

NOW
WRITE!

Fiction

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Fiction Writing Exercises ^{From} Today's
Best Writers + Teachers

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Seven Drafts in Seven Days

by Porter Shreve

Porter Shreve is the author of three novels: *The Obituary Writer*, *Drives Like a Dream*, and *When the White House Was Ours*. Co-editor of six anthologies, he directs the creative writing program at Purdue University.

When I heard in graduate school that Raymond Carver wrote as many as thirty drafts of his classic story “Cathedral” I thought about putting down my pen for good. I had never written more than two or three drafts of a short story, though I knew abstractly that revision is the key to making a story great. Widely anthologized short stories look easy because the language is so precise, the arc so perfectly paced and the ending inevitable, but it’s important to remember that these narratives take most writers months, sometimes years, to compose. How did Carver manage to find just the right word every time? How did he discover the particular voice of the unnamed narrator – down in the dumps but subtly yearning? In what ways did Carver’s secondary characters – the wife and the blind man – push the narrator toward change? How did Carver happen upon the brilliant symbol of the Cathedral, a physical object on a television show that by the end of the story becomes a metaphor for the narrator’s almost spiritual breakthrough? For Carver the answer rested in revision. Ever since I learned this I’ve become a devoted reviser, and I encourage the same of my students.

In a workshop of anywhere from ten to twenty people it can be overwhelming to try to figure out whose critiques to take to heart. You pay particular attention to your instructor’s comments, but you also want to take into account some of your fellow students’ suggestions. But when you receive so much critique, some of it contradictory, it can be hard to stay focused or maintain the energy that first inspired you. So instead of doing the wholesale revisions that nearly all first drafts need, you might make only cursory changes, adding a sentence here, fixing a run-on there, perhaps changing the title. “This isn’t a revision,” your instructor says, and you feel frustrated, misunderstood, perhaps shortsightedly defiant. Writers working on their own have a different but equally

daunting challenge. Without outside voices telling them “cut this” or “add that” one is often left wondering where to begin.

Objective:

Revision doesn't need to feel like a chore. For many writers, the pleasure is not in getting the first draft on the page but in rearranging the puzzle until all the pieces fit. This exercise will give you an opportunity to write many drafts in a relatively short space of time. With any luck you'll clear the revision hurdle and feel that with each draft you're making your story clearer, better and deeper.

EXERCISE

You're going to be writing seven drafts of your story, but instead of trying to take all of the problems into account at once you're going to focus in each draft on a different element of fiction. I'd recommend the following order, but you should feel free to choose your own:

Draft one: Character

Draft two: Conflict

Draft three: Setting

Draft four: Voice and Point of View

Draft five: Plot and Structure

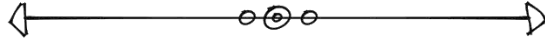
Draft six: Language

Draft seven: Symbol

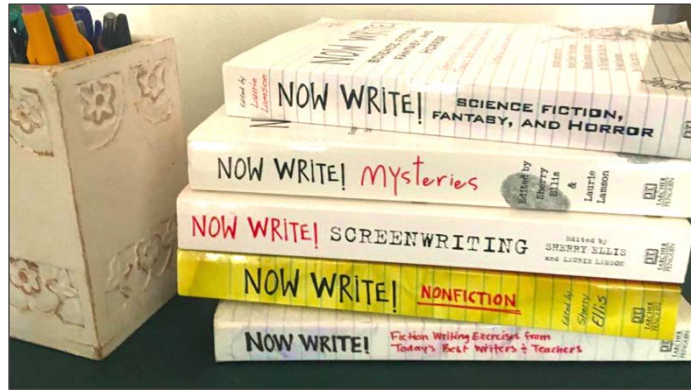
On each day you should underline your workshop's, your first reader's or your own comments according to the given subject. On day one, for example, underline anything

pertaining to character; on day five, underline anything having to do with plot and structure. On each day focus exclusively on the particular element assigned to that draft. If your story seems to need a more evocative sense of place, look for sections where you can use sensory details to describe the physical aspects of a particular environment. Where on day five you'd focus on the big picture – the chronology of events as they apply to plot and structure – on days six and seven you'd narrow in on sharpening your language sentence to sentence and giving the symbols or potential symbols in your story greater shape and clarity.

Often you'll find at the end of a given day that the process of revision has just begun. If you have time, you should by all means spend more than one day before moving on to the next element of fiction. If you move on, though, you should do so with the knowledge that you'll probably have to return and spend more days on certain problem areas. Perhaps, for example, you were able to make the protagonist fuller on day one of your revisions, but you still need to flesh out one or more secondary characters. If you think of a story as a living text you'll feel freer to re-imagine and rewrite it until all the various parts are in place and working simultaneously.



I hope you enjoy this sample exercise from **Now Write! Fiction**. All the Now Write! books are available on [Amazon](#) and at other major booksellers. If you need more writing support, please explore our [Consulting Services](#). - Laurie Lamson, *Now Write!* Editor



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