

## **Think Like an Author”: A Creative Writing Workshop** by young adult author, Adrian Fogelin

Creative writing begins before a single word is found. The story exists first as pictures in the imagination. Writers call it “visualizing” the story. Non-writers call it daydreaming, and they’re right. A writer may just be someone who can daydream longer and more clearly than most. The first step in writing any story is to see it—and hear it, and smell it—to create the experience in the mind. Writing the first draft of a story is the process of describing that inner vision. Later, when it is time to edit the work, the critic takes over. The critic is the consciousness that looks at the writing and says, “Too many adjectives, and by the way, bud, where’s the conflict?” But that comes later, after the story is told. All stories begin as a disciplined daydream.

I developed the following exercises in classrooms and libraries to introduce kids to the vivid, exciting world of creative writing—to make them better daydreamers.

### **Pre-writing exercise:**

Have your students close their eyes. Eyes closed, they will see clearer pictures as you lead them with questions. Tell them: You are standing in front of your house. Can you see its color, the hedges in front of it, the windows? Does the air have a smell? Is it warm or cold? Is it raining or sunny? Is it nighttime? Walk up to the door and reach for the knob. Let yourself in. Does the door make a sound as it opens? What color is the room you walk into? What furniture do you see? Now listen. Can you hear someone inside the house? What are they doing? Note: Be sure to pause between the questions.

This exercise can go on as long as you like; it has a hypnotic effect. The idea is to work the imaginative muscle that allows your students to “see” the worlds inside their heads and, instead of drifting along as is typical of daydreaming, to take charge and direct the daydream. End the exercise by walking them into their bedrooms. Have them describe the thing in the room that they “see” most vividly. If the description lacks detail, prompt them: What color is the spine of that book? What is on top of the dresser? Do this orally so your students hear each other’s answers, and “see” each other’s daydreams.

### **Story ingredients: Character, Plot and Setting**

Storytelling is like making a cake. Certain basic ingredients are required, but they can be used in different proportions. An action-adventure story may be heavy on plot, but light on character development. A romantic story might concentrate on character. A horror story expends lots of words on creaky doors, drippy blood, and moonless nights; all of which are components of setting. In the following exercises we’ll learn about, and use these basic story ingredients.

### **The First Ingredient: Character**

Character is my favorite ingredient. Most of my stories grow organically from the characters I’ve chosen. So how do you get new writers to create convincing characters? It is often best to do it orally, and work as a group at first.

### **Exercise: Build a Character**

**You'll need:** Go to Goodwill or your friends' and family's closets and gather an assortment of clothing items (I like shoes best—I use them almost exclusively). Each article of clothing will be the starting point for creating a character.

Note: If you don't want to own and store thirty pairs of shoes ask each student to bring a pair in the day you plan to do the exercise. Be sure to stress that you want variety and that older shoes work best (they look as if someone is wearing them). Forget to give these instructions and you will get thirty pairs of sneakers.

**Do the Exercise:** The first time you do this exercise, do it as a group and let the responses be oral, not written. In this way your students can wade into the process. Show the group something that belongs to the potential character, say a pair of shoes, a shirt, a hat, and go from there. I usually make the oral version brief, then allow each student to select an item of clothing, which will be the basis for building their character. Answers to questions like the following are jotted on a piece of paper. I emphasize that this is being written for the writer's use; it is not intended for the reader.

Here are some sample questions you might ask:

1. What sex is our character? (Some articles of clothing can go either way). For the following questions we will assume we are creating a female character.
2. How old is she?
3. You have seen what she is wearing on her feet. What does the rest of the outfit look like? (We advertise the kind of person we are by our choice of clothing. Imagine a character who wears pink tennis shoes and then one who wears combat boots. Same person? I doubt it.)
4. Choose three words that describe your character's build. (Point out that a thin character can be: skinny, lanky, lean, slender, willowy, gaunt, scrawny. Each of these adjectives has a somewhat different connotation.)
5. What words best describe the way your character walks? (You might start by having them replace the word "walk" with a verb that suits the character such as: strides, limps, shuffles.) Does the character look down as they walk? (Confidence or lack of confidence shows in simple body cues.) If the group is creating the character together I ask for a volunteer to demonstrate how the character walks. (Acting things out helps the writer to internalize the character.)
6. Imagine that you are inside your character's living room. Name three things that you see. (Every living room contains a sofa. Is your character's sofa plaid, stained, leather?) Name three things you hear inside your character's house; three things that you smell.

7. Where does your character go most days? If she has a job, what is it? If she is a kid, what kind of student is she? What subjects is she good/bad at? What does she want to grow up to be?
8. What is her favorite color and why? (example: A heavy middle aged character might like navy blue because it makes her hips look slimmer).
9. What do people like about her? What do they dislike about her?
10. Who does your character live with? (You'll be surprised by how many of your students' characters live alone.)
11. What does your character want or need more than anything in the world. (I point out to students that it is very rarely a thing. Most often it is related to relationships or personal aspirations. I also point out that wanting or needing is quite often what causes a story to happen.)
12. What is your character most afraid of? (It is hardly ever spiders. It is usually things the death of someone in the family, losing a job, or being alone. Like desire, fear can also provide a powerful plot engine for a story.)
13. What did she eat for breakfast? (This seems like a trivial question, but a breakfast that consists of a donut and Coca Cola says something very different about a character than a breakfast of oatmeal and orange juice.)
14. What is the worst thing she's ever done?
15. Does she use good grammar? (I call this the "ain't" test. If your character uses ain't you know something about her education and family).
16. What kind of music does she listen to?
17. What does your character have with them at all times? (It may be something useful like a wallet or cell phone, or something habitual like cigarettes or gum, or something sentimental like a locket from a grandmother.)
18. If you were telling this character's story, what will change in the course of that story?
19. Name your character. Don't have your students select a name for their character until they've got a clear idea of what that character is like. Like naming a new baby, picking a name for a character is surprisingly important. It should fit the person you are inventing. Would you name a super-hero Elmer, or a rocket scientist Bambi? I don't think so. The name and author selects helps to shape the character. Does a character need a long or a short name? Does the name reflect the character's ethnic heritage, or even the character's age? Hazel, Ethel, and Mildred were once popular names for girls. You don't meet many girls with those names today, only old ladies.

Does the character have a nickname? If not, it's okay. Some people named "Robert" are called "Robert." That tells you something about the character too.

20. What is there that you have figured out about your character that I haven't asked? (Here you will get details like, "My character is an orphan," or "My character collects stamps.")

**The questions can go on forever...** You'll know when you've asked enough. The students will start getting twitchy. When you are done asking questions your students will have a list, not a story. Have them flip the paper (tell them that what they have written so far is the stuff behind the story). A writer always knows more about a character than appears in the story. Writers are selective. They choose what to tell based on what the reader needs to know to understand and enjoy the story, but the writer must know much more than he or she tells.

**Time to write the start of the story:** On the clean side of the sheet of paper have the student write the opening of the story about the character they have just created. They will have to decide where the character is the first time the reader meets them. Most stories begin with the character in a very typical place, for example, a kid who loves to play soccer will be on the field; or else they begin with the character in a place where something important is happening, for example, walking down the aisle on their wedding day. When your writers make that choice they have selected the setting. Be sure to remind them to use all the tools at their disposal when they write:

Is the character alone the first time we meet them? If not, the writer has introduced some of the other characters who will appear in the story. If other characters are in the opening, dialogue is a tool the writer can use to reveal what the character is like.

Can the reader tell in those first few paragraphs what the conflict at the heart of the story is going to be? Letting the reader know the "problem" early is part of setting the hook.

Remind your students to use all the senses. There is nothing like sound or smell to make the reader feel as if they are part of the scene.

The setting can be used to explain how a character is feeling. In the real world it rains whenever it feels like it. In stories, cues such as weather, season, or time of day usually tell something about the character's state of mind.

What you are trying to steer your writers away from is simply restating the list. Say the character is a fat lawyer named Jerry. The opening sentence, if you simply restated a few items from the list, might be: Jerry was a three hundred and ninety-seven pound lawyer with blond hair and blue eyes. A more interesting opener might be: No one knew why lawyer Jerry Knight was such a fat man. He never seemed to consume anything but black coffee. But in the middle of the night when no one was with him, he stood with his head in the freezer and shoveled Rocky Road straight from the carton.

Read your class a couple of successful story openings and discuss the many jobs being done by those first few paragraphs.

### **Exercise: The purse**

**You'll need:** A purse and an assortment of objects which you will reveal one at a time as you pull them out of the purse.

**Do the exercise:** First, you will have the group evaluate the outside of the purse. What does the purse itself tell you about the character who owns it, i.e., it is purple plastic, it probably belongs to a kid, or, it is alligator, it is probably expensive and therefore belongs to someone with money. Next, open the purse and take something out. With each object they will make conjectures about the character. Things to put in the purse can be obvious like: makeup, a wallet, cell phone, keys; or not-so-obvious like a cut-off hospital bracelet, a pacifier, a can of cat food, an invitation, a grocery list, a wrapped present. Just talking through the aspects of the character is a good exercise. You will notice that your students will disagree about the meaning of the bag's contents. If so, it is useful to have each student write about the character they see.

### **Exercise: The Name Game**

Instead of beginning with something belonging to your character, you can start with the character's name.

**You'll need:** A deck of character name cards. I'm afraid you have to make the deck yourself. Index cards work fine, but be sure you laminate them. Print one fictional name on each. My deck includes: Leroy Coleman, Jeremiah Pitt, Latoya Johnson, Birdy Maclane, Henry Chang, Lisa-Marie Petit. Make sure that you have about an equal number of male and female names. Include names from a variety of ethnic groups. With the help of a phone book, or the spines of books in your school library this doesn't take long.

**Do the exercise (group):** This exercise is quick and simple. It demonstrates that characters are the particular invention of authors.

Have someone in the workshop make a random selection from the deck of character name cards and read the name aloud to the group (say, for example, Lila Barrett). Explain that each student is to make up a character named Lila Barrett inside their heads, not sharing their personal "Lila Barrett" until all the questions have been asked. If they are young you can get them to close their eyes, if they're older they will be way too cool. Whether their eyes are open or closed, I ask questions about the character, repeating the character's name regularly. What kind of pet does Lila Barrett have? Is she popular? What does Lila Barrett do in her free time? Students think, rather than verbalize their answers, so that many different "Lila Barretts" are taking shape. Pause between questions to give students time to work on their mental pictures of Lila Barrett. Every now and then I ask, "Are you beginning to see Lila Barrett?" "Seeing" the character is an important step in getting to know a character.

After your last question have several students describe their version of Lila Barrett. Sometimes I start by saying, "How many of you have a Lila Barrett who is under twenty?" By alternating

descriptions from the under twenty, and the over twenty characters, I get a real variety of characters, some young, some old—students think that anyone who is over 20 is old. Again, it works fine to do this one orally.

**Do the exercise (individual):** Have each student draw a card of their own from the deck. Again, ask a series of questions, then have each student write a compelling story opening.

**Exercise variations:**

Let your students make up their own character names. They can't come up with any? Writers have that problem too. One source writers use is cemetery headstones. Some of the best names in the world belong to dead people. But there's an easier, more portable source: the phone book. Be aware there are a few pitfalls in letting the students invent their own names. It can slow the exercise down, and, given free rein, young writers tend to invent characters who are too much like themselves—only older and with drivers' licenses. Girls' imagined characters are often cheerleaders with cool boyfriends. Boys seem to prefer convicts or ex-cons, murderers or other unsavory types. If you see that happening you might want to make all felons off-limits. There also seems to be a taboo against inventing a character of the opposite sex, especially for boys. Drawing a card from the deck takes care of that. While a boy would never make up a character named Mabel Madison, he'll deal with her if he draws her card.

**Exercise: What's in Your Pocket?**

This exercise is still exploring "character" but it's beginning to bridge to the next story element, plot. It can be used after the student has created a character by doing one of the previous exercises, or it can be a character starter on its own.

**You'll need:** Small, pocket-sized objects. Collect objects from the mundane to the downright strange. Objects in my bag include: A fishing bobber, matches, a crayon, a feather, a thimble and thread, an ID bracelet that says "Steven", a Greek drachma, a chunk of amethyst, a small glass vial, a shard of Paleolithic pottery, a raccoon jawbone, a piece of coral, a Gatorade Energy Bar, breath mints, a candle, a large marble, a glue stick, a barrette, a baby food jar lid.

**Do the exercise:** Keep all your pocket objects in a box and bring them out one by one, saying what they are, describing them a little. If your students have already created characters, have them raise a hand when they see an object that is appropriate for their character. When a hand goes up, give the kid the object. This can get very exciting, kind of like an auction. Some students hold out until they've seen everything, so don't worry if there are no takers for a while. More than one student can write about each object. What if a student doesn't find anything they want in your bag of tricks? Tell them to make an object up. If they have not created a character already you can spread the objects on a table and let them choose or walk around the room and hand them out yourself.

Have each student write a couple of paragraphs, in the voice of their character, explaining why this object is in their pocket. They might tell where they got it, and what they plan to do with it, or why it is important to them. When they read their paragraphs aloud, pay careful attention to the ones that catch a character's "voice" and point them out to the class. The other writers will quickly catch on.

## **The second ingredient: Plot**

Plot is the engine that drives the story forward. Some stories have big engines, an action-adventure story for example. Lots happens. Stories that turn on relationships tend to have smaller engines: two people fall in love; a boy becomes friends with his grouchy grandfather.

### **Exercise: Story Shapes**

There are just so many possible stories out there. The Cinderella story: poor girl gets rich guy and lives happily ever after, is told in many different ways. The details change, but the basic shape of the story remains the same. The basic requirement of all plots is that something must change in the course of the story. Plot has a shape that can be drawn as a line that trends up (Cinderella starts out poor and unloved and ends up rich and happily married), or it can trend down (The rich man loses all his money when the .com bubble bursts and ends up dishing up chili at Wendy's). The important feature of plot is change.

**You'll need:** A deck of "story shape" cards (yup, you have to make it) with the following story shapes on them (use the name only, not the description).

By the way, I did not invent these story shapes. Many are paraphrased from Jerome Stern's, "Making Shapely Fiction;" a good book to consult if you need some ideas and are looking for help and insight on the writing process. Others are plot types often used by screen writers.

### **Journey:**

This is the oldest form of story. The Odyssey, even the life of Christ, are journey stories. The journey need not be geographic. It can involve any new undertaking in which the outcome is uncertain: a fifty year old woman returns to college, a man is diagnosed with cancer, a child makes friends with another child of a different race. Most often the Journey story features a young, inexperienced character who has a goal. As they pursue that goal they meet other characters who help or hinder them, but the strongest motivation comes from inside the character himself. Ultimately, life is the journey we are writing about, and the lasting effects of the "journey" usually take place inside the character who makes it.

### **Trauma:**

This story shape has a built in "hook." The story starts with a traumatic event. It doesn't have to be a car crash or a drive-by shooting. A woman dropping her daughter's wedding cake is experiencing a disaster too. By starting with a bang you draw the reader in.

### **Gathering:**

Put your main character in a group situation: a party, reunion, family gathering, wedding. Your protagonist can be an insider (Joe goes to his family's annual fourth of July picnic) or an outsider (Joe goes to his girlfriend's family's fourth of July picnic and meets the folks for the first time). Either way, the main character reports on what happens at the event.

### **Onion:**

The situation at the heart of your story is enclosed within another situation, or situations: A boy

is trying to catch the attention of the girl two seats ahead of him, but there is a class going on, other students, the watchful teacher. Or think big, a boy is trying to catch the attention of a girl, but there's a war going on. He gets drafted, ships out. History can provide the layers that surround the story of individual lives. Think Dr. Zhivago. Think Gone With the Wind.

**The Visitation:**

In this one the journey comes to the character. The life-changing event is a stranger knocking at the door, a phone call in the middle of the night. Something happens that disrupts the flow of normal life. It can be pleasant or unpleasant. The visitor can be the woman who just moved in next door or the alien from two galaxies over. The visitor shapes the arc of the story. The one who is visited changes, or is changed by the visitation.

**Aha!**

Discovery or realization comes to your main character. The discovery can be about another person (Don keeps pulling my braid because he has a crush on me), or about the self (I'm keeping my daughter from going to ice skating camp because I'm lonely, not because it is best for her). O. Henry and "Twilight Zone" both used the Aha! plot masterfully.

**Snapshot:**

This is a way to compress a long time span into short story form. Present single scenes from the story, widely spaced over time, like snapshots in a photo album. Choose evocative scenes that mark important points in the life of the character.

**Pursuit:**

The character is chasing or seeking something or someone. A pursuit story tends to be exciting with the chase itself giving the story its shape.

**Rescue:**

The character must rescue or save someone or something. Bear in mind the type of person your character is. While one type of character may be capable of saving the world, another may only be capable of rescuing the neighbor's cat that has climbed up a tall tree.

**Escape:**

Protagonist is confined against their will and wants to escape. Kids will immediately think dungeon, but most of us are trapped by our jobs, families, our past bad choices. Kids will get this if you give them examples.

**Revenge:**

Your character "gets back at" at someone for a real or imagined injury.

**Rivalry:**

Protagonist competes for the same object or goal as another person (their rival). Let's say that your character is a middle-aged used car salesman named Barney. His rival might be a cute new young guy named Jason. If the author is really feeling cruel they will make Jason the son of the owner of the business. Very rarely are rivals in a story evenly matched. One appears likely to

win, the other (the underdog) seems likely to lose. We usually tell the story from the underdog's perspective.

**Temptation:**

The character is induced or persuaded to do something that is unwise, wrong, or immoral.

**Sacrifice:**

Protagonist takes actions that are motivated by a higher, selfless purpose such as love, honor, charity, the good of humanity.

**Do the exercise:** Have each student write a brief thumbnail about what will happen in their character's story. Writers pitching their stories are often told to explain what their story is about in one sentence. This is really, really hard, but a story should be explainable in a short paragraph. Please tell your students that many writers (including me) find it harder to write a brief synopsis than it is to write a whole book.

**Variation:** Introduce your students to plot types and have them name stories that fit each type, or, when the class has read a book have them talk about which plot type best describes the story just read. Some stories will have elements of more than one plot type.

**Exercise: Every Picture Tells a Story**

**You'll need:** Magazine photos, preferably laminated. Choose ones that suggest stories. Offer a wide range of characters and locations. Include pictures of kids, but adults are fine too. Kids are quite willing to write as adults. Images of animals work too. I have a photo of a dog on a table, eating the holiday ham. Someone always chooses it. It's fun to write in the voice of a dog who is wolfing down the Christmas dinner. They will be writing the story that the photograph they select suggests, but if you simply let them choose the picture and begin writing you're missing an important step.

**Before you do the exercise:** Select a photo to use as an example. You and your students will now spend some time looking at the photograph before writing. You will guide them with questions like the following:

What is the overall mood scene? (Describe the mood in yours.)

What can you tell about the time of day, the season? What kind of place?

If you could zoom back from this picture describe some of the other things that would come into view.

If you were physically in this scene, what would you smell, hear? What would the temperature be?

Look the picture over carefully for small details. (Point out the details in the photo you've selected: "I see that his shoe is untied, and the little boy has a dirt on his hands.")

This is only one moment in the story. What do you think happened before this photograph? After?

Name the problem you think might be at the heart of the story.

Who would you choose to be your point of view character to turn this into a story? Your narrator may not even be in your photo, but someone observing the scene just as you are. Imagine that there's something just be on the edges of the frame that is about to affect the course of the story. What is it?

Tell your students to think of the picture as a single image in a story.

**Do the exercise:** Having thoroughly explored the photograph, your students begin to write. This story will be told in first person. That means that one of the people in the picture (or that unseen observer) will be the point-of-view character. (Note: I have a photo of a motorcycle race that I show the kids when I talk about choosing the point-of-view character. I contrast the story that would be told by the racer in the lead with the one that would be told by the racer at the back of the pack.) Once students have chosen the narrator they must decide why what happens in the story matters to him or her. In stories you always have to ask, what's at stake? Tension is created when there is something to gain—or lose. What is the narrator's relationship with the other characters? Remind your students that the narrator will call him or herself, "I".

Your students don't have to write the whole story, just get started. The beginning of a story is doing its job if it draws the reader in. It should suggest motion. It should make clear what is at stake.

**Exercise: If you could have one power...**

Almost all kids are interested in fantasy and science fiction. This exercise will give them a chance to create a story in one of those genres while learning the elements of plot construction.

**You'll need:** I collect rocks so I use small, interesting rocks, crystals, beads, fossils; anything that fits easily in your hand and looks interesting. I display all of them on an elaborately woven silk scarf to make them look more special.

**Before you do the exercise:** Have each student select one of the objects. Explain that the object of their choice will give them one power. Be clear that the power can't be something like "every wish I ever wish will come true." Stories are best if they are specific and the plot elements have clear limits. Powers that my students have chosen include flight, invisibility, super speed, super strength, empathy, time travel, mind reading, the ability to morph into animals, and the power of constipation (don't ask).

Sometimes the object itself may suggest a power. I have a striped black and white bead that twists in the middle. Many students who have chosen it have written about twists in time or

parallel time lines. I also have a stone with a jagged white mark running across it. The “power of lightning” has been attached to it several times.

**Do the exercise:** Since the main character is the student creating the story, character development won't be a problem, setting either since this new “power” is being dropped into the student's normal life. This is a chance for you to walk your writers through the plotting process.

1. **The story begins.** How did you acquire the magical object? Explain that since this object is magic it should be acquired in an unusual way, for example, it drops out of the sky and lands at your feet or; one day while digging in the yard, your shovel hits the lid of a small metal box and inside...or; while visiting your crazy uncle you find a secret door in back of the closet in his guest room... Finding the magical object will begin the story. Have your students write that beginning.
2. **Getting the action going:** How did you discover the magic power of your object. Flying is great, but what happens when you first discover you can do it? That moment could be exhilarating, scary, funny. Have the student write about their first encounter with the power of their magical object.
3. **The power becomes normal:** After a while Superman took flying for granted: he gets in the phone booth, changes into tights and cape and, boom, he can fly. Have students write about the kinds of things they do once they've adjusted to their new power.
4. **The power gets you in trouble:** Sooner or later something goes wrong (in stories it always does). Without conflict a story has no power or energy. Have your students imagine a possible down side to their new power. Have them write about an unanticipated outcome of using their power.
5. **Giving the power away:** Stories need resolution and closure. Have your students imagine ridding themselves of the power. How do they do it? Do they pass the object on to someone else; do they destroy or hide it?

Here are the bare bones of a “magic object” story written by a student in one of my workshops.

He was swimming at the beach one day and got caught in an undertow. As he was dragged along the bottom, trying to grab something to keep him from being dragged out to sea, he picked up a rock that was on the bottom. He couldn't fight his way to the surface and eventually he had to breathe. Resigned to drowning he filled his lungs with water—and discovered that with the rock in his hands he could breathe under water. With his new power he had a great day swimming with fish, exploring the coral reef, finding a sunken ship. But when he came to the surface he discovered that he could no longer breathe air. He tried dropping the rock but as long as he and the rock were in the water together he could only breathe under water. Finally he swam as close to the shore as he could and tossed the rock up on dry land. Only then could he breathe air again.

### **The third ingredient: Setting**

Setting is the “where” in a story. It may play a minor role, providing a little atmosphere: a blue sky, a street, falling leaves. But if a character is lost in the wilderness, setting becomes an important agent of the plot, sometimes even a character. The lost man's survival depends on how he overcomes the problems posed by the setting, in much the same way he would combat a

human antagonist. (Think of Gary Paulsen’s “Hatchet.”) In fact, descriptions of setting often take on the characteristics of sentient beings: trees moan, the wind gnaws, the sky weeps. Considering “setting” in isolation provokes static, merely descriptive, writing. Setting only comes alive when its role in the story is clear. The following exercise combines a setting with cues related to plot. This one is the most complex of the exercises, so hold onto your hat.

### **Exercise: The Dark and Stormy Night**

**You’ll need:** For this exercise you will combine two prompts. For the first prompt I make up slips of paper with three story elements on them. Example 1: Something in the wrong place, the color red, bad weather. Example 2: A droning voice, pain, a bright light. Example 3: An easy chair, nighttime, the sound of a baby crying. For the second prompt I collect photos of settings from magazines. When looking for your own “setting” pictures, be sure to include natural areas, cityscapes, and building interiors and exteriors. Also include a few exotic locations like jungles and deserts.

**Before doing the exercise:** Before letting them get started I talk them through an example. Say the prompt is the first example: Something in the wrong place, the color red, bad weather. First I might show them a picture of a snowy landscape with bare trees, a stream running through it and no sign of human activity. This is the setting for the story, the three elements won’t appear in the picture, the picture will provide the place for the elements to occur. One student’s suggested solution was, the thing out of place: a small boy lost in a wilderness area; the color red: his hooded sweat shirt; the bad weather: an approaching snowstorm. Then I showed the same group a picture of a crowded highway and asked them to use the same three elements. The, “something in the wrong place” was a car cutting into a different lane, the red was... you get the idea.

**Do the exercise:** Have your students pull a slip with three story components on it, then choose a setting picture. Suggest they try to find a couple of settings in which the components could be used to create two different stories. Choose one. Write the story.

### **More wild and crazy exercises:**

#### **Exercise: First Sentences**

Where does a story begin? This is a question writers worry about and work on. Do you start with a big event: the car crash. Or before: Joe and Diane get in the car. Or maybe after: Joe and Diane listen to the siren of an approaching ambulance. Wherever the writer enters the story, the beginning should engage the reader and give a hint of the kind of story being told.

If all the writer had to do was hook the reader every book would start, “Bob stood at the edge of the cliff deciding whether or not to jump,” or, “Bloody footprints led away from the lifeless body lying on the rug.” There are adventure stories and mysteries, but there are many quiet stories that explore relationships. Those probably should start without blood or guts. Beginnings should be true to the kind of story you wish to tell—but always interesting.

**You’ll need:** Copy good first sentences out of a number of books of the kind your young writers like to read. Print them, several to a page, and then cut them into strips, one first line per strip,

then roll the strips like scrolls and put them all in a box. Each student grabs one at random and unrolls it. If they whine excessively I'll let them throw their first pick back and take another. Only allow them to make one exchanges if you want them to do any writing.

**Before you do the exercise:** Read your students a good first sentence. Have them speculate on what might happen in the story that follows. Read enough sample first sentences to convey to students the characteristics of the opening of a compelling story.

**Do the exercise:** Have students grab a first sentence at random, copy it onto their paper and go! Write a great first paragraph or two; enough for the reader to get the flavor of the story and sense the direction it is taking. Make it interesting.

**Exercise variations:**

If you put the title and author on the strip of paper along with the first line, students will often pick up the book the first line came from—and read it! After writing the first two paragraphs themselves, they are curious to see what the original author did with it. They usually like their own opening paragraphs better.

I often teach in school and public libraries. When that is the case (if time allows) I let students forage for their own first sentences. I have them copy a good first sentence on a blank sheet of paper, then pass it along to another student.

Switching: Starting with a real “first sentence” have a student write one paragraph, then pass the sheet of paper on so that a different person is writing the second paragraph. Continue until chaos breaks out.

Have the students make up their own first sentences. Kids love this one, and are surprisingly good at writing “hooks.”

**Exercise: A Patch of Blue**

Memory is the source of much of a writer's material. Older writers often benefit from the passage of time, and even physical distance in turning material from their own lives into material for stories. With this exercise I try to create some distance between the young writer and recent memory.

**You'll need:** I use small swatches of color from a Pantone color selector, Coloraid paper would be good too (both are available in art supply stores). Paint swatch samples from the hardware store would work just as well -- and they're free. Whatever you choose you want something with better, more varied colors than a package of colored craft paper. I fold the swatch in half so it stands up a little when I throw a bunch of them in a hat. Is a hat necessary? Of course it isn't, but I find that the more different ways I present prompts the more stimulated new writers will be.

**Do the exercise:** Tell your class: You have been away from home for a long, long time. You are no longer part of the day-to-day life of home, you are seeing it from a great distance, through the eye of memory. Pick a color out of the hat that evokes a vivid memory of home. Remember, you are far from this place you know so well. The color should take you back. It should fill you

with yearning for something you miss. Start with the words “I remember...” (Teachers: “I remember” is always an evocative place to begin writing -- write those words on paper yourself, then wait. Something is sure to happen). Sample: Student responses to a swatch of baby blue have included: “I remember the river behind my house where the old men put their boats in early in the morning,” and “I remember my favorite blue pajamas, the ones you would have to pay me to take off.”

### **Exercise: The package at the door**

**You’ll need:** Wrap an assortment of packages making them as varied and mysterious as possible. The packages I’ve made up include: a large, but very light, wrapped package that jingles when shaken (the jingle is provided by popcorn kernels in a glass jar held in place with wadded newspaper); an oddly shaped stone in a cloth bag bearing a scientific tag that says “Southern Victoria Land, Antarctica, Dolerite Ventifact”; an antique book heavily strapped with a belt bearing a note that says, “Open with extreme caution: ignore warning at your own peril”; a jewelry-sized box with fancy wrapping paper, a shiny bow and a heart drawn on it; a soapstone brick wrapped in graph paper with nothing written on it. The packages should range from ones with lots of suggestive detail like the jewelry box with fancy wrappings, to ones, like the soapstone, that could be many different things (the graph paper wrapping is vaguely scientific but gives no useful clues, the stone is really heavy, but that doesn’t tell you what it is). Fewer clues prod writer’s to rely on imagination and often result in more considered, interesting writing.

**Do the exercise:** Have students choose one of the packages (packages are passed around, multiple students write about each one). Tell them: You have just come home from school and you find a package leaning against your door. Who is it from, and what happens when you open it?

One of my favorite responses came on the box with the jingly popcorn inside. The writer said it contained a genie and that the jingle came from the bells on the toes of her shoes. When she opened the box the writer asked to try on the shoes. The story ended, “When I put on the shoes, she wasn’t a genie any more—and I was inside the box.”

### **Exercise: Smellavision**

Have you ever caught a whiff of scent and found yourself plunged into memory? Smell is sneaky that way. It can completely bypass the rational brain.

**You’ll need:** Collect things with strong smells. Easy choices include: a dollop of peanut butter; a bottle of vanilla, peppermint, perfume or after shave; a crushed garlic clove; pine resin; ground coffee; a piece of charred wood; chocolate; a sprig of rosemary.

**Do the exercise:** Ask your students to shut their eyes. Take the scents around one at a time (they will be in bottles or baggies). I touch the shoulder of each student when I want them to sniff. You’ll be amazed by the reactions. A smell, even of something harmless and familiar, sometimes bowls them over since it is the main sensory input. If the group is big you may need a second sample of each scent and an assistant walking around at the same time. After each

scent have them write about what it reminds them of. At first they will give you the standardized test response: Peppermint! Coffee! No. Explain that you want to know what image the smell brings to mind. Example: One student, smelling the sprig of rosemary wrote, “It reminds me of the flowers we planted on my aunt’s grave.” Another, smelling a heavy, floral perfume wrote: “It reminds me of elegant ladies in a museum, walking around thinking they’re all that.”

### **Exercise: Keys**

**You’ll need:** For this exercise you’ll need two kinds of keys. The first are real, literal keys. Gather a variety of them (you have a bunch of old keys in your drawers, don’t you?). Try to include tiny ones and big ones, car keys, skeleton keys, a diary key.

The second kind of “key” will be written directions that the writer will follow in their imagination to make something happen (see description below).

**Do the exercise:** Tell students: Keys open doors, they start cars, they unlock hidden places. But using a key isn’t the only way to open or activate something. Sometimes you need to follow written directions. Have students choose a key, or one of the folded sets of directions (one or the other – some students like the safe, solid keys, others are willing to take a chance on a set of mysterious instructions.) Have them write what happens when they use the key or follow the directions.

Teachers: Here are some samples of the written directions:

Close your eyes and turn three times in place. Speak the secret name of the sun once, and it shall be opened.

Set dial for maximum speed desired. Speeds above 5.6 are for Eagle Class Fliers only.

Open at you own risk. Memory may be affected and, in rare cases, sudden hair loss may occur.

To start, depress left pedal all the way to the floor. Caution: a partially depressed pedal may cause rapid and uncontrolled levitation.

When I write the directions I change fonts to fit the style of the directions. An elaborately Gothic typeface can add flavor to directions that sound magical.

### **Exercise: Point of View**

**You’ll need:** An incident to build your point-of-view stories around. Start by describing an incident to your students, for example: There’s been a bus accident on a crowded city street. A five year old boy has been struck by the bus. He was throwing a ball with another kid and chased it into the street. For any incident you will make up a list of the people who either witnessed, or took part in the incident, including a detail or two about them. Print each one on a strip of paper, fold all the strips up and put them in a bag, bowl or hat and have your students each pick one. The following list is given as an example. (Feel free to pick a more cheerful incident like a basketball game or a middle school dance).



You are: The bus driver, whose wife at home in the last phase of a terminal illness.

You are: The college student, who is seated immediately behind the driver, and who is about to take a final exam.

You are: The sister of the boy who was killed. She was supposed to be watching him but was on the phone arguing with her boyfriend.

You are: The homeless man, just waking up on the bench near the scene of the accident.

You are: The shopkeeper who is cranking out his awning over a display of vegetables when the crash occurs.

You are: The boy chasing the ball who gets hit by the bus.

You are: The policeman who gets the call to go to the scene of the accident.

You are: The blind man seated in a “handicapped” seat near the front of the bus.

You are: The mother of the boy who gets hit by the bus. At the time of the accident you are at work.

You are: The kid who threw the ball to the victim.

You are: The tourist who is taking pictures with a cell phone.

You are: The newspaper vendor who is selling papers from a stand on the corner where the accident happens.

You are: The stray dog resting under a nearby parked car.

**Do the exercise:**

Have each student write an account of the event from the point of view of the character they have drawn. You will see this incident from many points of view and have a web of interconnected stories when you are done.

**In conclusion:**

The writing exercises in “Think Like an Author” will do nothing for spelling or syntax—unless you follow up with a cycle of corrections (call it editing and your students will experience another aspect of the writing life). What this program does is create a genuine enthusiasm for writing and storytelling. Suddenly, to write is to be cool. By approaching creative writing from an unexpected angle the workshop may provoke writing from kids who think they hate to write. In addition to stimulating writing, the program helps students become good critical readers. How

do the writers of the books they read use character, plot and setting to tell a story?

Feel free to change the exercises or mix them up, do the ones that work for you, forget the ones that don't. Make up exercises of your own. I offer my "Think Like an Author" program to teachers, camp counselors, librarians—anyone who wants to bring a love of creative writing to kids. Use it, enjoy it, pass it along. One of these days I'll turn it into a book. Until then, use this.

To learn more about my books: "Crossing Jordan," "Anna Casey's Place in the World," "My Brother's Hero," and "Sister Spider Knows All," "The Big Nothing," "The Real Question," and "The Sorta Sisters," all published by Peachtree Publishers of Atlanta, or to invite me to your school so that I can teach this program to your students personally, visit my website, [www.adrianfogelin.com](http://www.adrianfogelin.com).

Comments and suggestions on "Think Like an Author" are always welcome and can be sent to me via the website—the program is a work in progress.

"Think Like an Author" creative writing workshop, copyright 2002, Adrian Fogelin