

Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Fiction and Nonfiction

CLASS FOUR • Assignment

Fiction assignment: consciously considering plot

For fiction, assignments 1 and 2 asked you to work on character development; to find ways to create a relationship between character, community, and place; and to explore how your characters were defined by the cultural pressures of their communities and their limitations of their settings.

Assignment 3 asked you to write about change: literal travel and/or psychological travel. This brings you to plot.

Why does this bring you to plot? Because your plot decisions – to have x happen, and then y, and then z – are based on why x, y, and z happen. What motivated your characters, last week, to undergo change? Why did the change matter to them: what was at stake? Did this change bring problems, or did it solve problems?

As Venise Berry stated, "When you identify certain issues, you have certain psychological stakes that come along with those issues. So what you're going to do here is really consider how to organize your events so that they best highlight the stakes. Now, who is your character? You should know that by now. You should have that set up. What do they need? What are they looking for? What are they trying to accomplish? How are they going to get what they need? These are all elements of your plot, taking your character from one space to another, helping your reader to understand the needs and the wants and the desires of this character."

So, look back at what you wrote for assignment 3. What social issue is in play here? In other words, what cultural or societal pressures drove your character's transformation? You may not think those pressures were involved: perhaps your character went through a physical change such as moving from one place to another to take a new job, or perhaps your character went through a psychological change such as deciding to begin or end a relationship, and those may seem like entirely personal decisions. But all human decisions take place within a cultural context. What motivates someone to move to a new place for a new job? Perhaps a desire for more fulfilling or safer or higher-paying or more stable employment. But that desire is felt within a context. Perhaps the context is that this person lives in a place where fulfilling, safe, well-paid, and/or stable employment is limited. Why are good jobs not available in this location? Or perhaps the context is that this person lives in a place where there are many good jobs, but this person doesn't have the education necessary to get those jobs. Why was education not available to him? Asking the questions above should help you understand not only what the stakes are for your character(s), but where those stakes came from. And understanding the context of those stakes will help you understand fully what the problem of your story is: what the central conflict is for your characters.

For assignment 4, expand and/or refine what you wrote for assignment 3. As you did last week, consider how you want to show the "before" and the "after" of your character's change, but now also think about how you want to show 1) the societal context of the problem or conflict that drove that change and 2) the psychological stakes for this character. You might try Boris Fishman's suggestion to reveal key information up front about what's happening and why it matters, or you might try revealing the conflict or the stakes more gradually. What works best for showing the reader where this transformation came from and why it matters?

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Consider what kind of change you wrote about. Was your character's travel psychological: a decision, a realization, a shift in belief? Or was it a literal migration from one place to another? Or was it both? If you wrote only about a psychological change, try adding action and see if this helps you fully establish the conflict, the stakes, and the societal context of your character's transformation? If you wrote only about physical travel, try adding a glimpse of the emotional and mental shifts that your character is experiencing, and see if this helps you show the conflict, the stakes, and the societal context of this migration.

And if you didn't write fiction for assignment 3, but you would still like to try writing fiction for assignment 4, go right ahead!

Suggested word range: 1500-3500 words.

Personal essay assignment: consciously expanding into historical context and universal experience

For nonfiction, assignments 1 and 2 asked you to work on creating a piece of literary journalism that offered the reader a portrait of a particular person in a particular culture and a particular place. Assignment 3 asked you to write a memoir piece (a complete essay or part of something larger) in which you wrote about your experience of literal or psychological travel: of a time of migration from one place to another; or of a time of movement from one belief, one understanding, one sense of community and self, to another. The memoir essay is a wonderful and particular form of nonfiction writing on its own, but it has some things in common with the personal essay. For example, the personal essay also works with memory, with a sense of then vs. now, with past and present perspectives. But the personal essay tries to directly incorporate a broader and deeper sense of past and present societal context, and it tries to directly create a connection between the personal experience and the universal human experience.

Chris Merrill stated, "This is a chance to think about the historical context of a memory, perhaps even the memory that you wrote about last week in your memoir essay. What are the larger dimensions of the issues that you are exploring? What are the cultural and physical landscapes that surround this memory, this moment? [...] What are the cultural and historical influences that you were aware of at that moment and which now shape your understanding of that moment? [...] And ideally, we're hoping that we can describe these events, these memories so well that though they are rooted entirely or mostly in personal or perhaps historical experience, they take on a universal aspect to them."

Start by looking at your memoir piece from a distance, and try to see ways that you think it addresses a common experience. What social issue is behind this commonality? In other words, what cultural or societal pressures drove the change you went through? You may not think those pressures were involved: perhaps you went through a physical change such as moving from one place to another to take a new job, or perhaps you went through a psychological change such as deciding to begin or end a relationship, and those may seem like entirely personal decisions. But all human decisions take place within a cultural context. For example, if you moved to a place to take a new job, what employment limitations were you facing in your former place of residence? Why did better opportunities exist in your new location but not your old one; and how might those place-

based opportunities and limitations of reveal larger societal structures? If you chose to end a relationship, what factors or emotions that you felt while making that decision were specific only to the problems between you and your partner; and what factors or emotions may have been connected to community constraints, societal expectations, or common patterns of human behavior?

Then, look at how your memoir piece addressed your memory of the travel or transformation you wrote about. Before that change, what was your understanding of who you were as a community member, as a student or employee or part of a family, as a citizen of your city and region and country? How did that understanding of your identity – of your place in the world – determine how you chose to make that change, or chose to face that change? After that change, how did your understanding of your identity and your place in community shift? When you look back on it now, what do you understand about yourself that you didn't understand then? In your mind, try to isolate that piece of information, that new thing you came to understand, for a moment. Try to define it. Maybe you learned that sometimes, you will tell lies. Maybe you learned that sometimes, you will sacrifice your needs for someone else's. Maybe you came to believe that no matter what happens, you are strong enough to get through it. What you learned about yourself is something that many other people have also learned about themselves, and it's something that still more people will learn about themselves in the future. Not everyone will learn this exact thing, and no one else will learn it through the exact experience of transformation and/or travel that you had. But you have two universal human experiences to work with here: 1) you have the thing you learned or came to believe, which is something other people will learn or have learned in their own ways; and you have the process of learning, which is something that other people will go through or have gone through in their own ways. So you have two aspects of universal human experience to connect your personal experience with.

Finally, think about the emotions that accompanied the before and the after of your experience: whether you moved from joy to fear, from sorrow to relief, from loneliness to fulfillment, those are universal human emotions that your reader, too, has experienced.

For assignment 4, expand and/or refine what you wrote for assignment 3. As you did last week, consider how you want to show the "before" and the "after" of your change, but now also think about how you want to show 1) the societal context of the problem or conflict that drove that change and 2) how you want to create a sense that your experience of that change was not only a personal experience but a human experience. You might look at Tim Bascom's suggestion to consider the context of your thoughts and actions, to consider what you most want to leave out about yourself. If there is a moment where you wish you hadn't acted or thought as you did – or a moment where you are glad you did act and think as you did – that moment might be the key to showing the reader why your experience matters; to showing the reader that your personal experience has connections to societal structures; to historical influences; and to universal human experiences of change and of the emotions that accompany change.

And if you didn't write a memoir piece for assignment 3, but you would still like to try writing a personal essay for assignment 4, go right ahead!

Suggested word range: 1500-3500 words.