

How Writers Write Fiction 2015

CLASS FOUR • Assignment

Assignment for Beginning Writers:

For this assignment, you'll write two different versions of the same scene. You will write a scene, and then you will write it again in a different way. You will submit both of these scenes together in one text for your assignment.

Both scenes will involve the same two characters. In each scene, these two characters are reuniting or have recently reunited after a past separation. This separation in their past can be physical (for example, perhaps one of them moved to a different country and has just returned), or it can be psychological (perhaps they had a fight which caused them to stop speaking to one another, and they have just now begun to speak again), or it can be both physical and psychological (perhaps they had a fight and stopped speaking to one other, and then one of them moved to another country, and now that person has returned and they are speaking to each other again).

First write the scene in the point of view of Character #1; then rewrite the same scene—the same events, the same two people, in the same place and time—but in the point of view of Character #2.

Both of your scenes must involve a third character who must stay off the page and does not actually appear in the scene. Each of your two characters must think about and/or talk about this third character. This third character must be the same person in both scenes. Just as in real life, every person's point of view is different, in your scenes, your two characters' points of view are different. So, in the scene you write in Character #1's point of view, Character #1 might talk about this Absent Character #3 with love: perhaps he thinks that Absent Character #3 is his best friend. But in the scene you write in Character #2's point of view, perhaps Absent Character #3 is an evil bully who can't be trusted. In the excerpt from the required reading "Loyalty," Charles Baxter uses his narrator's point of view to tell us who Corinne and Astrid are: this means that we can see Corinne and Astrid through the narrator, who is not impartial. Think about what "Loyalty" would be like if it had been written from Astrid's point of view, or from Corinne's point of view: how differently would we think about each of them? How would the tone of the story change? Mamle Kabu spoke about using your characters to advance your story's themes and concerns. Use the way your two characters talk about Absent Character #3 to examine how your choice of narrative point of view affects the reader's perception of your story. For example, in your first scene, if Character #1 says that Absent Character #3 is a good friend, and Character #2 disagrees, perhaps Character #2 will look like a mean or jealous person. In your second scene, if you show Character #2 thinking about how Absent Character #3 always said terrible things behind Character #1's back, then perhaps now Character #1 will look foolish.

As you write these two scenes, also consider how the impact of the narrative changes – tone, pace, what factual and emotional information the character mentions or places emphasis on and what information he downplays or leaves out. To really work with these elements, vary the order in which the characters present the details of the scene – for example, in the first scene, Character #1 might think or say that the Character #2's shoes are dirty, because to Character #1 that is significant to the



emotional subtext of their reunion and/or to the emotional subtext of the history of their separation. Character #2 might not get around to mentioning that her shoes are dirty until the very end of the scene, because to her that is not important to the scene taking place or to their past history. Or you could have Character #1 mention certain details that Character #2 does not mention at all—for example, one character might think and/or talk repeatedly about the dirty shoes, and the other character might never mention them at all. Notice how their two points of view alter the scene – to recall Andrew Sean Greer’s talk, perhaps for one of your characters, the story is the scarf (or the shoes). And for the other character, perhaps the story is not the scarf.

Again, submit both scenes as one text for your assignment. You can simply hit Enter or Return a few times to separate your two scenes. If you would like to, you can include headers such as “Scene #1” and “Scene #2” to make the separation between the two scenes clear.

Suggested word range: 800-1200 words.

Assignment for Advanced Writers:

Read and follow the directions in the writing assignment for beginning writers. Consider, as described in the writing assignment for beginning writers, Andrew Sean Greer’s statement “the story is not the scarf,” Mamle Kabu’s discussion of using characters to advance your narrative themes, and Baxter’s use of his narrator’s point of view to establish who Corinne and Astrid are in a way that Corinne and Astrid might disagree with.

However, when you write your two scenes, with your two present characters and one absent character, create a disjunction between Character #1’s perception of reality and Character #2’s perception of reality. When we read these two scenes, we should realize that their accounts of what happened in their past are factually different, and therefore, they have two radically different ideas of what is happening between them now. In other words, this goes beyond Character #1 liking Absent Character #3 and Character #2 hating Absent Character #3. In your two scenes, one or both of your characters has misunderstood or misinterpreted something fundamental to their relationship. For example, let’s say they used to be married, but have been separated and living in separate houses. Perhaps Character #1 thinks that they got married so that Character #2 could legally stay in the country where they live. And perhaps Character #2 thinks that they got married because they were madly in love. So perhaps now Character #2 thinks that they are meeting to talk about moving back into the same house and saving their marriage, while Character #1 thinks that they are meeting to finalize the terms of their divorce.

This may recall to your mind your Class Session 2 writing assignment, in which you introduced an element of fantasy into a cast of characters. Use this as an opportunity to work more with subtext and with how much of your characters’ goals and motivations you want the reader to understand. Think about how you can use these characters to manipulate not only the reader’s experience of a story’s tone and narrative arc, but also how the reader perceives the truth of a character’s point of view. For example:

- Is one of them wrong about what’s happening now, or about what happened in the past? Or are both interpretations of the facts valid?

- Is one of them trying to present the facts of the past or present in a particular light, because that's how he wants the other character to see things? Or is each character trying to manipulate the other's recollection/perception of the facts? If one of them is trying to manipulate the other's perception of the facts, is he doing so consciously or does he not realize?

- How clearly are you showing us these characters' motivations? If one of them is trying to distort the truth, can we tell which one, or do both characters feel equally convincing/unconvincing? Is one narrative real and the other false, or are they both suspect?

Is there only one true perspective in two scenes story? The character point of view that tells the story best, that creates the most exciting narrative arc, may not tell the full truth of what really happened. Then again, perhaps the point of view that serves your story best will be the one that lays out what really happened between these characters.

Suggested word range: 800-1200 words.