

How Writers Write Fiction 2015

CLASS FIVE • Assignment

Assignment for Beginning Writers:

Write a scene in which your characters think and talk about a past event in a remembered place. Your scene must include at least three characters, each of whom must speak at least once. Use your characters' voices to create a sense of this setting in their past: how do they speak of this place to one another? How do they describe it in their thoughts, and how do their descriptions differ? Does each character believe that his memory is correct? Do they enjoy comparing and perhaps correcting one another's memories? Try to create a strong picture of this event and this place through your characters' voices. You might want to work with color, smell, and/or sound to achieve this: for example, you might consider the details of the food your characters normally cooked and ate in this place, or the details of the clothes they wore during this event. You might consider what voices and sounds they remember hearing during this event: for example, if this event was unusual or disruptive, were the voices they heard different from the ones they normally heard in this place? Or if this event was a normal occurrence, did they hear the same voices and noises that they heard every day in this place?

You can write this scene in present tense or in past tense. For example, you could write, "Elena **tells** me that when our grandmother's plum tree caught on fire, it was hot, but it was raining. She **says** we crouched on the exposed, dusty roots of the tree, warm water dripping down the collars of our shirts, and tried to burn the letter from our father." Or you could write "Elena **told** me that when our grandmother's plum tree caught on fire, it was hot, but it was raining. She **said** we crouched on the exposed, dusty roots of the tree, warm water dripping down the collars of our shirts, and tried to burn the letter from our father." In both tenses, the reader can tell that the remembered event of the fire happened before the conversation between Elena and the narrator.

As we have discussed (and you might look back at Class Session 3 for more detail on this) you can use dialogue and relationships to tell us who your characters are. As your characters speak to one another, try to use what they say to tell us who they are: perhaps remembering this event reminds one character that he hated the place where the event happened, while the memory of this event fills another character with affection and longing for the place where the event happened. The way each of them thinks and speaks about this memory will give each of them a distinct voice, and through those voices, the reader will understand something about who each of them is and how each of them feels about his fellow characters.

As you write, think of how your characters' thoughts, speech, and actions come together to create a collage of the place they are remembering. As some parts of their memories may overlap, and some may differ, how do their voices overlap to create the overall impression of this setting that the reader will experience?

Suggested word limit: 800-1000 words.



Assignment for Advanced Writers:

Read and follow the directions in the writing assignment for beginning writers above. However, as you write your scene, include a strong and detailed sense of the setting where your characters are now. Build a picture of the similarities and differences between the place (and event) they are remembering together and the place they are occupying.

Of course, this does not mean you have to write the present-day setting in present tense. For example, you could write, “I **stand** in my silent kitchen, one palm on the handle of my stainless-steel dishwasher, the other palm on the rounded edge of the gleaming silver refrigerator. I **remember** the kitchens of my mother and grandmother’s sprawling beach houses, where each appliance, each chair, each dishtowel and placemat, was a different shade of seashell or ocean or sunset.” Or you could write “I **stood** in my silent kitchen, one palm on the handle of my stainless-steel dishwasher, the other palm on the rounded edge of the gleaming silver refrigerator. I **remembered** the kitchens of my mother and grandmother’s sprawling beach houses, where each appliance, each chair, each dishtowel and placemat, was a different shade of seashell or ocean or sunset.” In both tenses, the difference between the present-day kitchen and the remembered kitchens is clear.

Think about how the setting where your characters are now can be used to illuminate the reader’s understanding of the setting (and event) they are remembering. Notice how their descriptions and discussion of the past event are affected by their awareness of their current setting: does the event they are describing feel ridiculous, or unlikely, as if it could never happen where they are now? Does the event, and the place where the event happened, feel far away? Or does the transition from then to now, from the old place to the new, feel natural and seamless?

And think about how past and present-day settings can provide an opportunity to define your characters’ voices. Just as your characters’ descriptions of this remembered place may differ, and the differences in their memories may tell us something about who they are, the way they describe and talk about and move through their present-day setting may tell us something about who they are.

Suggested word limit: 800-1000 words.