

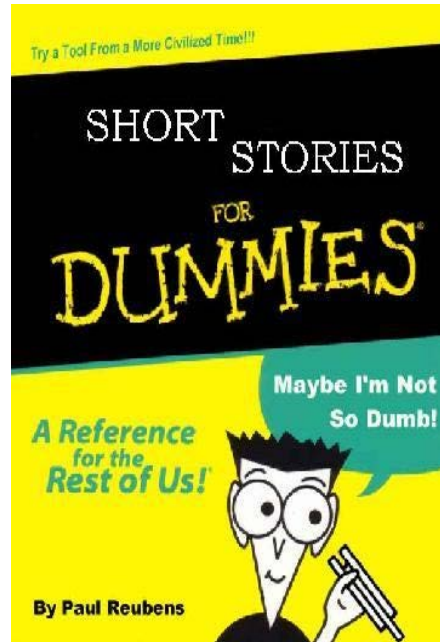
Composition 13: The Art of Short Fiction

Essential Question: How do writers create short fiction that reflects life?

PROMPT: Write a short story in which a character must deal with a conflict.

Focus Skills

1. 4.5 Pages Final Copy Calibri or Arial 12
2. Spelling
3. Show What Your Characters are Like
4. Follow a Pattern of Conflict
5. Write 2-Page or Longer Average Scenes
6. Follow Point of View Rules
7. Develop Setting with Sensory Details
8. Write Effective Dialogue



Mega-Tips for Content Development

- Write from 1st person point of view and personal experience. Everyday events and real life often make better high school-level stories.
- Do not turn you characters into “cartoons”—that is, try to portray them as real people with real human complexities and real lives—and real names. Fiction tries to hold a mirror up to reality and portray real life—make this your aim.

Planning Stage 1: Showing What Your Characters Are Like 5 points

Ever since we were in kindergarten, it has been more fun to show than to tell. What was true in the grade school game is also true in the fiction writing game—our audience has more fun when we show them what our characters are like instead of spoiling the game by telling, telling, telling. Below are three *tell* statements. Using sensory images and descriptive details, let’s rewrite these sentences to *show* instead of tell.

- Joe looked both cool and a bit dangerous on the lobby bench.
- Elise was nervous as Joe approached her.
- Mrs. McCready’s dog sure put the *ug* in ugly.

Now, identify a major character in your story. It need not be the main character, but it can be.

Planning Stage 1: Showing Character Traits

Character's name: _____ 5 pts

Appearance

Write one descriptive sentence about your character's appearance or manner of dress that shows something about his/her personality. *Example: Emma's fishnet stockings seemed held together by more than a few nail polish patch jobs.*

Actions

Write one descriptive sentence about your character's actions, postures, facial expressions, or gestures that shows his/her personality. *Example: Emma paused before the display window at Victoria's Secret, concentrating intently, not so much on the splash of pink merchandise but on her reflection in the glass.*

Words

Write one line of dialogue that shows something significant about your character's personality. *Example: "Know what I've concluded about men, Jessie? They're sort of like elephants. Some are okay to look at, but you wouldn't want to own one."*

What Other Characters Say

Write a line of dialogue spoken about your character by another character, a line that again shows something about your character's personality. *Example: "Yah, I seen her. Bit of a door-knob, that girl. Everyone gets a turn."*

Attitudes/Personal Tastes & Thoughts

To show your character's attitudes, complete the following questionnaire from his/her pt. of view.

- Most valued personal possession:
- Most important person in his/her life:
- A pivotal event that has shaped his/her life:
- A favorite activity or pursuit:
- What most annoys or angers him/her:
- His/her biggest regret:

Planning Stage 2: Follow a Pattern of Conflict

5 points

Author Kurt Vonnegut has observed that in every good story, a character *wants* something but struggles to get it because of some type of *obstacle*. The character tries to *take action* to get what he wants but at the same time he is *acted upon* by forces he cannot always control [bad luck, bad timing, other characters, nature]. Whether he gets what he desires is not important, only that he *realizes something about life or self or changes in some way* after the dust of the conflict has settled.

What does your main character *want*?

Why can't your character easily get what he wants? In other words, what's the *obstacle*?

What action will your character take in the story to deal with his problem—and how might outside forces beyond his control complicate his efforts?

What might your character end up realizing about life or about himself (or how might he change in some way) as a result of his struggles?

Planning Stage 3: Scene Writing Guidelines

5 points

Below, map out who will appear in each scene, what will happen, and where it will happen. As you do so, try to limit your story's time frame to no more than a few days, possibly even one day, or one hour even...a slice of life, not a whole life's story! Scene 1 should hint at what the conflict is and no scene should ever be less than 2 pages handwritten...don't rush it with 10 short, choppy scenes. It's better to write one carefully detailed scene.

Scene 1

Where It Happens:

Who's In It:

What Happens (include detail of how conflict will be introduced):

Scene 2

Where It Happens:

Who's In It:

What Happens:

Scene 3

Where It Happens:

Who's In It:

What Happens:

Porcelain
by
Breanna Cameron

The feeble old man pulled a picture from his desk. It was a picture of a girl whose long, dark hair was caught in the wind of a summer evening. She was smiling. Not with her mouth, but with her soul. She was propped on the railing of a balcony overlooking an ocean that cast a white shimmer on her face. Everything about the setting of the picture was lovely, but it could not radiate the woman's beauty.

"She's so lovely, the man said aloud, not to anyone in particular. The words were spoken for a crowd of phantoms surrounding him. They were always surrounding him, always watching him, his personal audience. These phantoms, they never spoke. They just stared at him, testing his sanity. Menacing him.

The man was no more than five- feet tall. Shrinking had taken its toll on him a bit early. As did graying. He was only sixty years old, and already he appeared to be at least seventy-five. This aging effect often resulted in people treating him like a child and whispering about his demise with pity in their tone. This he despised.

He got up from his desk. He had work to do. He was a mortician.

He also had a secret trade. He told no one of it. Only the phantoms knew.

He did not enjoy putting makeup on the dead. Putting them in their caskets and crossing their arms, making them look like they were simply sleeping. Putting the rouge on the cheeks he viewed as almost degrading to the dead. They were dead; therefore, they had no blood to rush to their cheeks to make them seem embarrassed or youthful. He did not see the point in making

the dead look alive, but it was simply a trade, and many dubbed him the best. He was the best at making the dead appear to be sleeping.

That's a title to be proud of, he thought sarcastically.

He trudged over to the corpse on which he was required to cast the illusion of life. This particular person was shot in the jaw, which meant that the face of the man was of no use to his hobby. The man's jaw was not completely intact. Only fragments of the bottom jaw were holding it to the top jaw. It was much like the tiniest string holding a button to a coat. This made it almost impossible to work with; therefore, he had to remove the jaw.

The family would never know this. They would think that he simply fixed the man. The mortician seamed up the dead man's fake face. He constructed and applied a fake bottom jaw to the skull and covered it with a fake skin constructed out hydroglycerine, which gave the skin texture, and tetrahydromonoxide, which bonded with the other chemicals to make the skin appear firm.

People rarely took into consideration all of the work the mortician had to do to make a loved one look asleep rather than murdered. They did not know the weight on one's soul that the job had as well. The mortician could only tell himself for so long that they are inanimate dummies, until the realization resurfaced that they were formerly living people with living histories.

The families always gave him a picture of the deceased so that he would make the person look like the living thing. In these pictures, the subjects were always smiling. Sometimes they were even with their families or children, and in every picture, the person looked very full of life. This bothered the man. The families knew that

there was no way possible that the mortician could make the person look like that again. He could not open their eyes and make them sparkle or make the person smile authentically. Above all, he could not make a dead person radiate life.

It was impossible.

On to the next corpse, the man thought as he walked over to the body lying on a metal table.

He pulled the white sheet off of the body, revealing one of the loveliest faces he had ever seen. Her face was not severely wounded from her rough encounter with death. She had the most amazing cheek bones.

Perfect.

The mortician walked to the end of the table and started wheeling her out of the room. This girl made him think of the lovely woman in his picture. His daughter. She was even lovelier than the corpse he was wheeling through the hallway of his building. He stepped into the elevator, which was large enough for only him and the operating table. This particular elevator ride always seemed much longer than it was.

Whenever he decided that he could not take any more suspense, he went to the bottom floor and bagged her body. He drove his car around the back of the building and put the body in his trunk. He was taking her home.

It was not very often that he got a face so perfect to work with. This girl truly was lovely. He took her to his little workshop and placed her on the table in the center. The workshop was a small room with no windows. It was full of objects that the average person would not be able to name. Things like little scalpels and scrapers and odd needles for stitching. Everything was always so small. This made it easy to capture every detail of the face. The mortician gently washed the girl's face and put wax over any cuts

or scrapes she had encountered while fighting off death. The face had to be completely smooth.

He started concocting a substance out of white powder, water, and other chemicals that he added in small doses. Eventually the mixture thickened and he started spreading it over the face of the girl. He was making a mask.

A porcelain mask.

The next day, he went back to the funeral parlor and did what he was expected to do. He had three faces to perfect today. None of the faces were particularly hard to make presentable. All of the bodies were elderly people who died of natural causes. Sometimes, he found it exasperating to fathom how many people died in a single day.

His audience of phantoms had one new addition this morning: a very pretty girl with amazing cheek bones.

His soul felt heavy. He felt his losses. Earlier that year, his daughter had been murdered. The picture in his desk was the best memory he had of her. She was never all that close to him. He was sure it had something to do with the emotional strings attached to his profession. Who would want to admit to having a father who was a mortician? The only reason that he had this career was because he was good at it, and everyone knows that whenever you're good at something, the paycheck shows it. He made plenty of money to buy her everything she needed to be lovely. The clothes, the shoes, the handbags. This he knew nothing of, so he would simply give her money, and she would take it from there. Above all, he loved how pretty she had been. She had the perfect face, the perfect hair, the perfect smile. His daughter was perfect. It was such a shame that she was not alive anymore.

Often he lamented that the picture of his daughter made for better company than his daughter ever had. He once walked into his home to find her stealing money out of the vault.

Whenever he asked what she was doing, she responded, "I'm taking money from you," and walked away.

Often he told himself that it was simply because she was a teenager and had a lack of a motherly figure in her life. This was not the case. She was simply rude, all of the time. He found it hard to believe that something so lovely could be so hateful. However, he knew that he had in some way molded her into the monster she was. Maybe he was not attentive enough, for he often chose making masks over playing dollies.

Whenever he went home that night, he felt sick. Not physically, but mentally. He felt like he was going to crack. Like the phantoms' staring had gotten to him. His mask was not yet dry; therefore he couldn't take pleasure in forming it. He made himself a very elaborate meal to fulfill his longing need for bliss at some point in this day. However, the steak tasted of ash and the wine tasted just the slightest bit sour. The only solution was to go to sleep, with the help a few tranquilizers. His dreams were always too haunting to sleep through without chemical aid.

The next day, he took the body of the girl back and did his work. He went home late that night. He did not feel like being alone. The dead weren't exactly the best company, but they were company, nonetheless. Sometimes, he felt like they were listening to what he had to say. Many a corpse took his deepest secrets to their graves with them. Today, he was talking to an elderly woman. She looked like the kind of woman that would speak softly and call him *young man*.

Whenever he walked into his house, the first thing he did was go to his workshop. Tonight, the mask would be dry, and he would complete it.

At this point, the mask appeared to be a blob of strange white consistency. He would have to sand it down to the point where he could simply carve a quarter of an inch away from the facial mold, then he would sand it more precisely, and eventually buff it. He did this all very well. This was his true talent. He loved making the masks, more than anything. He wanted to show the world his creation. He had given up so much to make them. He loved them.

Once he was finished with the mask of the pretty girl with amazing cheek bones, he went to the room in which he stored his handiwork. This room was more of a showroom than anything. Glass cases lined the walls, all displaying the masks that he found to be particularly lovely. The lesser masks were on shelves, which covered the walls like bookshelves. In fact, this room had once been a library, but it had never held books. This was a library of faces, faces of the dead.

He was going to set this girl's right beside his absolute masterpiece. The mask he had just created was almost as good as the one he had made earlier that year.

As he went to sit the mask on a stand, his elbow bumped something. It was the slightest of bumps, but it was enough. His masterpiece tumbled to the floor, shattering. He dove in a vain attempt to catch it.

"No. No. No. Not this mask. Not her!"

The phantoms were laughing at him.

"This mask was beautiful, made from the only beauty in my life." The phantoms were mocking him. "This mask was everything!"

The phantoms were pointing at him, laughing. "I killed for this!" The phantoms were hysterical at this point. They would not stop.

"I killed my daughter for this!"