: *fiction, especially short stories*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *45 to 50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Legend has it that Hemingway's favorite piece of his own writing was a six-word short story that he wrote to win a bet:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

This six-word story is a great jumping-off point for a classroom exercise on narrative fiction, particularly the short story. Instead of beginning class by talking about that day's reading assignment, write Hemingway's six-word story on the board and ask the students for their thoughts on it. Let the class brainstorm for several minutes, encouraging them to say anything that comes to mind about the story, and write their ideas on the board as well. Ask some questions to get them thinking: Do you think that Hemingway's piece *is* a short story? How short can a story be and still be a story? Can you express a narrative in just six words? Characters? Who is narrating this story? How important are punctuation and syntax to its telling? What differentiates it from a poem?

After this discussion, divide your students into pairs and ask each pair to transform that day's reading assignment into a six-word story. Give them about ten minutes to compose, and then ask them to write their stories on the board. Once everyone has regrouped, ask each pair to present its six-word story to the class. To get the conversation going, consider posing one or two of the following questions to the pairs: Which elements of the original story did you absolutely need to include and why? What does your six-word story leave out? How important is punctuation to your six-word story? Diction? Tone? Do you see your six-word story as a summary of the reading



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assignment? As a tagline? Is there a narrative arc to your story? Is there an epiphany? What is the relationship between the two texts? Are your six-word story and the original story even in the same genre?

Here the conversation might naturally lead into a more general discussion of the genre of the short story. How short can a short story be? Conversely, how long can a short story be? How do long and short versions of narrative fiction work differently? If you wish, take notes on the board as your students come up with definitions in order to organize their thoughts. Ideally, your class will, as a group, come up with a framework and vocabulary for discussing fiction that you can employ throughout the rest of the class. You might encourage your students to define such key terms as point of view, plot, tone, or epiphany. If your course covers multiple narrative genres—flash fiction, the short story, prose poetry, the novella, the novel—you might also work with your students to define and distinguish one genre from another. Allow at least thirty to thirty-five minutes for the pair presentations and the conversations to follow.

## REFLECTIONS

"The Six-Word Story" (an activity sometimes also assigned in creative writing classrooms) is designed to help students think about how and why we define narratives by genre, and also about the possible pitfalls of doing so. I have done this exercise several times in an introductory course, usually in the middle of a unit on short stories, but it can be done successfully at any point in a class on fiction or the short story in particular.

When doing this exercise, I often pair Hemingway's six-word story with Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," which has made for some deliciously humorous narratives. A sampling from my students:

- Leg lost: Christian country person wanted.
- Dude, where's my leg? That's country!
- Simple good country boy: leg thief.
- A woman loses her leg twice.

"The Six-Word Story" can also lead class conversations in many different and productive directions. I've talked with my students about Hemingway's "iceberg theory," the role of the gothic in American literature, the relationship between the comedic and the ironic, and the effects of terseness and brevity in literature. In addition to O'Connor's "Good Country People," I have also paired Hemingway's story with James Joyce's "Araby" and would recommend pairing the six-word story with any short story that exhibits a significant shift in tone or an epiphany. Other short stories that I'd recommend are Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," Michael Cunningham's "Pearls," Junot Díaz's "The Cheater's Guide to Love," and Jhumpa Lahiri's

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"Sexy." If you're interested in a Hemingway-specific lesson, you could discuss his six-word story alongside "The End of Something" or another short story from *In Our Time*.

What I have found most valuable in this exercise is the group discussion of the students' writing process: how they narrow the original story down to just six words, how they decide what matters (and *how* it matters) in the story, how many of their six-word stories make use of the author's distinctive vocabulary, tone, or point of view. When you put students in an active authorial position, they are able to think about style from a completely different perspective and see a text's diction, syntax, and punctuation as deliberate.

Additionally, this exercise builds strong close-reading skills. It encourages students to read fiction as closely and carefully as they read poetry. While my students are often more than willing to debate the role of a semicolon in a poem, they are much more resistant to doing so in a short story. This exercise opens students up to reading fiction—even very, very short fiction—from a new perspective.

# Narrative Rounds

*Joyce Coleman*

An icebreaker exercise that teaches the most basic elements of oral storytelling.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *first day, early*
Writing Component: *optional after class*
Close Reading: *none*
Estimated Time: *35 to 40 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Begin by putting students into pairs (for small classes) or groups of three (for medium classes). Ask each student to tell the other member or members of the group a story. The story should last no more than five minutes, and it must be about the storyteller him- or herself (what folklorists call a "personal

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experience narrative" or "memorat"). The tellers should choose a story that they are comfortable sharing and that is likely to interest the audience, and they should tell it with conviction. The listeners should pay close attention and respond supportively.

Once all the students have told their stories, ask the entire class to get up and form two concentric circles. (Move furniture to the sides of the room as needed; if you are in a classroom with bolted-down chairs, bring everyone to the front of the room.) Ask each circle to walk slowly, in opposite directions, until you tell the circles to stop and face each other. Then ask each student to choose one of the stories she or he just heard and tell it to the person standing opposite. That person will then tell the first speaker a story he or she had just heard. Because the retellings of the stories tend to be notably shorter than the originals, this portion of the exercise typically takes just five to seven minutes.

Now ask the circles to walk forward again until you stop them. Have the new facing pairs tell each other the story they have *just* heard from their previous partner. This next round will take even less time than the previous one, usually only four to five minutes.

Have the students return to their seats, then call on one person at random to tell the last story she or he heard to the entire class. Ask the other members of the class to help trace this version of the story back to the intermediate and original tellers, noting which aspects of the story have changed along the way. After the class has traced a few stories back this way, invite the students to consider the changes that seem to occur in transition. Although some parts of stories may become garbled, as in the game of telephone, students typically find that the changes are meaningful: action has been tightened, less important details have been dropped, and the story has moved more firmly into one or another narrative mode (usually comic). They may also find that common themes emerge. List these observations on the board and encourage students to reflect on what their discoveries might say about storytelling more generally.

## REFLECTIONS

"Narrative Rounds" invites students to discover some of the most basic components of effective narrative through their own lived experience. The learning is augmented by many nonintellectual factors: the intimacy of the storytelling group at the beginning, the physical activity of walking, and the excitement or anxiety of encountering random listeners in the circle and plunging into engagement with them. The exercise takes narrative back to its source in face-to-face interaction, connecting it to the high-context, multisensory experience of oral literature. This can be used as a teaching point later on if you are reading texts derived from oral traditions; you can also use these observations to ask students how written narratives differ from oral

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ones. Finally, as an icebreaker, the exercise gives students a way to meet each other and begin to feel comfortable interacting.

For example, in one of my classes a student told a story about a trip from North Dakota to Manhattan with her father and two of her high-school friends. The father sent the three young women into the city with lots of good advice, which they promptly disregarded. They got pulled into a game of three-card monte, lost money, got the money back when a cop intervened, and were chased by the card dealer. They finally got back safely to their hotel, where they lied to the father about what had happened.

In tracing the story back to its original version, the class discovered that various details had dropped away in the retelling: for example, information about the women involved and the exact sequence of their bets in the card game. Other elements were augmented to create more excitement, such as how far the women had to run to escape the angry dealer. The class recognized that the retellers had edited the story to make it more dramatic and engaging. At the same time, the real fear that the women had felt gave way, in retelling, to a comic tone.

Discussion of the story's theme pulled in another story, about a male student engaging in underage drinking, then driving, landing in jail, and having to be bailed out by his parents. Combining these stories, the class arrived at a general, age-appropriate theme of adolescents testing their limits but needing their parents to fall back on. As a result of the discussion, the students became more aware of basic elements of narrative construction and also more aware of their own preferences as audience or readers.

As a follow-up to this exercise, you can also design a take-home work sheet that guides students to a more detailed analysis of the experience. The work sheet could ask the students to consider why they chose the personal story they told, how and why they edited and possibly fictionalized it in the telling, what they thought the underlying message of the story was, and how their listeners' reactions affected them as they spoke. They could also be asked to comment on what they learned about narrative from their experience as listeners and retellers. The next class can be devoted to sharing these analyses and drawing further conclusions.

The results of this take-home exercise usually reinforce the principles that emerge in class discussion. Even the original tellers of the stories, it turns out, often fictionalize them to make them sound happier or funnier ("I altered the 'reality' of my story by making it humorous. Of course, at the time this really happened, none of this was funny") or to heighten the interest by exaggerating key details or dropping boring ones ("like where I stayed and what I ate"). But it also provides new insight into the role of audience in shaping narrative: "The more we nodded the more he told," one student wrote. In another case the listeners transformed the story as the teller was telling it: he changed his serious account of falling down a flight of stairs into a funny

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story because his audience kept laughing. Tales tend to form a chain: one person's story about New Year's Eve evokes from the next person yet another story about New Year's Eve. All these reactions show how storytelling becomes a reciprocal exchange between tellers and listeners.

# Splicing

*Michael Wood*

An introductory exercise on literary influence and adaptation.

Genre: *fiction, especially novels*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *20 to 25 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Play the following game with your students: The night before class, choose two novels that share some connection. The novels might be from the same genre, for example, or they might include a similar character type, or make use of a particular kind of plot point or theme, or use language in a similar way: two novels, in other words, that make you say, even if only briefly, "Oh, this reminds me of that other novel." (They don't need to be novels on your current syllabus, but they can be.)

From each novel, select a few short excerpts that you might normally show to students side by side as evidence of the similarity between the texts. *Now splice the excerpts from each novel together.* You can simply alternate bits if you like, or you can splice them more creatively (half a line here, half a line there). Try to maintain narrative sense; try not to let the seams show. You don't have to use every word or even every sentence. (What you don't include will ultimately be as instructive as what you do include.)

In class, give the students a copy of this new passage. Tell them it is a hybrid—a text made up of actual phrases or sentences from two different

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novels. You can tell them the titles of the novels if you wish; for a higher degree of difficulty, keep that a secret. Now play the game: ask them to try to take the passage apart by identifying, as best they can, which pieces come from which text. You can have them do this individually or in small groups. (The arguments in small groups can be lively.) When everyone is ready—ten minutes is generally enough time for a short passage—ask each person or group to describe how and why they split up the passage the way they did. Once everyone has had a chance to weigh in, produce the original excerpts and let them see exactly which pieces came from which texts. Let them also see—and reflect on—which pieces you didn't splice together. Could those pieces have been spliced in just as easily? Why or why not?

## REFLECTIONS

It has been said that there are only six or seven stories in the world—all other stories are variants upon them. This game gets students thinking about often quite subtle narrative questions—in particular, how literary texts adapt, repeat, and rewrite each other.

I first used this exercise in an introductory survey course on the reading of fiction, from Homer's *The Odyssey* to the present day. Texts included *The Arabian Nights,* Charles Dickens's *Hard Times,* Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* and a number of others, and one particular section was devoted to literary influence and intertextuality: Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* as a revision of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a supplement to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre.* I spliced certain sentences from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* into the text of *Jane Eyre*, as follows:

> His mother had taken him home for a month or two, on account of his delicate health. In her opinion there was no finer boy anywhere. He hated exercise—unless of course it involved punching somebody. He was large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin. He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. He had thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, not once or twice in the day, but continually. He spent some minutes thrusting out his tongue as far as he could without damaging the roots.

Here are the source passages:

> The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere. . . . [They] didn't want their son mixing with a child like that.

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> Nearly ten years had passed. . . Dudley was very fat and hated exercise—unless of course it involved punching somebody. Dudley's favorite punching bag was Harry. . . Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry. . . wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. . . Dudley. . . had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like an angel—Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.
>
> —Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

> His mother had taken him home for a month or two, 'on account of his delicate health.'
>
> [He was] large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin. . . . He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks. . . . The master. . . affirmed that he would do very well if he had fewer cakes. . . sent from home.
>
> He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week, not once or twice in the day, but continually. . . . [He] spent some minutes thrusting out his tongue. . . as far as he could without damaging the roots.
>
> —Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

Student groups were quick to spy the recurring figure of the spoiled bully—in both cases the son of the family our orphan hero/heroine has come to live with. Some groups even guessed, correctly, the identities of the two novels I had commingled together, more at first from the composite character portrait of the bully than anything else, such as narrative point of view, tone of voice, irony, diction, recognizable metaphors or tricks of syntax, and so on. And that's when things got more interesting: How is it exactly that these two novels, from two different centuries, speak so well to one another? And what kind of "story" can be said to emerge from this act of irreverent coupling?

When we reconvened, conversation turned immediately to the subject of literary influence. Students concluded that the important thing was not just that Rowling had read *Jane Eyre*, which she certainly had, but that both Brontë and Rowling are working interestingly with a stereotype, involving readers in what they already know and what they want from such a story. They liked the "new" story the spliced version presented, noting how the sentences slip seamlessly from one book into another, and also the way sentences I did not include matched other sentences so well: "delicate health" / "no finer boy"; "large and stout" / "very fat"; "dim and bleared eye" / "small,

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watery blue eyes"; "flabby cheeks" / "pink face." The interest in intertextuality, we finally concluded, is not, as it may at first seem, in what looks like copying, but in shared use of material.

And it is with this thought in mind that the exercise could be developed or adapted to help students think about genre (revenge tragedy, the epic, the western, the sentimental romance); about the way individual texts can talk to each other across genres; about many of the basic building blocks of character and narrative. You can use the exercise to teach plot or theme or character or language, depending on your needs and interests. You can even use it to teach style (most style exercises focus on stylistic differences between writers; this one plays on their unexpected harmonies). But in each case the point is to put together one or more texts and invite students to take them apart and wonder why the job is so easy or so difficult. And then, with practice, you can ask them to make their own collations from texts they have read for the course.

# Is It in Your Body?

*Kathryn Bond Stockton*

An exercise in recall that helps students think about how—and why—texts get "inside" us.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *intermediate or advanced*
Student Difficulty: *moderate or hard*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *50 to 60 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Assign a ten- to twenty-page scene from a novel for students to read outside of class. Choose something juicy, even upsetting. Make sure it is rich in detail and word choice. Ideally, it should be interpretively dense—for

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example, the scene from Jean Genet's *Querelle* in which the sailor Querelle murders Vic, or the scene in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* where Humbert has a wiggling Lolita in his lap. Passages less salacious but lush include the protagonist's drug-dream scene in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* or the emotional "shipwreck" scene between Dorothea and Rosamond in George Eliot's monumental *Middlemarch*. Instruct the students, when you assign the passage, to expect an in-class written exercise that will require them to have read carefully.

When class convenes, divide students into groups of three or four. Ask each group, with their books closed, to record on paper as many details as the students can remember about the scene they've read. (Have one student serve as group recorder.) Tell them first to list only the words or phrases they recall verbatim. Then have them sequence the general happenings and features (dialogue, descriptions, and so on) of the scene, using the left-hand part of the paper for verbatim details and the right-hand part for sequencing and summarizing. Allow about twenty minutes for the students to work in their groups. State the time limit. You want to convey a bit of excitement, even urgency, but also allow for the students' thoughtfulness.

In the next twenty minutes, assign two scribes to each side of the board at the front of the room (chalkboard or whiteboard). Call on each group in turn to offer a single detail or a happening, the student-scribes writing these on the board: verbatim details on the left, paraphrase/summation on the right. The point is to get a snapshot of *how much text* and *what of the text* students have internalized. Ideally, the groups keep adding details one at a time, until all their details appear on the board. (This part of the exercise can also be shortened or even skipped; it's fun to compare different groups' recall but not required for the lesson's overall force and effect.)

Once the students have established how much of the text is "in" their bodies, invite the class to reflect on these results: To what extent did groups (and individuals in groups) recall the same details or features from the scene? For details recalled in common (which ones?), what is the reason: Shock value? Salaciousness? Beauty? Repugnance? Unusual word choice? (Un)familiar concept? Do we as readers all have the same novel *in* us while discussing it? Is the novel functionally reducible, then, to the bundle of words and summations we extract from it and carry in our bodies? Why or why not? Wind up the conversation by encompassing the work students and their teachers perform in the classroom. Is our differential recall a problem for proffering interpretations or readings—in short, for doing literary criticism? How or how not?

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## REFLECTIONS

Students have serious fun with this text-in-the-body experiment. With the right passage, they're intrigued to think deeply about why certain details got inside them and then remained verbatim or became altered or just petered out. As you can imagine, most undergraduates have never thought of words having penetrative force—and never thought of readers having different novels "in" them after they've read the exact same text.

For example, in my class Theories of Gender and Sexuality, I taught *Lolita* and had a riotous but truly illuminating time with this exercise. I assigned the famous lap scene, along with short chapters that precede and follow it (chapters 12–14, nine pages total). Images commonly recalled verbatim: "Eden-red apple" (with a few students adding from memory the critical adjective "banal" that Humbert attaches to this phrase), "hidden tumor" and "gagged, bursting beast" (phrases describing Humbert's erection), "tactile correspondence" (euphemism for his penis being rubbed by her monkeyish movements in his lap), "innocent cotton frock" (indicating innocence attributed to Lolita's dress, not to her), "safely solipsized" (for Humbert's confidence that he's preserved her innocence), "Turk" and "slave" (Humbert's tumescent sense of their positions), "bruise. . . on thigh," "huge hairy hand," "thumb. . . reaching. . . groin," "giggling child," "shrill voice," "squirmed," "crushed against buttock. . . throb," "man or monster," "[her] cheeks aflame, hair awry," "Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing!" (all from the crucial sequence leading to Humbert's climax).

Who does what to whom and to what effect (Is Lolita aroused by Humbert's "beast"? Does she, too, ecstatically arrive?) caused intense debate—and laughter—demonstrating how much hangs on *what of the text* gets "in" us. Many students sheepishly admitted that they *wanted* to commit to memory this "beautiful" passage, despite their being repulsed by its content. Given what students did and didn't memorize, even in the face of enormous effort, we as a class decided that the passage positions the *reader* as both attracted pedophile and distracted child. That is to say, like Humbert, we ourselves experience a strange attraction that time will erode—our attraction to the very words on the page (dense, lyrical, rhythmic, funny, euphemistically fresh, and clearly antinormative)—and these words distract us (much as Humbert tries to distract Lolita with his Carmen ditty) from the bewildering goal being sought. We were left wondering which and how many of these words would still be in us at semester's end.

For a greater challenge in a more advanced class, especially in a literary theory class, launch this exercise after you have taught Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the sign from his treatise *Course in General Linguistics*, Jacques Derrida's notions of difference and deferral, or even Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (which views the reader as the text's

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"destination"). The exercise helps to show and explore the materiality of the signifier. In my class, our discussions kept turning back, for example, to the sound of the words, to their rhythmic flow. In some instances, the signifier's satisfying sound ("plop," "safely solipsized," "gagged, bursting beast") aided students' recall. But we also noticed that certain sentences were so precise and dense that we were defeated in committing them to memory, despite our intense desire to do so ("Lola, the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through its juice, losing her slipper, rubbing the heel of her slipperless foot in its sloppy anklet"), making us like Humbert, who can't keep hold of what he has only momentarily possessed. In addition, you can illustrate how the text inside us (only ever partially there, due to its tendency to drain from us) contributes to meanings being plural and partial but not subjective in the way many students think the text can mean anything they think or say it does. Of course, you don't need Saussure or Derrida to make such points. You can simply use the exercise itself to stage these questions in ordinary discourse any undergraduate is bound to understand.

# Mapmaker

*Kenyon Gradert*

A cartographic adventure that helps students visualize plot, themes, and literary place.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *medium to high*
Estimated Time: *50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose any extended work of fiction that has a strong element of place. After your students have read the entire work, spend a final discussion day in class by collectively drawing and annotating a map. Begin by drawing a giant rectangle

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on the board to serve as your map's borders—you'll need lots of space. In a bottom corner, draw a compass with the cardinal directions. Then ask students to recount the four or five most important locations of the plot, starting with the geographically largest and moving to the smallest: In what country does this story take place? What cities? What houses, cafés, or parks? (The size and scope of the locations will of course vary by text.) As students answer, ask them to come up and draw the location, depicted either by its geographic outline or by some clever symbol: a log cabin for Uncle Tom's cabin, for example. It often helps if you, as the instructor, draw the largest-scale location first and set a relaxed mood by poking fun at your own lack of cartographic precision.

After you have this handful of primary places on your map (this part of the exercise usually takes ten to fifteen minutes), divide the students into small groups and assign each group to a particular place on the map. Give groups ten minutes to convene and discuss their place, focusing on such questions as these: What kind of language does the author use to depict this place? What sort of things tend to happen in this neck of the woods? Which characters are most connected to the place, and how do they feel about it? Does the place change as the plot progresses? What key themes in the work are best expressed here? Could this place be considered, in its own way, a character in the text, and if so, how? What other places on the map is this place connected to? Reconvene the class and allow another ten minutes for groups to present (briefly) key thoughts on their place. Annotate the map with these observations as the groups present their findings.

Finally, devote fifteen to twenty minutes to a conversation about the "big picture" of the map. Ask students, for example, to trace the story's journey on the map; have them literally draw lines on it for a visual reminder of plot. Ideally, these lines will form a good transition into the concluding discussion of big questions: How do these places work together, or in tension, to form a narrative experience? How are place and plot, in this text, related? In addition, consider how these places inform the author's vision of the world: how does the Chicago of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, the Middle East of Melville's *Clarel*, or the Rome of Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, for example, reveal the authors' beliefs about God, human beings, and society? Bring the journey full circle by tying these authors' visions to your students' visions of their own place: Where do they come from, and how does this inform their vision of the world? Does a student's suburban upbringing chafe against Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County? (See Cowley's *Portable Faulkner* for a great model.) Does your university campus stand with or in contrast to the works you're reading? Ideally, students will reveal their diverse backgrounds and illustrate how it forms the basis for their own unique interaction with the map's big picture.

If the text under discussion focuses on an actual or metaphorical journey, you might also broaden this closing conversation to discuss the nature of travel more generally. What kind of journey are the characters on? Are they

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pilgrims? Aimless wanderers? Gaudy tourists? Imperial conquerors? Are some characters more stationary than others?

As class draws to a close, ask the students if they would change anything on the map—either by addition, subtraction, or reconfiguration—in light of the discussion they've just had. Some students may wish to hear more about a certain character; others may think a certain side journey is irrelevant to the main plot; yet others may express frustration with go-nowhere characters. Reactions vary (and opinions may change as discussion progresses), but students tend to enjoy discovering their own agency within the story through expressing opinions about how the work's world might change.

## REFLECTIONS

This mapping exercise is a memorable way to reexamine major characters, plots, and themes one final time before you move on to another work. Students enjoy the visual aspect of the mapmaking and find that tracing connections between places is a helpful way to make vivid the key components of the text. The exercise also can be a springboard for the discussion of critical approaches to literature and space, including postcolonial, ecocritical, feminist, Marxist, new historicist, borderlands, and queer theory interpretations. It can even function as an introduction to GIS and spatial projects in the digital humanities.

"Mapmaker" helps students draw connections not only within the work at hand but also to previously read works, as students perform their own sort of journey within the literature. In my classroom the exercise has worked well to enable this very journey. At the conclusion of Benjamin Franklin's hectic *Autobiography*, for example, a map helped our class synthesize the rambling course of the author's life. By listing all of Franklin's varied activities in Philadelphia, London, and the frontier, students were able to visualize the marvelous breadth and depth of his life. Noting this spatial rambling, we transitioned smoothly into a discussion of Max Weber's analysis of Franklin's restlessness in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and discussed how Franklin's geography may have informed his famous discussion of morality in Part Two of the autobiography.

In addition, students noted that Franklin, supposedly a quintessentially American figure, was thoroughly transatlantic in his scientific studies and diplomatic missions. (Here I pulled up a digital map comparing Franklin's transatlantic and Voltaire's Eurocentric letter correspondences, from the "Visualizing Benjamin Franklin's Correspondence Network" case study within Stanford University's wonderful *Mapping the Republic of Letters* project.) Finally, we discussed how Franklin's extended descriptions of public spaces (libraries, streets, fire stations) inform his vision of democracy and republicanism. Discussion could have continued long after, reaching into contemporary politics of space and debates about whether Franklin still has

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something to say to the Occupy generation or to postcolonial peoples. At its best, "Mapmaker" poignantly brings the author's world into contact with students' own sense of space and place.

This exercise also gives students a new appreciation for narrative structure—the ways stories take (and make) their journeys. One student may note that the journey in *The Sound and the Fury* is nauseatingly cyclical; another that many works of the American Renaissance feature a movement out from society and back; yet another that Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* seems more interested in labyrinthine wandering than in getting anywhere in particular. In discussing and arguing with each other about the nature of the literary journey at hand, students make a collective trip, not unlike Chaucer's travelers: "In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle."

# Diagram This

*Erin G. Carlston*

An exercise that asks student to think visually about narrative structures and patterns.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy or moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

This exercise asks students to create a diagram of a work of fiction. The range of structures and patterns you can ask your class to visualize is quite broad. I have used this exercise, for example, to ask students to diagram the relationship between the provinces, the metropole, and the British Empire in Arnold Bennett's *Old Wives' Tale*; the interaction of race and class in Dorothy West's novel *The Living Is Easy*; the connections among Dorian Gray, Dorian's

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picture, Basil Hallward, Lord Henry, Life, and Art in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; and the chronology suggested by the first hundred lines of Homer's *Iliad* compared to the first hundred lines of the *Odyssey*.

At the beginning of class, divide the students into groups of three or four and provide them with pencils, erasers, and 8.5 × 11–inch sheets of paper. Then choose one of the following aspects of that day's text for the groups to diagram: either the structure of the work as a whole, or the relationship among a set of characters, places, events and/or themes (which you will specify) in that work. Give the students your chosen prompt, along with two simple rules: (1) don't draw representational pictures—no stick figures or symbols like smiley faces, and (2) use absolutely no written text. Instead, ask the students to think in terms of pattern, shape, and relationship.

To help them get started, offer examples of diagram types or invite them to brainstorm a list as a class before beginning. Possibilities include flow charts, Venn diagrams, timelines, food pyramids, geometric forms, graphs, and abstract transit maps, among other forms. Stress that this isn't a test of drawing ability and that students won't be judged on their artistic talents. Ask each group to designate one member who will do the actual drawing.

After they have finished drawing their diagrams (this should take about fifteen minutes), ask each group to pass its diagram to the group on the right. Each group should now spend five minutes trying to figure out what the group to their left is getting at—*without asking that group any questions*. When everyone is ready, have each group present the diagram they were given and propose their interpretation of it to the rest of the class. Project each diagram in the front of the room for everyone to see, if possible. Let students from the other groups offer comments or questions, and before moving on to the next group, invite the students who drew the diagram to say whether the interpretation accurately captured their intention. (If you are pressed for time, you can also simply have each group present its diagram to the rest of the class directly without passing it to the right first, though passing introduces an extra layer of interactivity and interpretation that students particularly enjoy.) In the last ten minutes of class, ask the class as a whole how the diagrams have shaped their understanding of the text and whether, after seeing other diagrams, they would alter their own in any way.

## REFLECTIONS

The primary goal of "Diagram This" is to get students, especially first-year students or nonmajors, to think about narrative fiction in terms of structure and pattern rather than the more accessible character and plot. It teaches them that the way a work is constructed affects what it says. While many students are perplexed by the exercise for the first few minutes and often ask for examples—which I refuse to give them because then they'll just copy the model—almost

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all of them rise to the challenge. The visual act of diagramming encourages students who are less comfortable with written and spoken language to get their ideas about a story into a form in which they can literally see what they think. And for students who *are* adept at written or verbal analysis, the assignment requires that they temporarily set aside the tools with which they're comfortable and conceptualize more abstractly how texts function.

When I use this exercise with Virginia Woolf's short story "Slater's Pins Have No Points," I ask students to diagram its structure and then, if they need more prompting, encourage them to think specifically about how time works in the story: it begins and ends in almost the same second, and the entire body of the story consists of flashbacks and mental associations. Some students end up drawing two fixed points connected by squiggly lines or large tangled loops. Others have drawn parallel lines representing "real time" and "internal time" and have added elements suggesting how they're connected. Some have shown external reality as a very small element contained within a much larger figure representing the psychological interpretation of reality. Within the short space of a fifty-minute class period, students can go from being baffled by Woolf's elliptical methods to working out quite successfully how she weaves in and out through time and memory.

For a variation useful for small classes (under fifteen students), you can have each student draw an individual diagram and, again, if you prefer, eliminate the step in which they pass around the drawings. Instead, go straight to asking a few students to share with the whole class. Done in this fashion near the beginning of the class, the exercise is a more concise way of starting off discussion and close reading of the text, rather than a task occupying the entire hour.

# Bridges

*Joseph Fruscione*

A flexible exercise that teaches narrative structure.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low to medium*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*

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Writing Component: *in class, optional after class*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *45 to 50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Assign any fictional work with an interesting or innovative structure. Novels are best, but short stories with sufficiently complex narrative designs also work nicely. Consider, for example, Joyce's "The Dead" (layers of consciousness and flashback), Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (parallel perspectives in a novel spanning only one day), Melville's "Benito Cereno" (flawed narrative consciousness, flashbacks, and a plot twist), Chopin's *The Awakening* (internal harmony and repetition, layers of memory, and subtle flashbacks), Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (postmodern metafiction with a hybrid structure), or any other work that plays with time and structure but can challenge first-time readers.

In class, you might begin by mapping out on the board with students what appear to be the different sections or larger movements of the work at hand. This part of the exercise can be a quick, general overview of the text's main chapters or sections, or it can be a slow, more careful diagramming of its many structural parts. (A useful starter exercise for "Bridges" could be the abbreviated version of the previous exercise, "Diagram This.") This opening step is not essential, but for introductory classes in which students may not know much about narrative structure, it can be helpful.

Invite students to choose any two consecutive sections, review them quickly, and write in response to this three-part prompt: What is each section doing individually? How are the two narrative pieces linked stylistically or thematically? What is new or clearer through rereading them in sequence? Give students fifteen to twenty minutes for this in-class writing component, which will strengthen and specify the group discussion to follow (the writing component can also function as prewriting for an eventual essay). If you like, you can pair students off and ask them to perform the exercise together, keeping a more casual record of their findings.

After the students have done their rereading and writing, have them share the *what* and *why* of their choices. Encourage them to read out loud the key lines or passages that capture the links they've identified, and help keep them focused on what they most want the class to see about their structural pairing. Highlight those fortuitous moments when students pick the same pairing but draw very different conclusions, or when they choose overlapping sections (one's second piece is another's first)—a happy coincidence that can add considerable momentum to the discussion.

Conclude by posing a set of more general questions about narrative structure and about the exercise itself: How exactly do authors create textual

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bridges, and what is their relation to other literary devices like plot, characterization, point of view, or theme? How are a text's internal motifs and connections easier to identify by locating and examining these narrative bridges? What can we learn from this method that we might have missed otherwise?

## REFLECTIONS

"Bridges" focuses on the always important, often invisible, and sometimes complex structures of literary narratives. It pointedly directs students' attention to how an author connects and perhaps counterpoints a story's individual pieces to advance a larger unified purpose. Studying a narrative's consecutive clusters helps students identify internal tensions or ironies, explore complementary themes or images, understand narrative pacing or movement, and analyze narration or shifting points of view.

The exercise can work well for eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novels and stories, though I find it tailor-made for modernist texts, in which a narrative's internal transitions or overall cohesiveness may at first strike students as disjointed, even confusing. I have tried it on a number of story collections and novels from the early twentieth century, including Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925), and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930). In Toomer's *Cane*, one student group examined the juxtaposition of "Harvest Song" (a narrative poem) and "Bona and Paul" (a story) to ask why Toomer sequenced, side by side in the collection's urban section, characters of such different cultural and racial experiences. In linking this poem and story of this rich but challenging text, they concluded that Toomer deploys repetition, revision, and region to capture the richness of interracial voices and identities. For Hemingway's *In Our Time*, the juxtaposition of the seemingly different narratives "Indian Camp" and "Chapter 2" ("Minarets stuck up. . .") struck one group as, in truth, variations on a set of common themes: interpersonal struggle, parent-child relations, gender fluidity, and strained childbirth.

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*—with its fifteen narrators—posed to students a difficult challenge but also offered one of the strongest examples of how authors construct meaning by creating narrative bridges. For example, Vardaman's "My mother is a fish" chapter, placed back-to-back with Cash's methodical, thirteen-step description of making his mother's coffin ("I made it on the bevel," he begins), highlights how Faulkner presents the Bundrens as foils for each other throughout the novel. Here the students argued, quite insightfully, that Faulkner showcases Cash's meticulousness in counterpoint to Vardaman's confusion to illustrate different kinds of grief. I like to end my course section on narrative structure by noting how Toomer, Hemingway, and Faulkner all shared a common mentor, Sherwood Anderson, whose short-story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) may have influenced their stylistic innovation, flexible handling of time, and broader identity as artists of the avant-garde.

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As this example intimates, the exercise can also work progressively. For courses that arrange the readings chronologically, like mine, instructors can revise the exercise and heighten its level of difficulty when they get to later texts: by asking students to connect *three* consecutive sections in one work or by requiring them to make thematic pairings across texts (for example, a race-gender-place juxtaposition in Faulkner might echo yet complicate one from Toomer). I like this cumulative, more advanced version of “Bridges” because it goes beyond a single day and can yield for students deeper critical insights about both period (the avant-garde form of modernist texts) and genre (the forms of fictional works). In my experience, these kinds of fictional texts have worked particularly well because we often approach modernist works in nontraditional ways, while uncovering how fiction can be distinctive in its embrace of nonlinear structure and reading practices.

# Intersectional Reading

*Maureen Meharg Kentoff*

A comparative exercise that examines character through the theory of intersectionality.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *45 to 50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Intersectionality is an approach to literary analysis that invites students to consider how a range of identity factors, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, corporeality, role, or setting, interact to shape character. Novels with richly rendered social worlds—texts like Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Nella

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Larsen's *Passing*, or Toni Morrison's *Sula*, for example—are particularly good candidates for this comparative exercise in intersectional reading.

Before class, choose two characters from the assigned text that make a good pair for comparison across a range of factors like the ones listed above. Decide on the scope of material you want your students to analyze: the entire text, a particular chapter or section, or a specific selection of passages that provide rich character detail. Then prepare two handouts, each with three columns and four rows. Orient these two handouts in landscape mode and maximize the size of the chart so that there is ample space in each box.

On the first handout, label the first column header "Subjectivity Factor" and the remaining two column headers with the names of the characters. Then, under the first column header, label each of the three remaining rows with a particular subjectivity factor pertinent to the characters you've selected, such as "gender," "class," and "race." Title this handout "Close Character Reading."

On the second handout, keep the character names the same but change the first column header to "Intersecting Factors." Under this header, list the factors from the first handout as intersecting pairs: for example, "gender and class"; "gender and race"; "class and race." Title this handout "Intersectional Reading," and copy it on a different color paper, so the forms are easy to differentiate. If you were asking students to compare main characters Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in Larsen's *Passing*, for example, your handouts might look something like this:

Handout #1: Close Character Reading

| *Subjectivity Factor* | *Clare Kendry* | *Irene Redfield* |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Class | | |
| Race | | |

Handout #2: Intersectional Reading

| *Intersecting Factors* | *Clare Kendry* | *Irene Redfield* |
|---|---|---|
| Gender and Class | | |
| Gender and Race | | |
| Class and Race | | |

In class, spend the first few minutes briefly reviewing the concept of intersectionality and its potential for a more complete analysis of a character's lived experience. Then divide the class into groups of three or four and

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distribute copies of handout #1. Ask each group to spend fifteen to twenty minutes completing the boxes on the chart as they consider how each subjectivity factor is addressed in the text for each character. (If you like, you can offer an example for each factor to get them started.) Tell the groups to be specific in recalling character descriptions and events, including direct references to words, phrases, scenes, interactions, dialogue, and plot trajectory; remind them to cite page numbers when possible. (Be sure to specify what portion of the text they are responsible for.) At this point the groups should *not* compare characters but simply consider each individual character in terms of the factors listed. If they discover overlap between categories, tell them to place each detail in the box that seems most appropriate.

After the students have completed the first handout, pass out copies of handout #2. Ask each group to spend the next fifteen to twenty minutes completing the boxes on the new chart by considering how the two subjectivity factors that are listed *intersect* with each other. Encourage the groups to refer to the first handout for specific details and to note how these factors differ when compared across characters. Remind the groups again to list direct references, with page numbers. As with the first handout, you can offer examples to help them get started. During the group work, it can also be helpful to move around the room, listening in on the deliberations and posing questions or offering suggestions for fine-tuning ideas.

Once the groups have completed the second handout, bring the class as a whole back together and spend the remaining class time discussing each intersection. Invite groups to share their findings on how a particular set of intersecting factors shapes, enriches, or constrains each character's lived experience. In what ways do these intersections reveal similarities and differences across characters? Ask the groups to cite specific language used by the author and to acknowledge both literal and figurative descriptions within the text. If possible, list the group responses on a shared chart in the front of the room, either on the board or a projection screen. Given the "messiness" of intersectionality, your discussion will likely not be an orderly process. Encourage students to embrace this quality, and underscore how it is evidence of the complexity of characters (and humans!). Also note that intersectional reading will help students recognize and tease out this messiness as they conduct literary analyses in formal and informal written assignments.

## REFLECTIONS

The goal of this exercise is to help students develop a more tangible and profound understanding of the complex theory of intersectionality. (For a further overview of intersectionality, I have found Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz's edited volume *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender* particularly helpful.) The

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process achieves a number of objectives: students practice close reading of the text in general and close reading of characters in particular; they generate concrete ways in which to explicate a character's intersectionality; and they are given additional opportunities to "unpack" the author's language and various literary devices (imagery, symbolism, dialect, and so on) that elicit multiple interpretations across characters.

My favorite text for teaching intersectionality is Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. I typically ask students to compare siblings Jimmie and Maggie Johnson, or Maggie and her lover Pete across such factors as "gender," "class," and "setting." Sometimes I offer a few examples to help the class get started, but students usually need only a little prompting before tackling the handout. In completing the first chart for the character of Maggie, for example, my students have cited allusions to "gender" in her family position (she is a daughter, an older and younger sister, a caretaker, and a family domestic), in her appearance (she is described as a pretty girl "who blossomed in a mud puddle"), and in her changing roles throughout the story (initially a romantic who desires marriage and feminine finery, she ends up a scorned lover and finally a prostitute). When we move to the second chart, the conversation quickly focuses on the impact of gender difference, as the life trajectories and even physical spaces available to Maggie contrast sharply with those available to the male characters Jimmie or Pete, despite their shared class status. This intersectional comparison helps students develop a multilayered analysis of Crane's commentary on "how the other half lives" (to borrow a phrase from Jacob Riis) rather than simply focus on a single characteristic such as class.

"Intersectional Reading" can be adapted to any course level and tailored in multiple ways. For an introductory class, you might focus on only two subjectivity factors or only one character (but note that the act of comparing characters can elicit a more complete understanding of intersectionality). For an advanced class, you can delve into subjectivity factors that are more tacitly implied by the author. In *Maggie*, for example, I have used such factors as capitalism, urban geography, and domestic abuse. In Larsen's *Passing*, I have asked students to explore the themes of sexuality or miscegenation by comparing Irene and Clare across various intersections of race, gender, family, and marriage. Another option is to choose topics specific to a particular course: for example, consumer culture, vernacular speech, or religion. You can also assign less fully drawn characters (in *Passing*, try Brian Redfield or Jack Bellew). I have also invited students to compare characters from two different texts, such as an intersectional analysis of class, gender, and setting focused on Edna Pontellier from Chopin's *The Awakening* and Lily Bart from Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

Regardless of the course level, it can be helpful to offer examples of concepts that might fall under a given factor. For example, for "class," tell the students that they might consider depictions of work, income, liquid assets, possessions, attire, education, language, home life, or financial future. For

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"setting," they might focus on location, landscape, weather, home, material surroundings, public venues, corporeal space, architecture, workplace, street life, transportation, or mobility. You can also list these concepts on the board or even print them on the first handout.

My students react with great enthusiasm to "Intersectional Reading." They enjoy the challenge of tackling what is often perceived as a very abstract and difficult theoretical model. After the exercise, they report feeling more confident in their ability to generate specific and complex analyses not just of the characters but also of various themes and literary devices throughout the text. Some requested that we schedule the activity a few times throughout the semester. Given the growing prominence of intersectional interpretations across the humanities, this exercise also offers insight into how intersectional reading can be applied to a variety of literary genres. In sum, students are grateful for the practice and the open forum in which they are challenged to explore more fully and concretely how a key concept of lived experience affects literary representation.

# Proust Questionnaire

*John Bugg*

An exercise that encourages critical distance in the study of characterization.

Genre: *fiction, especially novels*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy or moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

This exercise uses a version of the famous Proust Questionnaire as a springboard for a discussion of characterization. When French author Marcel Proust was a teenager, a friend asked him to answer a series of questions.

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He answered the same questions again when he was twenty (both questionnaires survive today). The Proust Questionnaire later became popular for interviews in magazines and on television shows, and today *Vanity Fair* regularly asks celebrities to respond to a modified version.

The "Proust Questionnaire" exercise works well with almost any type of novel: realism or romance, historical fiction or metafiction, even crime thrillers and graphic novels. Any work with a roster of multidimensional characters will do. Some good candidates include Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (with hidden connections among characters who at first appear very different); Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (with Jane's first-person narration contouring the depiction of every other character in the novel); and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (with characters' inner lives coordinated according to a handful of repeating ideas about Thatcher-era Britain). The "Proust Questionnaire" also works brilliantly with any volume of Proust's own *In Search of Lost Time*, with its density of personalities and a narrator who is himself a constellation of selves.

To begin the exercise, distribute copies of the Proust Questionnaire (see the end of this chapter for an example with selected answers from the young Proust) to each member of the class and explain its origin. Next, hand out a template of the questionnaire with Proust's answers removed. Ask your students to fill out the questionnaire from the point of view of one of the characters in the text you are reading. But here's the crucial step: ask students to craft their answers in such a way that they could plausibly have come from *more than one character*. Challenge your students to perplex both you as the instructor and their classmates. Offer an example. Let's say you are doing the exercise with Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and the character in question is Mrs. Bennet. For the question "What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?" ask students not to write "Failing to marry off my daughters to rich men" but to craft a less obvious answer, one that could apply to other characters, perhaps something like "To have no control over whom people marry." You can see how, in these more abstract terms, the answer could plausibly have come from other characters in *Pride and Prejudice* (Lady Catherine de Burgh, for instance). Give students about fifteen minutes to complete the quiz on behalf of their character.

When they are done, break up the class into groups of about five students each. Have each group switch questionnaires with one other group. (If you have an odd number, just ask each group to hand off its quizzes to the group next to them.) Instruct groups to determine together which literary character filled out each questionnaire and to prepare justifications for their answers. This portion of the exercise takes roughly twenty minutes. Afterward, reconvene for a full-class discussion. Invite each group to share their best guesses and the reasons for those guesses, before the author of each questionnaire confirms if they got it right. (As a variant for this exercise, you can also split it across two class periods. In the first class, ask students to fill out the

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questionnaires before they leave. Make copies of the five questionnaires that are most difficult to figure out, and then distribute these in the following class, a complete set to each group.)

Once all the guesses have been made, use some of the following questions to lead discussion toward the real purpose of the exercise: discovering the structural logic of characterization. It can be useful to move from queries specific to their individual answers to those that address broader issues:

- What made the characters seem different from each other before we did this exercise? (Social status? Age?)
- What makes them seem similar after doing this exercise? (Internal motivations? Emotional states? Attachments to particular people or things?)
- Were there any characters who simply couldn't be mistaken for anyone else in the text, no matter how craftily you disguised their answers? What are their unique qualities? What is their role in the novel? Did this tend to happen with major or minor characters?
- Was any one question especially useful for illuminating underlying similarities or differences among the characters?
- Was any question particularly difficult to answer for your character? Was this because you didn't know the answer or because you didn't know how to disguise that it belonged to your character?
- What did this difficulty reveal about your character or about how the novelist characterizes this figure?
- Which characters were most frequently mistaken for each other? Why do you think these confusions happened? Did they tend to happen between characters you already associated with each other or between those that seemed to have little in common at first glance? What does this confusion reveal?

Bring things to a close by asking students to expand from what they learned about specific characters and the relationships among them to what they learned about the technique of literary characterization.

## REFLECTIONS

The quiz format of this exercise is inviting, and students enjoy the challenge of "fooling" everyone with their answers. But as students craft their responses, something counterintuitive happens: rather than becoming immersed in intense psychological profiles of their favorite characters, students begin to think about characterization in structural terms. Because the aim in filling out the questionnaire is precisely not to pretend to be one character but to hold two or more characters in mind at the same time (through the process of disguising their answers), students come to recognize the

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craftedness of character delineation, so often a transparent part of the reading experience. In other words, the larger aim of the exercise is to help students pull back from an uncritical absorption in the novel or too close an identification with any one character.

I often use this exercise when teaching Jane Austen's *Emma*. It gets students talking about how Austen delineates character and about the importance of differentiation in this process. Are characters in novels knowable only by their difference from one another, or are they knowable in other ways? What might it mean if we can't tell whether the questionnaire has been filled out by Emma Woodhouse or Robert Martin? We ran into this very question when one student filled out the questionnaire so cleverly that the class was evenly split on "whose" answers we were reading. In response to the question about "the lowest depth of misery," for instance, the student wrote that it would be "to lose the respect of Mr. Knightley." Everyone assumed that this answer must have come from Emma, and there was great surprise when it turned out to be Robert Martin.

Before doing the exercise, students had never considered the possibility that these two characters have qualities in common or that they might serve a similar structural role in the novel: to establish Mr. Knightley's status as community mentor. This led us to an interesting recognition of some of the other things these characters might have in common. Students mentioned their mutual interest in creating and maintaining a stable household, caring for the spectrum of social life that makes up Highbury, an attachment to Harriet Smith, and, more complexly, a relationship to social striving that can be difficult to define. Ultimately the questionnaire led us to think about how, for Emma, antipathy might be masking similarity, which brought us in turn to a broader discussion of a recurring dynamic in Austen: her characters tend to dislike those who share certain qualities that they also possess.

I have also used this exercise successfully with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Here, discussion often leads to the recognition that Walton, Frankenstein, and the Creature are startlingly similar. Several questions on the questionnaire bring these similarities to light. For instance, for the questions "What is your idea of earthly happiness?" and "What is your favorite occupation?," the answers given from the point of view of Walton, Frankenstein, or the Creature tend to emphasize a desire for learning. Before doing this exercise, students had not noticed how strongly all three characters were driven by the common motivation to acquire knowledge. But when we used the disguised "Proust Questionnaire" answers to explore what each character valued most, students often simply could not distinguish the novel's central male characters from one other. This conversation led to a larger discussion about how the genre of science fiction (for which *Frankenstein* is an important source text) tends to function through a nonrealist, mythological, or archetypal logic of doubling and mirroring.

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## PROUST QUESTIONNAIRE

What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?
—*To be separated from Mama.*

Where would you like to live?
—*In the country of the Ideal, or, rather, of my ideal.*

What is your idea of earthly happiness?
—*To live in contact with those I love, with the beauties of nature, with a quantity of books and music, and to have, within easy distance, a French theater.*

To what faults do you feel most indulgent?
—*To a life deprived of the works of genius.*

Who are your favorite heroes of fiction?
—*Those of romance and poetry, those who are the expression of an ideal rather than an imitation of the real.*

Who are your favorite characters in history?
—*A mixture of Socrates, Pericles, Mahomet, Pliny the Younger and Augustin Thierry.*

Who are your favorite heroines in real life?
—*A woman of genius leading an ordinary life.*

Who are your favorite heroines of fiction?
—*Those who are more than women without ceasing to be womanly; everything that is tender, poetic, pure and in every way beautiful.*

Your favorite painter?
—*Meissonier.*

Your favorite musician?
—*Mozart.*

The quality you most admire in a man?
—*Intelligence, moral sense.*

The quality you most admire in a woman?
—*Gentleness, naturalness, intelligence.*

Your favorite virtue?
—*All virtues that are not limited to a sect: the universal virtues.*

Your favorite occupation?
—*Reading, dreaming, and writing verse.*

Who would you have liked to be?
—*Since the question does not arise, I prefer not to answer it. All the same, I should very much have liked to be Pliny the Younger.*

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# Understanding Point of View

*Pamela Regis*

An exercise that teaches the mechanics of narrative point of view.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose one or more passages from a work of fiction—five sentences from any novel or short story will do, but a longer passage will also work—and ask the class to determine the point of view that the author has employed. Project the passage on a screen or distribute it in a handout. Have students point out the pronouns that help identify the point of view. Beginnings are particularly useful passages for this exercise, because authors must establish a work's point of view immediately. Also useful are passages that report the thoughts of characters.

Next, solicit from the students a list of all the *other* point of view possibilities the author could have employed, and list these on the board. For example, a paragraph written in third-person omniscient could have been written in third-person objective or third-person limited. Include the various focal character possibilities as well. For example, the focal character in a third-person limited point of view could have been a major character or minor one. Or the passage could have been written in the second person, which, although rarely used, is helpful in this exercise, the goal of which is to uncover all of the other possibilities that the author could have employed. Finally, the passage could have been written in the first person with, again, any focal character recounting the events.

Now ask the students, either singly, in pairs, or in small groups, to rewrite the passage in one of the points of view that the author did not employ.

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Assign each student (or group) a specific point of view. (If you have more students or groups than point of view possibilities, you can assign the same point of view more than once.) Students will have to figure out how to cut, supplement, or otherwise rework the details of the passage to follow the rules of the point of view they have been assigned. They should add or delete details in order to get as close to the original as possible while still observing the limitations imposed by the new point of view. Give students about fifteen minutes for this section of the exercise.

When the revisions are done, taking each revision in turn, invite the reviser(s) to present the new passage to the rest of the class. If possible, have revisers write the passage on a flip chart, display it on an overhead projector or via a document camera, or put it on a PowerPoint slide so that the whole class can see the rewrite.

Ask the class if the rewritten passage follows the rules of the new point of view. You can prompt them with questions: Have the pronouns been shifted appropriately? Have the rules of who is allowed to "think" in the new point of view been adhered to? Have limited or first-person points of view truly kept within the knowledge that the focal character could have had? Does third-person objective stay out of characters' heads? In first person and third-person limited, has knowledge that the narrator knows but that a given character cannot know been deleted or attributed to a character in a plausible way?

Then ask the revisers to explain a few of the changes they had to make in order to rewrite the passage. What was lost? What was gained? How has the overall impact of the passage been changed by the rewriting?

Finally, ask the class several questions: What has the *reader* gained or lost by the shift? What information does he or she now have that the original did not include? What information has been lost that the original did include? Ask students whether or not the original author chose the best possible point of view, given the work's focus and themes. If not, which point of view would have been more effective? Why? Repeat this sequence with the next rewritten passage. Allow roughly four to five minutes per student or group; in a fifty-minute class, for example, you can comfortably cover seven to eight rewritten passages.

For a variation on this exercise, have students prepare their rewrites for homework and bring them to the following class. This will eliminate the small-group discussion (unless you assign this as an out-of-class group activity) but will also give you more time to discuss the rewrites themselves during the class period.

## REFLECTIONS

The goal of this hands-on exercise is to help students understand the nature of point of view and the control that it exercises over every aspect of a work of fiction. The exercise makes apparent the decisions that an author makes in deploying a given point of view, as well as the extent to which a reader's

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information about the events and characters in a work of fiction is a direct consequence of the point of view that the author has chosen. This exercise also provides a good introduction to modernist and postmodernist departures from traditional point of view, such as stream of consciousness.

Any work of fiction will provide a passage for rewriting. Take, for example, Terry L. Tilton's extremely brief short story, "That Settles That." Here it is in its entirety:

> Tom was a handsome, fun-loving young man, albeit a bit drunk when he got into an argument with Sam, his room mate of just two months.
> "You can't. You can not write a short story in just 55 words, you idiot!"
> Sam shot him dead on the spot.
> "Oh yes you can," Sam said, smiling.

For this particular story, before I assign complete rewrites, I ask the entire class to identify the two instances of description that we need to delete to change the omniscient narrator, who can see into characters' minds and souls, into an objective one, who limits the narration to what can be known through the senses, particularly sight and sound. Omit "fun-loving" and "a bit drunk," which require knowledge of Tom's inner states, and the third-person omniscient narration becomes objective.

Then I ask groups of students to rewrite the story, extending it beyond the fifty-five-word limit if they wish, and inventing details, as long as they observe the rules of the point of view they have been assigned. Different individuals or groups rewrite the story

- in the first person, using Tom as the focal character;
- in the first person, using Sam as the focal character;
- in third-person limited, using Tom as the character whose observations, thoughts, and impressions the reader is privy to;
- in third-person limited, using Sam as the character whose observations, thoughts, and impressions the reader is privy to;
- in third-person objective, which prohibits the narrator from reporting the inner state of any character; or
- in second person, a rarely used point of view, but useful for this exercise.

Students quickly realize that rewriting the story using first-person narration from the point of view of the shooter, Sam, permits them fairly wide latitude in drawing Sam's character, and that Sam is very much a filter for the reader's perception of Tom's character, assuming that Sam characterizes his victim at all. When Tom narrates, the opposite is true, and students realize that conveying "Sam shot him dead on the spot" from Tom's point of view presents them with a challenge, which they typically overcome using an ellipsis. The third-person limited rewrites permit students to provide the thoughts of the focal characters, and rewrites typically include the motives of Sam and Tom.

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Third-person objective rewrites force students to confine the narration to the action only. (Raymond Carver deploys third-person objective point of view to chilling effect in "Popular Mechanics.") The biggest challenge is to rewrite the story in the second person, which provides an opportunity to discuss the difficulties posed by this point of view. (See "Videotape" by Don DeLillo for a fine example of a second-person narrator: "You know about families and their video cameras," DeLillo's narrator explains.)

For English majors, I follow this exercise with a paper assignment that asks them to assess the contribution of point of view to the theme of a given work of fiction. If you'd like to offer your class an extended opportunity to explore the ways in which writers deploy point of view, consider pairing Joyce Carol Oates's 1972 rewrite of Anton Chekhov's 1899 short story "The Lady with the Pet Dog" with Chekhov's original. Both authors employ third-person limited point of view. Chekhov uses the male protagonist as the focal character; Oates uses the female protagonist.

# Flip the Script

*Stephen M. Park*

An exercise that teaches point of view through creative rewriting.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy or moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class, optional after class*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *50 to 60 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose a passage from the novel or short story your students are reading and ask them to review it before coming to class. The passage should be a page or two in length, though slightly longer passages can work for take-home versions of the exercise. Stories told in the third person work well: Charles

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Dickens's *Hard Times*, Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Novels with first-person narrators work even better: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

At the start of class, project the passage on the board and ask students to discuss the point of view from which the passage or story is told. Who gets to tell the story, and why?

Now, it's the students' job to "flip" things around and look at the same story from another angle. Organize the class into small groups and tell them to rewrite the passage from the point of view of another character in the story. Give them at least fifteen minutes both to choose a character and to start writing, though this part of the exercise could easily run longer. When they've had enough time, have each group (1) identify the character whose point of view they chose (and why they chose him or her), (2) explain how the shift in point of view changes the understanding of the passage, and (3) read a little bit of what they wrote. (As a variation, you can also assign each group a specific character into whose point of view you would like them to rewrite the passage, or even assign the same character to all the groups.)

During the presentations (allow five to seven minutes per group), you may find that some groups struggle with the second task: although they have rewritten the passage in a provocative way, they are not able to articulate fully the significance of the changes they have made. If that happens, encourage the other groups to offer suggestions, or step in to point out how important the change is ("Rewriting the passage from *Benito Cereno* from Babo's perspective really makes clear how naive Melville's original narrator is"). Be sure to ask the students to reflect on why the author has made the narrative choices that appear in the original text in the first place ("Why has Melville constructed a narrator who misinterprets his surroundings while still allowing the reader enough information to come to other conclusions?"). The larger question to keep students thinking about during this exercise is this: if the reader of the original text were deprived of the narrative perspective that they have just rewritten, what is lost and what is gained?

This exercise can also work well if you invite students to insert characters from other novels or stories you've read in the course. For instance, if Stephen Crane's Maggie suddenly landed in the middle of Henry James's *Daisy Miller: A Study*, how might she describe the experiences of this other young American woman? In more-advanced courses, you might ask students to insert a literary theorist or historical figure as a character in the story and narrate from that point of view. How would Karl Marx narrate the visit to the flax mill in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*? How would Simone de Beauvoir narrate the opening pages of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*? There really are no limits to how you might have your students reimagine a piece of fiction.

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## REFLECTIONS

"Flip the Script" allows students to approach a text in new ways, think about reading as an imaginative act, and study the formal element of point of view. By rewriting a story from the perspective of a minor character, or by shifting the perspective from third to first person, students become more aware of the author's original narrative choices and the reasons behind them. This exercise is similar in approach to "Understanding Point of View" (see the preceding exercise) but allows for more creative latitude, works best with comparatively longer passages, and provides the option of working across literary texts.

In my Introduction to Literature class, students experimented with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's first-person short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by rewriting the beginning using a third-person narrator. Whereas Gilman's original narrator observes of her husband, "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage," without providing further details, I asked my students to imagine the scene more fully. What is John's laugh like? Is it a hearty laugh, a nervous laugh, or perhaps a condescending one? What was actually said between the characters? In their rewrites, students drew on different clichés of patriarchal husbands, and by discussing such attitudes and behaviors, they were able to understand more fully the meaning behind Gilman's phrase "one expects that in marriage." We then spent more time thinking about the narrative choices in Gilman's original text and the ultimate effect of leaving such scenes out. My students noticed how the narrator's presumption that such scenes go without saying tells us something about her worldview, thus adding to the richness of Gilman's first-person narrative.

Inviting in the students' creativity can also serve as an opportunity to challenge the text you are reading. Looking at a story from the point of view of a minor character or an invented one enables students to explore the gaps in the text and consider how presumptions about gender, race, or class have shaped the way the story has been told. When reading Sherman Alexie's *Flight*, for example, my students often notice how the novel's adolescent male narrator voices a number of patriarchal attitudes, especially in his descriptions of women. So when asking students to flip the script on this novel, I encourage them to rewrite a passage from the point of view of one of the stronger female characters we've seen in other texts, such as Paula Gunn Allen's "Deer Woman" or Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman." The result is a variety of new stories that leads to a great discussion of Alexie's novel. For instance, Allen's "Deer Woman" (itself a rewrite of a folktale) tells the story of two women who lure two sexist male characters away, not to their deaths but rather toward a chance for a renewed appreciation of strong Native American women. So, in writing a scene in which Allen's characters present Alexie's narrator with the same option to change, the question emerges: would he?

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This scenario has generated all sorts of student rewrites, ranging from an unrepentant narrator who fixates on the women's bodies to a more enlightened narrator who ends up chastising a fictionalized Sherman Alexie for the descriptions of women in his novel. These speculations about what the narrator would do always divide the class, and our conversation naturally moves from their creative rewrites to an analytical debate regarding Alexie's novel and the complexity of his characters, during which I make sure that the students support their claims about the narrator with evidence from *Flight*. To wrap up the class, I stress that just as Allen as a writer inserts resistant characters into her story, students as imaginative readers can challenge texts in similar ways.

This is an exercise that brings everyone into the conversation. Since it gets away from traditional modes of literary analysis, students can speak up in class without having to worry whether their insights into the story are "correct." Their rewrites themselves constitute creative critical acts, allowing students to make interpretive statements about the text by thinking about the author's narrative choices and by considering which perspectives are absent from the story. What's more, these rewrites can create some hilarious and memorable moments when they're read aloud, which may be why my students often refer to what they learned in this exercise months later.

In a follow-up to "Flip the Script," I have sometimes asked students to continue writing at home, further embellishing their rewrite of the story. Or I have had them write a short critical reflection that explains what their group's rewrite reveals about the original text or the technique of novel writing. In any case, this act of rethinking a text's narrative point of view helps students become more imaginative and resistant readers of fiction.

*I would like to thank Gretel Vera-Rosas for developing this lesson with me in a class we taught together.*

# First Paragraphs

*Abigail Burnham Bloom*

A first-day exercise in which the texts introduce themselves to your students.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *low*

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Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *first day*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *variable, from 20 to 50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

For the first day of class, type up (or cut and paste) the first paragraph of each work of fiction you will read in the course and arrange them on a handout in the order they appear on your syllabus. Limit the number of paragraphs to novels or major works of the course so that all can be discussed during the time allotted for the exercise. When class begins, distribute the handout or project it in the front of the room.

Ask a student volunteer to read the first paragraph. Then invite the class to offer their first impressions, posing questions such as these: Who is speaking in the paragraph? What seems striking or significant about it? How does the paragraph draw you in—or push you away? Next, ask students to make some predictions: What kind of story does this opening paragraph seem to be preparing you to read? What do you think will happen in this story? (When you pose these last questions, ask any students who may have already read the work to let their uninitiated classmates venture the predictions!)

Spend four to five minutes on each paragraph before moving on, as it's important to make sure students "meet" each one before the class is over. (Four examples might take just twenty minutes; ten examples a full fifty minutes.) Encourage students to comment on whatever elements seem striking, including voice, tone, diction, imagery, vocabulary, sentence structure, and theme. Remind them that there are no incorrect responses—they are simply giving initial impressions. When students venture answers, ask follow-up questions to encourage even closer reading: Where do you see that in the paragraph? Does this remind you of other works you have read? As you introduce more paragraphs, ask the students to note similarities and differences among them. After all the paragraphs have been introduced, ask the class to compare them. Do they show a progression or a change of emphasis?

Often the first paragraph will reveal concerns of the author in an oblique way that you can help your students realize. Bring up ideas that would suggest what an author might be trying to accomplish in the first paragraph and what an astute reader might be able to comprehend. You might ask: Based on what you've seen, how do authors use the first paragraph of a work to interest a reader in continuing to read the work? At the end of class, take a straw poll: based just on the opening paragraphs, which work would the students most like to read, and why?

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## REFLECTIONS

"First Paragraphs" encourages students to think about how narratives draw in their readers, an appropriate activity for the first day of a class on fiction. It also introduces, in a low-key and enjoyable way, some of the analytical terminology and methods to which you'll return throughout the semester. For students new to literary analysis, after all, starting to read a new work of fiction can be intimidating. The start of a novel like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can provide the context for discussing the use of letters or diaries within fiction. Students need to be reminded that even if the start seems slow, if they stick with the novel, it will become comprehensible and even exciting. A text such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* may be less daunting to students later in the semester after a "First Paragraphs" introduction to the style and themes of the work. And all students look forward to finding out whether their initial predictions about a work are correct.

This exercise also introduces students to the rudiments of close reading, and shows them how to listen and respond to the opinions of their classmates from the start of the semester. As they discuss the works and their reactions to them, moreover, students will become more comfortable not only with the literature but also with your style of questioning. For this reason, it's important to model the methods that you'll use during the term in this first class. For example, if you want students to see that they will be encouraged to volunteer or that they will be called on and asked for their opinion, be sure to call on students during this first class.

Depending on the class and its structure, this exercise might yield different kinds of results. In a course devoted to a single author, for example, the first paragraphs might highlight the range of, or shifts in, an author's concerns or techniques. In a course devoted to Jane Austen, students can see a similarity of theme and tone but differences in emphasis. In a period survey class, in which the syllabus is organized chronologically, the progression of the paragraphs may show the developing concerns and literary styles of the era itself. Works in a history of the novel course may reveal a progression from an impersonal voice to a more psychologically penetrating approach. If the students don't notice these patterns, try drawing their attention to them. Regardless of the course, the exercise will also help you assess the reading abilities of your students and gain familiarity with the expectations and assumptions they will bring to the works on your syllabus.

In a summer class on Victorian novels, we read the first paragraphs of *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Dracula*. Many students were confused by the openings of *Wuthering Heights* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. After reading the first paragraph of *Wuthering*

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*Heights*, one student guessed that the narrator was a woman who was in love with Heathcliff. When he had finished the novel, he recounted his confusion over the start and reflected that the author had intended the reader to be as disoriented as the narrator. Another student commented that he wondered why such a long first paragraph as that of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* made no reference to the title characters and contained so many difficult references (Mr. Utterson is described as "austere with himself" and states, "I incline to Caine's heresy"). Many students worried that *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* itself would be lengthy and off point, which it definitely didn't turn out to be. Students believed correctly from the opening of *Great Expectations* that the novel would be about Pip's discovery of his own identity and enjoyed seeing how the fact that his name is a palindrome accentuates that theme. With the first paragraph of *Dracula*, students caught on immediately to the differences between the East and West that are established, and they enjoyed that the novel began as a diary entry, just like *Wuthering Heights*.

During the comparative discussion, students were impressed by the diversity of opening structures. They came to see that what they think they know about a work because of cultural references or previous readings in high school may not be true when they read the novel in college. The opening paragraphs also brought out what may be difficult for students in reading Victorian novels—a different vocabulary from ours today, a tendency to verbosity, and a multitude of characters and plots. In the straw poll students voted for *Great Expectations* as the novel they most wanted to read, because the first paragraph was direct and clear. However, at the end of the semester, when they voted again, they chose *Dracula* as their favorite novel, mainly because of its subject matter and plot, which they found "so modern."

As you study each new text in the semester, ask students if the work matches their expectations from having read the first paragraph on the first day of class. (If not, what changed?) At the end of the semester, you can do a parallel exercise with "last paragraphs." Are the tones, images, and themes that are most important in the work reflected in the final paragraphs of the book? What's particularly striking about the ways these narratives bring their stories to a close? Conclude the semester by letting students vote for their favorite closing paragraph—or even their favorite read of the semester.

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# Script Doctor

*Diana Fuss*

A high-energy exercise for thinking about narrative closure.

Genre: *any, especially fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *in class*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *40 to 50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose a novel, short story, or play with a curious ending—an ending that is complex, unsatisfying, disturbing, controversial, unnerving, or simply surprising. Script doctoring for narrative closure can be performed on almost any fictional or dramatic text and even on poems like Robert Browning's dramatic monologues ("My Last Duchess" or "Porphyria's Lover"), with their strong narrative thrust and complicated, demented speakers. I find it works best, though, for novels with sad or tragic endings: George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*.

If the passage you have selected is short, begin by asking a student to read it out loud; if the passage is long, invite students to refresh their memories by skimming it quickly. Then identify some general problems with the ending—interpretive questions that have preoccupied scholars for years, or simply things that have long puzzled, worried, or intrigued you. If there is time, pause and ask students why these problems and debates might be important, or whether they have questions and concerns of their own about how the text comes to rest. This preliminary discussion might take ten minutes or so.

Next, invite students to think like script doctors: if they were charged with rewriting the ending, how might they conclude it differently? Remind them that script doctors are those unsung, uncredited writers whose primary job is to retool specific elements of scripts that need fixing—be it plot,

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dialogue, characterization, tempo, or theme. Give students roughly five to six minutes to jot down one or more proposals for an alternate ending. Students may have several ideas: ask them to pick one. Then ask them to share their ideas with the class as a whole. Make a first pass around the room, so everyone has a chance to talk about at least one of their doctored endings. Consider using a one-minute time limit so that everyone has a chance to speak and no one gets too carried away. And leave a few minutes at the end of the round for comments and conversation. For a small class this portion of the exercise should take roughly twenty minutes.

If your class is medium sized, it is better at the outset to divide students into small groups of three to four. Ask them to generate together one or more new endings within a ten- to fifteen-minute time frame. I find that even when done collaboratively, "Script Doctor" works most efficiently if students still have a moment to generate some of their own thoughts first, so recommend that each group take a contemplative moment before they begin discussing ideas. When the groups are done, ask each group to share what they agree is their best or favorite idea first. If there is time, you can go around the room a second or even a third time to solicit more endings. Leave time for other students to respond, or even vote as a class on the ending they like best. For this group work and class discussion, you'll need at least thirty minutes.

To bring things to a satisfying close, take at least ten minutes at the end to circle back and reconsider the logic, purpose, or value of the story's original ending in light of its many possible alternatives. What have the new endings made more legible about the original text? What crucial elements of the original might be lost in the alternative endings considered as a whole? Is there anything about the original ending that no one dared to change? Why or why not?

## REFLECTIONS

Script doctoring provides a high-energy (and often hilarious) way to talk about larger questions of narrative form and literary endings. Teaching closure is more challenging than it looks, posing any number of literary conventions to unknot: plot, character, structure, framing, sequencing, foreshadowing, denouement, resolution, suspense, irony. Working with students' doctored revisions as points of contrast immediately helps to sharpen both local questions of authorial choice (why does the author choose this incident, this image, this word, this tone?) and larger questions of narrative closure (What constitutes a successful ending? What changes when an ending changes? Why does a story conclude the way it does?).

The results can be fascinating, as I discovered teaching Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, a novel that famously concludes with the heroine swimming

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languidly out to sea. While students usually wish to debate the meaning of Edna Pontellier's ambiguous act (choice or fate? action or passivity? triumph or tragedy?), an exercise like this can yield much fresher results. The alternate endings students imagined were notably diverse: Edna returning to the beach, Edna swimming across the channel, Edna washing up on shore, Edna dreaming of swimming, Edna painting the scene. But the one thing every doctored script had in common was the return of Edna's body (dead or alive) to land.

This strong desire to put the body back on terra firma, and back into the text, returned us to what we had not yet understood about the body of the novel itself—namely, its gradual dematerialization of language, its wavelike and oceanic structure, and its subtle narrative drift. An ending that at first seemed so disappointingly vague suddenly made perfect sense. And the novel's narrative problems actually appeared more like literary strategies—a fitting finale to an exercise all about endings.

There are several variations for a script-doctoring exercise like this one. For longer classes or seminars with an emphasis on in-class writing exercises, you can really kick things up a notch. Consider asking students to rewrite the text's final paragraph. Or invite them to craft a short epilogue to the tale. Or, if you have already spent some time on narrative exposition, invite them to draft the first paragraph of a proposed sequel. Once again, be sure to allow enough time for students to read their efforts aloud and to comment on one another's literary imaginations. The point of this exercise is to augment and amplify the method of close reading with the practice of creative revision.

# Alternate Endings

*Melina Moe*

A comparative exercise for thinking about endings.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *midterm or late*

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Writing Component: *optional in class*
Close Reading: *medium to high*
Estimated Time: *25 to 30 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose the closing passage of a short story or novel whose ending exists in multiple forms, either in print or manuscript. The selection could be a couple of paragraphs or up to a chapter in length, depending on how much time you allot for the exercise. Good candidates for this exercise include any fictional work for which the author drafted more than one ending: Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (focusing on the "shadow of parting," compare the original ending to the 1863 edition), Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (with multiple scripted endings, this novel facilitates a good discussion about what Cortázar meant when he called it a "counter-novel"), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (compare the first British edition to the first American edition), Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (he wrote *forty-seven* different endings!).

After a first day of discussion about the published version of your fictional work, surprise students by circulating the alternate ending. Ask them, as they read it for the next class meeting, to attend to how the two endings affect their interpretation of the narrative as a whole. Let them know that when class reconvenes, you will be inviting them to choose which ending they prefer. If the alternate ending is not very long, and if there is sufficient time, you can also perform this exercise in the same class period, without sending them home first.

Frame the ensuing discussion according to your needs. If your primary focus is narrative plotting or structure, divide the class into two (or more) groups, assign each a different ending, and give the groups ten minutes to work together to generate arguments in defense of their endings. Then reconvene and let each side argue why their ending may (or may not) be suggestive, successful, or otherwise suitable. For texts with multiple endings, like *A Farewell to Arms*, use multiple groups to collaboratively argue for (or, if they like, against) their particular assigned ending. Allow ten minutes for the actual group debates.

If your primary focus is the precise stylistic techniques of narrative closure, consider using pairs instead. Have students study more closely the language and tone of the two different endings, being sure to list the precise ways the wording or mood of the ending changes from version to version. Then have each pair choose their most interesting finding to report back to the class as a whole. The pair version of this exercise also takes roughly twenty minutes of class time.

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To wind up this exercise, take a bit more time to pose some larger questions: What kinds of problems does each of the endings resolve? What uncertainties do they raise? Why do you think the author finally settled on the ending he or she did? Did he or she make the best decision?

## REFLECTIONS

"Alternate Endings" presents narrative as a site of interpretive complexity, for both readers and authors. While it emphasizes close reading, it also shows students how a single passage (or the omission of a single passage) can change the meaning of the entire narrative. For example, my students have been genuinely surprised by the ending to the first British printing of *Moby-Dick*, in which it remains a mystery how Ishmael, and thus the story of the *Pequod* itself, escapes the whirlpool. This exercise introduces students to various techniques of narrative closure and facilitates discussion about how endings can focus and guide our interpretation of works that can in other ways be quite imposing.

For works that have been the subject of editorial controversy, this exercise works particularly well for thinking about the circulation of a text from author to printer to reader. For example, I frequently teach the two different published endings of Nella Larsen's *Passing*. Larsen's modernist novella describes the social and psychological upheaval following an unexpected meeting between two friends whose paths had diverged many years before when one of them left the black community to "pass" as a white woman. One version ends with the ambiguous breakdown of one of the story's main protagonists, Irene Redfield, after her friend Clare falls to her death from a Harlem apartment building; the other concludes with an anonymous police officer offering the closing words about the accident. Both endings were printed in the same year (the text changed between the second and third editions), and the surviving paratextual archives provide few clues as to who, or what, is responsible for the change. It is unclear if Larsen oversaw the alteration, if the editorial staff pushed for a different ending, or if the change was the product of contingency in the typesetting or publishing process. I always provide students with details of the manuscript's preparation and tell them that Larsen's original ending was on a single plate of stereotype that might have been accidentally dropped in the third edition.

The American Women Writers paperback edition of *Passing*, from Rutgers University Press (packaged with Larsen's *Quicksand*), includes an editorial footnote that claims the change of endings makes little difference, so I begin there, separating students into small groups and asking them if they agree or disagree. To give students a flavor of what it is like to edit a text, I ask each group to generate their own footnote: if they were editing an edition of the novel, what would they say about the two endings? In one of my classes,

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one group focused on narrative style, arguing that the original version of Larson's ending was an experiment in using first-person perspective to alert us to unreliable narrators. Another group defended the revised ending and described how the appearance of a police officer at the conclusion of the book framed what was otherwise an intensely psychological tale in a specific historical moment of urbanization and American racial conflict. Both groups said that whatever footnote they wrote about Larson's ending would color their interpretation of the novel as a whole. It is a short leap for them from writing editorial footnotes to talking about how these interpretive claims can guide a reading of major themes in the novel.

# The Great Debate

*Jay Dickson*

An exercise that analyzes the wider ethical and cultural stakes of crucial conflicts in literary texts.

Genre: *fiction or drama*
Course Level: *introductory or intermediate*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *any*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *medium*
Estimated Time: *50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose an extended, complex, structurally important debate from a fictional or dramatic literary text, a debate in which choosing sides or determining the eventual resolution is neither simple nor immediately clear. Examples might include the famous *agons* of the Greek tragedies (the disagreement over Polynices's burial in Sophocles's *Antigone*, or the Carpet Scene in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, wherein the title character argues with his wife Clytemnestra about whether he is as despotic as she would make out), the debate in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* between Victor and his creature over whether to

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create a bride for the monster, or the Wilcox family's argument over whether to fulfill the request of Ruth Wilcox's penciled will in E. M. Forster's *Howards End.* You might also choose a dilemma that takes place mostly within a character's mind (such as Hamlet's reluctance to kill his uncle) or even an important *implicit* textual conflict (such as whether Clarissa Dalloway made the right decision about whom to marry years before).

Identify the debate you wish students to examine. If you like, you can alert students beforehand by asking them to pay especially close attention, as they read the assigned work, to a particular chapter, scene, or section. On the day of the discussion, tell the class that the purpose of the exercise is not to hash out who is "right" in the debate but rather to identify the terms of the debate and, most importantly, to explore why these terms matter.

Prepare a handout with the following eight questions:

1. What are the main positions taken in the debate?
2. What is the main core argument of each position?
3. Is the core argument for your position refuted, and if so, how?
4. Who speaks for your position, and for what reasons?
5. What cultural, social, political, or economic interests does your "side" in the debate represent? Which values are really being debated?
6. Why does the author place the debate where it is within the text? What kinds of structural purposes does this placement serve?
7. If the decision is adjudicated, who acts as judge? What interests does the judge represent?
8. Are there other positions that the debate allows for but that are not pursued or staged?

After circulating the handout, begin with a full-group brainstorming discussion of no more than ten minutes, simply to get the lay of the land. Limit this portion of the exercise to the handout's first two questions only: what are the main positions in the debate, and what appears to be the main argument behind each position? Quickly sum up the students' answers on the board, choosing a large column for each of the major positions so everyone can see the general terms of the debate.

Once you have the positions on the board, break the class into small groups—anywhere from three to five students per group. Assign each group a "side" in the debate. (If there are more groups than sides, assign multiple groups the same position.) Give each group no more than twenty minutes to discuss the remaining six questions on the handout. Let them know that, while they might touch on all sides of the debate if they wish, they should attend most closely to the side they have been assigned.

For the next twenty minutes, have each group report back to the larger class. As groups delve more closely into each side of the debate, continue to fill out the information on the board, recording and defining each position

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with the detail and nuance students provide. If you like, you can ask groups to hold off on discussing the last two questions on the handout until each individual position has been more deeply explored. Then, at the end of the exercise, ask students to explain how the conflict is ultimately decided and how the stakes of the conflict might be at play elsewhere within the text. Talking through alternative outcomes also will help students understand why the author structured the text as she or he did, and will clarify the writer's core thematic or ethical commitments.

## REFLECTIONS

This a great exercise for getting students to understand the ethical wagers of literature. The guided questions lead students to grasp more fully the specific underlying beliefs, codes, customs, or ideals that a text analyzes and contests. And the focus on opposing or multiple sides encourages students to explore and examine a real diversity of values, especially in cultures or eras of which they are less informed. Such an approach seeks to attune students historically to the tremendous ethical possibilities for literature as a whole. This exercise highlights why the humanities matter.

Usually, when confronted with an important and difficult conflict within a text, students immediately wish to judge who is "right," a decision based on their own experiences and emotions. For example, when I did this exercise with Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and focused on the debate over whether Edmund Bertram and then Fanny Price should participate in the amateur theatricals, my students initially found it unimaginable that the two should not participate, given how casually such activities are treated today. But asking students to spell out the terms of the debate by rehearsing Fanny's position against performing *Lovers' Vows* against Mr. Yates's position for it, they ultimately were able to see why amateur theatricals might be viewed as dangerously socially destabilizing in late eighteenth-century and Regency society. My students also noted that the challenge to static patriarchal authority represented by the theatricals is mounted later in *Mansfield Park* when Maria Rushworth leaves her husband for Henry Crawford. When I finally asked the class to brainstorm alternative resolutions for the conflict not proposed by the text, they came up with two especially clarifying questions: Could the young people gathered at Mansfield Park have chosen a safer play to perform, or were any theatricals socially dangerous without Sir Thomas Bertram's explicit permission? And, did the Bertram children and their friends actually *need* to choose as risqué a play as *Lovers' Vows* in order to release their pent-up rebellious energies?

Although this exercise works particularly well with novels and with plays, I have also successfully tried it with at least one poem marked by moral conflict, Homer's great epic *The Iliad*. The heated debate in Book I between

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Achilles and Agamemnon before the assembled Achaeans as to who deserves the Trojan woman Briseis as a prize concubine brings out in students strong emotions and a bit of initial confusion. Many don't fully understand why the warlords are fighting or why this particular conflict should begin Homer's poem, while others wonder why Briseis should herself be denied a voice in the disagreement entirely. By assuming sides and talking through the actual terms of the debate, my students began to understand more clearly the complex role of women in ancient Greek culture. Students were also able to discover and delve more deeply into competing models of leadership at play in the positions taken by Agamemnon and Achilles. My students, for example, noted that the shame-based warrior ethos is staged most strikingly when Agamemnon publicly tells the mighty warrior Achilles—with nearly fatal consequences—that the latter's anger and arguments "mean nothing" to him.

Working through this debate, which transpires at the beginning of *The Iliad*, also prepared the students well for discussing other contesting values elsewhere in the poem, most particularly the two different models of heroism represented by the epic's major combatants: Achilles (the figure of the older war-based culture) and Hector (the representative of the emerging order that values domestic life). "The Great Debate" proved to be a great way to highlight how ancient Greek culture routinely worked through its cultural values in agonistic form, whether in the Socratic dialogues, in the political debates staged in the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, or in the conflicts enacted in the tragic Greek dramas.

## For more exercises that can be used to teach stories, try these:

*Specific relevance*

Read, Reread, Close Read (Discussions)
Reverse Entropy (Discussions)
The Blow Up (Essentials)
The Cut Up (Essentials)
The One-Liner (Essentials)
Let's Get Heretical (Poems)
Dramatic Monologue (Poems)
Talk Show Host (Plays)
Introduction to Genre Fiction (Genres)

*General relevance*

The Sixty Second Game (Discussions)
Fishbowl (Discussions)
Put the Question (Discussions)
It's Time We Talked (Discussions)
Debate (Discussions)
Leader, Skeptic, Scribe (Discussions)
The New Title (Essentials)
The Descriptive Word (Essentials)
The Common Thread (Essentials)

*(CONTINUED...)*

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# CANONS

The exercises in this section pull back even further than the ones in "Genres," inviting students to think about literature as literature (what counts?), about the role of authors (how do they matter?), and even about syllabuses (why read *this* instead of *that*?). Many are icebreakers or first-day exercises, designed to get students thinking about some of the assumptions they may have brought to a course on literature in the first place. All the exercises encourage reflection on the larger questions that underlie discussions of literary canons: what belongs, what doesn't, and why?

Do we know a work of literature when we see it? The first two exercises ("What Is 'Literature'?" and "Is This Book Literature?") let students grapple with this question by literally handing them texts to inspect, compare, and debate. The next two exercises ("Putting a Face to a Name" and "Literature Class Band") turn from the matter of the text to the figure of the author. How does one's sense of an author—including his or her age, or gender, or reputation, or race—shape expectations about the status or value of the literary texts that author produces? The last three exercises ("Judge a Book by Its Cover," "The Blank Syllabus," and "Build-A-Canon") use your own course syllabuses to prompt discussions about the ways canons themselves are built and rebuilt, shaped and reshaped, by scholars and readers alike. After trying one or more of these activities, your students will likely never look at a syllabus, an author, or the text in their own hands the same way again.

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# What Is "Literature"?

*Christopher R. Trogan*

A first-day exercise that asks one of the most basic questions in a literature class.

Genre: *any*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *first day*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *low*
Estimated Time: *45 to 50 minutes*

## EXERCISE

In preparation for the first day of class, assemble a number of different "texts" from a range of printed media. Include traditional literary examples (select passages from novels, plays, or poetry, each on its own sheet of paper; try to include excerpts from both canonical and noncanonical texts), as well as nontraditional items, such as an advertisement, an informational brochure, a train schedule, a musical score, or a photograph. If you wish, the traditional examples may be from your own syllabus, but they do not need to be.

In class, put your students into small groups and distribute one example to each group. If you have a small class, you can give each group more than one example. Ask each group to decide whether its item is a work of literature, and why. While all students must contribute to the discussion, one student in each group must take notes and another student must report to the class. Announce a set amount of time (ten to fifteen minutes is usually sufficient) to arrive at a response and a rationale.

Once the groups are ready, reconvene the class and collect the examples. Project each example in the front of the room as the student reporter offers the group's position, analysis, and defense. If you don't have an overhead projector or screen, you can ask each group to hold up the example or pass it around the room. For each example, establish a dialogue between yourself, the group, and the rest of the class: What criteria did the group use to determine whether its example is a work of literature? Does the rest of the class agree with these criteria and with the group's position?



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After you have moved through each of the examples (you can consider timing them: a few minutes each), extrapolate to larger questions: Are the criteria used to define "literature" static or fluid? If the former, who defines these criteria, and what are they? If the latter, can't anything potentially count as "literature"? Where, and how, do you draw the lines? What are the implications of all this for someone taking a "literature" course?

## REFLECTIONS

This exercise works very well on the first day of class. Students do not expect to be confronted with such a question—one they often assume is predefined but quickly discover is much more open and complicated. However, the nature of the exercise allows them to explore the topic lightheartedly and build a sense of teamwork. They quickly get to know each other's personalities by the way each student responds to the question (aesthetically "conservative" students are likely to argue against the photograph or train schedule as literature, while more aesthetically "liberal" students are likely to argue for it), so it also works well as an icebreaker exercise. Indeed, I always include a photograph—in which I am pictured—as one of the examples. During group discussion, I choose this example last and use it to move into an informal introduction of myself to the class. They realize that their professor is a person, too!

"What is 'Literature'?" is particularly suited to introductory classes, and works with syllabuses that include primarily canonical texts, noncanonical texts, or a mixture of both. Including excerpts from both canonical and noncanonical texts in the examples you give out can help students think about gradations of "literary" status even among the works they decide count as "literature." I typically begin the exercise by stating, "This is a literature class, but what is 'literature'?" This helps students realize that unlike the definitions of many other disciplines (psychology, accounting, medicine, law), the very definition and discipline of "literature" is up for discussion. This recognition is eye-opening and empowering: students understand that they have the power to question the status and value of everything they will read during the semester and that this questioning is crucial to any literature course. In short, it prepares and excites them for the challenges to come.

For example, in one class I distributed a musical score of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a Nike sneaker advertisement, Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," the first paragraph of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," a comic book, a train schedule, and a photograph taken at my recent family reunion. I asked each group to argue whether their example was "literature," based on specific criteria that they were to develop. The arguments that the groups offered were based on

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interesting criteria: whether the example contained "language," whether it was "fictional" but also expressed something "true," and whether there was something "aesthetic" or "artistic" about it. One group even noted that their example was a work of literature because it was "intertextual." These arguments also led naturally to discussions of what these terms mean.

I found that the line between "literature" and "not literature" was most difficult to draw when the example involved something informational or utilitarian or when the example contained no words (for example, the visual or musical examples). In this particular experiment, the students ultimately deemed all the texts "literature" except for the family reunion photograph and the train schedule. What was most important, of course, was the process, which left students with an appreciation not only for the immense difficulty of defining what literature is but also for the valuable questions about truth, fiction, and art that such an endeavor provides.

# Is This Book Literature?

*Lydia G. Fash*

A hands-on exercise that encourages students to consider the label "literature."

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *early or late*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *low*
Estimated Time: *variable, 20 to 45 minutes*

## EXERCISE

This exercise invites students to think about how their reactions to an unfamiliar text are often framed, if not predicted, by cultural assumptions about what constitutes "literature." "Is This Book Literature?" works best in classes that include at least one noncanonical text or a text from a stereotypically

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to expand the canon. After our fruitful discussion, students left the class both interested in reading Jewett and more aware of the social and critical forces that label a work "literature."

For a variation on this exercise, instead of asking students to bring in a single book, bring all the books on your syllabus to class and distribute one to each group. For their individual text, let each group decide the answer to the question, Is this book "literature"? Then let groups make a case to the class for or against their volume. Or consider combining this exercise with another in this section, "Judge a Book by Its Cover," which focuses specifically on book jackets. Or follow up with "How to Read a Bookstore" (in the "Genres" section), which invites students to investigate how the book is marketed online or in bookstores. Books labeled "classics" have a different feel from those labeled "best sellers" in either venue. The purpose of "Is This Book Literature?" is to ask why this is so and to debate, as professional literary critics often do, whether or how the distinction is meaningful.

# Putting a Face to a Name

*Elizabeth Leane*

An icebreaker that encourages reflection on the figure of the author.

Genre: *any*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *small to medium*
Semester Time: *first day*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *none*
Estimated Time: *variable, 20 to 40 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Find online images—artworks or photographs—of well-known writers. These may be writers whose work is to be studied in class; who are identified with the period, nation, or movement being studied; or simply whose names students will likely recognize. The number of images should be half

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the number of students in the class. Print out the images, ideally in color, without any identifying labels. On separate pieces of paper, print out in large type the names of the authors. Depending on what is being studied in your class, you might want to include authors whose images are likely to provoke discussion for several different reasons: because they are particularly iconic (Shakespeare); because they question assumptions students make about identity based on names (George Eliot); because the image reveals well-known contextual associations (a group portrait of the Brontë sisters); because the work of the author in question was or is particularly closely tied to his or her visual image (Byron or Oscar Wilde); or, conversely, because the author is famously private or reclusive (Emily Dickinson, Thomas Pynchon, or J. D. Salinger).

On the first day of class, distribute images and names randomly. Ask the students to find the person holding the name they think belongs to their author's image, or vice versa, and to introduce themselves. If you have an odd number of students, you can either make this a feature (for example, the label "Percy and Mary Shelley" could be matched up with separate images of the authors) or simply hold an image or name yourself and wait to be approached. Ask each pair to spend a few moments discussing with each other why they think they are the right match of author and image. It should take no more than ten minutes to complete this matchmaking portion of the exercise.

Then ask each pair to introduce one another to the class and, together, to explain why they think the name and image match. When all pairs are done, identify any mismatches and ask the class as a whole to suggest solutions. The class can then discuss what they have learned in the process, particularly through the mismatches. Why were some images easy to connect with names and others not? What factors did students use in making their identification? All told, this exercise can take as little as twenty minutes or as long as forty minutes, depending on class size.

## REFLECTIONS

This exercise works best for classes focusing on canonical literature. It is intended as an icebreaker activity on the first day of the semester and is most suitable for classes that cover not just the literary text but the literary author as well.

As an icebreaker, the exercise is effective because the students usually require several encounters before they find their matching image or name. The pairs themselves have a sense of joint achievement (if correct) or joint merriment (if wildly incorrect). In this sense, it is vital that you create a relaxed, lighthearted atmosphere in which mistakes are expected and do not reflect negatively on the students. I have found that a good way to do this is to

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confess to a mistaken assumption I have made in the past about an author based only on his or her name—the more embarrassing, the better.

"Putting a Face to a Name" requires that students reflect on the construction of authorial identity and the role of celebrity in literary culture. In thinking about the factors that led to their pairing, students usually point to clues such as their own cultural capital (they will probably recognize images of Shakespeare); automatic connections they make between the author's person (gender, dress, pose), their name, and their work (a seemingly demure mobcapped Jane Austen); or historical context, including the medium (photograph or painting, the style of a period).

By carefully selecting images, the instructor can nudge the class toward a particular issue. A good example comes from a recent class in an introductory literature unit that I regularly teach as part of a team. One of the images provided was Cecil Beaton's 1956 photograph of T. S. Eliot, in which three slightly different exposures are superimposed. The students did not automatically identify Eliot, but once the match between image and name had been made, they were intrigued by what the multiple exposures might signify. Those who had already read the assigned text, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," tentatively pointed to the sense of an incoherent, fragmented self the poem evokes, which piqued the other students' interest. This led to discussion of the use of poetic personae and the extent to which a poetic voice can be identified with the author. The students also raised the question of age, pointing out that in the photograph provided, Eliot is an elderly man, although some of his best-known poems, including "Prufrock," were written when he was in his twenties and thirties.

This exercise, then, can stimulate discussion of how particular authorial images come to be circulated and perpetuated and how such portraits relate to the reception of an author's work. You can ask questions that encourage students to go beyond face value in their understanding of literary celebrity: for example, whether reclusiveness is a refusal to create an authorial image or merely another means of doing so. For classes focusing on a particular period, movement, or national context, you can lead discussion toward the assumptions students bring to the class, how they have been formed, and how they might be questioned. Depending on the level at which the class is working and the time available, you may like to introduce the notions of the "intentional fallacy" and the "death of the author" and to explain why they do not make the figure of the author redundant in analysis of literary texts and cultures. You could distinguish between the author as the assumed source of meaning in a text and the author as an important paratextual and epitextual consideration (while avoiding these technical terms). In my experience, the conflation of these things is a common source of confusion for beginning students.

Because this is an icebreaker at an introductory level, however, you should not try too hard to direct the class toward a particular end. The exercise

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should be generative of questions rather than answers and above all should be fun, allowing students to relax and shed inhibitions about the texts and authors they will encounter in their studies.

# Literature Class Band

*Claire Cothren*

A first-day exercise that encourages students to think critically about literary canonization.

Genre: *any*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *first day*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *none*
Estimated Time: *45 minutes*

## EXERCISE

On the first day of class, show students the iconic cover art for the Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which pictures the band members in front of a collage of more than fifty other artists, actors, athletes, philosophers, celebrities, and various historical figures. (Copies of the album sleeve can be found in many places online, including the Beatles' official website, http://thebeatles.com.)

Explain that the collage features images of individuals the band members liked and admired—figures they would enjoy having in attendance at one of their concerts. After identifying a few of these individuals and commenting briefly on their various credentials, ask the students to imagine that they have the opportunity to create a "literature class band." They should consider whose work they would most like to study in a literature class and then select a dozen or more of these figures for inclusion on a class "album cover."

Allow students five to ten minutes to discuss their ideas in small groups. Encourage them to share their favorite authors or works, and then reconvene

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the groups to solicit nominations. (For a class size that is medium or large, consider asking groups to agree on just one author to nominate, with backup candidates at the ready if another group chooses the same author.) If the classroom is equipped with an instructor's computer and access to the Internet, you can easily create, on the spot, a makeshift album cover by copying and pasting to a Word document images of the authors whom students identify. (Alternatively, you can ask a tech-savvy student or two to do the job.) If the classroom is not equipped in this way, you or the students can simply list the authors on the board.

After displaying the names (and, if possible, images) of at least a dozen literary figures, ask students to talk about the "album" they've created. Questions to consider: Are these figures ones you are likely to encounter in a traditional literature classroom? Why (or why not)? Do they represent "true" literature? "Great" literature? Who gets to decide? Also: What do these figures have in common (nationality, gender, genre, race, time period)? After a closer look, do any figures seem to be missing or underrepresented? Why might their omission be considered problematic? Do literary figures have to be poets, playwrights, or novelists, or can they include other kinds of writers? This entire exercise takes roughly forty-five minutes, though you can adjust the timing by limiting or expanding the number of authors included on your album cover.

## REFLECTIONS

"Literature Class Band" is a fun first-day activity that allows students to get to know each other by discussing their favorite literary figures. While many enjoy discovering that they share an interest in certain authors, they find even more compelling the ensuing class discussion about how to define literature.

*Sgt. Pepper* is a useful starting point for this discussion because once students observe the relative diversity of the figures on the Beatles' album (Bob Dylan, Shirley Temple, Sonny Liston, James Joyce), they also tend to think about their literary preferences in more inclusive terms. From there, students can begin to consider questions of literary canonization—whether, for example, the work of young adult fiction writers, rappers, or graphic novelists is (or should be) studied alongside the work of novelists, playwrights, and poets. The visual component of the exercise is particularly important because it helps students identify canonical trends or aporias (like the predominance of men), not only on the *Sgt. Pepper* cover but also (often) in their own nominees, as well as in the literary canons from which many class syllabuses typically draw.

When I used this exercise in an introduction to literature course, students were quick to nominate "classic" Western novelists and playwrights for their band, including Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Hawthorne, Poe, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Dickens, and Austen. They also offered up a few of their

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favorite contemporary authors—J. K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer, and Suzanne Collins. However, it was with some hesitation that they ventured to list "alternative" choices such as speechwriters (Martin Luther King Jr.), lyricists (Kanye West), or screenwriters (Quentin Tarantino). A discussion of why the class felt more reluctant to name some band members than others not only helped students to reach conclusions about which texts are already widely canonized in the West but also encouraged them to think critically about trends in genre, style, and periodization. In examining the "album cover" that we created, students further noted the overwhelming representation of white British and American men. We were then able to discuss what factors contributed to this canonical trend as well as the need and potential for change.

Although I have had great success with this exercise in general literature surveys, it could also work well in genre courses (classes devoted to the gothic, science fiction, mystery, detective fiction, or romance) and in contemporary fiction survey courses, where canons have yet to solidify.

# Judge a Book by Its Cover

*J. Michelle Coghlan*

A first-day exercise that encourages students to consider the visual cues of literary canons.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *first day*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *none to low*
Estimated Time: *35 to 40 minutes*

## EXERCISE

Choose two or three books (they may be popular or canonical) and cart into class as many different editions of them as you can. (A suitcase to carry them all makes a nice stage prop.) Any book with a range of covers will do,

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though books with long, diverse, or controversial publication histories work best: James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, or Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Should it prove useful to you, many books have critical works dedicated to their publication history (for example, Cathy Davidson's "The Life and Times of *Charlotte Temple*: The Biography of a Book" examines dozens of editions of Susanna Rowson's best-selling seduction novel). The exercise itself, however, does not require such scholarly apparatus; it can be conducted simply by relying on available editions in your library.

Divide the class into small groups, distribute different editions of each book to each group, and ask the students to do what they have always been told not to do: judge a book by its cover. If you are not able to bring physical copies of the different editions themselves, you can instead bring photocopies of the individual covers, whose images can usually be found online. Color copies work best, especially for paperback editions. Place one cover on each page and then distribute to the different groups.

After you distribute the books, provide students with a list of guiding questions: What kind of image, typeface, or layout has the publisher chosen for each cover? What does the cover seem to say about the kind of story this book tells? Does the edition dive right into the tale or does it include a scholarly introduction or preface? Taken as a whole, what kind of audience does this book seem designed for, and how do you know? If you have brought physical copies of the books, encourage students to look at the back covers and tables of contents too. This group portion of the exercise takes roughly fifteen minutes.

Next, reconvene the class as a whole and allow another fifteen to twenty minutes for groups to share their findings. What was the most interesting thing they discovered? What surprised them the most? Which of the editions scream "canon" and which keep readers guessing? Be sure to leave yourself enough time at the end to make a few salient general comments—about books, readers, canons, and commerce.

## REFLECTIONS

I like to do this exercise on the first day of the semester, introducing as many books on the syllabus as possible. Not only is it a nice icebreaker for students to get to know each other, but it also gets them excited about all the texts they will soon be reading. The purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to consider the ways that literary texts change over time, shaped by forces of reception and canonization. The history of book covers can reveal much about shifting literary contexts. Trends in scholarship or the marketplace can even give old texts new life.

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When I tried this exercise in a course on American best sellers, students quickly observed that Raymond Chandler's 1940 hard-boiled detective novel *Farewell, My Lovely* takes on a different aura when we encounter the Vintage reprint edition emblazoned with a single white manicured hand with red polished nails, and wrapped in the signature pink and purple shades of chick lit. Others marveled at the unexpected disparity between an image of a languid hunter perched atop a tree in the highbrow 1914 clothbound edition of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* and the big-haired beefcake swinging from vines above a beleaguered (and barely dressed) damsel in distress from the late 1980s Ballantine version they had been assigned. Still others dissected the scholarly apparatus included in the Penguin edition of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, an element they noted had been conspicuously absent from the other paperbacks on our syllabus.

There were many questions generated during our discussion: Can such wildly different-looking texts even be called the same book? Could the stature or "street cred" of *any* given text be diminished or reinforced by the way it is packaged for its imagined readers? Does every book cover ultimately work to calibrate the demands or expectations we might have of the book inside it, whether we realize it or not? These queries set the stage for the way that we later encountered (and reconsidered) every other best seller on our syllabus. But the most tangible takeaway of this exercise was that our course was grounded from the outset in my students' newfound insight that book covers might color the way we approach a given text and that those cultural cues have changed over the life of a novel. In other words, this exercise did not just open new avenues for approaching familiar texts: it also shed light on the wider cultural context that had shaped each book's ever-shifting material form. It turns out that sometimes you really can judge a book by its cover.

# The Blank Syllabus

*Chris Walsh*

A do-it-yourself exercise that invites students to complete your syllabus by selecting some of the course readings.

Genre: *any*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *moderate*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*

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# STYLES

If the preceding exercises focus on words in all their weighted particularity, the exercises in this section place words in their dynamic relation to one another. How words are collected and combined, paced and punctuated, sounded and sequenced all add up to what we call "style." What makes a style distinctive? How does style convey meaning? Why do authorial styles change? Exercises on tone, voice, and diction attune students to the subtleties of literary style, from the grand style to the plain style and all the innumerable writing styles in between.

Where and when does style matter most? The opening exercises in this section locate style variously at a text's beginning ("First Things First"), middle ("Dramatic Echoes"), and end ("The Forgers' Circle"). Classifying, comparing, describing, and even performing literary styles teach students to attend to the formal and oratorical complexities of sentence structure and syntax. Imitation emerges as an especially popular method for offering students an inside view into what it means to be a literary stylist. The three imitation exercises included here ("One-Sentence Pastiche," "Imitate This," and "Convolution") invite students first to imitate a line, then a paragraph, and finally an entire poem. This section comes to a full stop on one of style's least discussed but most important elements: punctuation ("Punctuation Matters").

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# First Things First

*Naomi Milthorpe*

A dynamic group exercise using famous first lines to encourage close reading.

Genre: *fiction*
Course Level: *introductory*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *first day*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *high*
Estimated Time: *15 minutes*

## EXERCISE

It's the first class of the semester. Maybe it's the first literature class your students have ever taken. Either way, you want to make sure that they begin the year with close reading at the front of their minds. Using famous first sentences, this exercise is designed to stimulate detailed attention to a text's form and content, and especially its style.

Choose a selection of striking first sentences from novels and list them on a single sheet of paper. The handout is for students to use and take away at the end of the class, so allow plenty of writing space around each sentence. Three to five sentences are ideal to keep the class engaged for the duration of the exercise. Be prepared either to project this same sheet on an overhead or PowerPoint or to copy it on a whiteboard or blackboard; choose a method that will also let you mark up the sentences for everyone to see.

Begin the class by outlining the idea that thinking critically about literature is not simply a matter of understanding story and character but also of paying attention to how language makes meaning. Emphasize to students that this exercise isn't a test of their knowledge or a tool for working out the plot of the novel. Ask the students, with your brief introduction in mind, to take a few minutes to examine each sentence. Encourage them to use their sheets to make note of the things that stand out, that seem strange, that confuse them—anything at all. Then, beginning with one sentence, initiate a full-group discussion. (If you have time, you can also separate students into groups or have them work in pairs before reconvening as a group.) Start



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simply: ask them about aspects of prose style and narrative form first, before introducing questions about content and generic markers.

Possible questions can include the following: What sort of words does the sentence use? What do you notice about punctuation and syntax? What is the sentence's tone? Can we tell anything about the novel's setting (its time or place), characters, theme, or other narrative elements? Does the sentence seem to be written in a particular genre?

As the students offer answers and ideas, annotate the sentences as you project them (encourage students to do the same on their sheets). Keep the discussion fast paced to prompt students to think on their feet and trust their instincts. This exercise need not take more than fifteen minutes, though the more examples you provide, the more intensive the exercise.

## REFLECTIONS

"First Things First" works best as a short, sharp introduction to close reading and as a way to get new students talking and working together as a group. It has worked well in my courses to get past the initial class silence and really focus on skills development and critical thinking from the first moment the students enter the classroom. Providing the printed sentences on a sheet encourages close textual work, while using an overhead or PowerPoint fosters group cohesion.

In the past, I have used this exercise in introductory courses and always chosen sentences from novels that are not on the required reading list, in order to separate discussion of form from the baggage of plot or character analysis. But this exercise could also work in a more specialized or advanced course, using sentences from the genre or historical period you'll be examining.

Some novels with good discussable first sentences include Toni Morrison's *Beloved* ("124 was spiteful"), Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ("You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' but that ain't no matter"), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* ("In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since"), and of course Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"). For its pithy imperative tone, I especially like to use Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* ("Call me Ishmael"). And who can resist, for its pleasurable blurring of the axiomatic and the ironic, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* ("It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife")?

Canonical texts are especially suitable candidates for inclusion on your handout. For example, I always include *Pride and Prejudice* up front on my list, since some students may know the novel or film adaptation and feel

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more confident in their readings, but be sure to ask them to try to forget about Lizzie and Darcy for a minute and think instead about tone, irony, and language. George Orwell's opening sentence in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ("It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen") prompts immediate reflections about style. Students tend to notice that the sentence is fairly unobtrusive ("bland" is the word they often use), but they also note that the two halves of the sentence seem symmetrical, as if the second part mirrors the first. Particularly attentive students will usually counter that the second half of the sentence has a few too many syllables—something seems "off" in Orwell's rhythm (you can ask students to consider whether this is a fault in the writing, or a clue about lack of balance within the narrative). Students usually also offer ideas about time (April and springtime, yes, but more important, how clocks striking thirteen is weird).

By the end of the class, your students should leave with greater confidence in their first impressions and with more experience in reading closely to gain critical distance. They will also leave with a sheet of paper covered in annotations, a good model for the kind of marginalia skills we expect of close readers. Finally, the exercise provides a handy reference point for the rest of the semester; whenever you want to turn to detailed close-reading exercises on passages or lines of text, you can remind your students of the importance of "First Things First."

# Dramatic Echoes

*Hollis Robbins*

A playful exercise in understanding literary style through dramatic interpretation.

Genre: *drama*
Course Level: *any*
Student Difficulty: *easy*
Teacher Preparation: *low*
Class Size: *any*
Semester Time: *midterm*
Writing Component: *none*
Close Reading: *medium to high*
Estimated Time: *variable, from 20 to 60 minutes*

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