

NOW  
WRITE!

Fiction

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Fiction Writing Exercises <sup>From</sup> Today's  
Best Writers + Teachers

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## **Birth of a Story in an Hour or Less**

by **Crystal Wilkinson**

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This exercise is intended to be done in several parts and make take up to an hour to complete. It could also be divided up into several days.

Inventing a fiction is like giving birth. It is about the act of creating a living, breathing character and placing them in a realistic situation for our readers. As fiction writers we take everything we know about how the world works and bridge it to another level of understanding. When we invent a character we inhabit someone else's voice, body and mind. This act of sometimes explaining the movements, the actions, the psychological history of someone we don't fully understand is precisely the art of fiction.

## EXERCISE

### Part I: The voice

At birth our first modes of communication are oral so let's begin there.

Imagine two characters talking about something maybe they are talking about a third person. Perhaps one of them has a problem. Just allow them to talk for awhile. Write only dialogue. Don't even give them names yet. Focus only on inventing a conversation for them.

Example:

A: I'm not feeling well today.

B: Really, what's wrong?

A: I've got a headache.

B. Did I tell you what Bob said last night?

Keep writing until you have two full pages of dialogue.

## **Part II: Your characters' place in the world.**

Imagine where this conversation is taking place. Describe the place, filling in as many details as you can just taking in the area. Imagine a panoramic view of this place. What's there? Are there any sensory details you've missed? What's the weather like? Are there smells? Sounds? What objects can be found in this place?

## **Part III: Who are you?**

Choose one of these characters to focus on and answer the following questions. Some of the questions may seem silly or even repetitive but each answer puts you closer to knowing this person you've invented. Try not to over think your answers just move as quickly as you can down the list, not stopping to judge. Answer honestly in the moment.

1. What is your character's age?
2. Sex?
3. Describe your character's face.
4. Does your character have any noticeable physical flaws?
5. What is he/she wearing?
6. Is your character married or single?
7. Who is your character's significant other? Describe them.
8. What relationships are important to your character? Describe them.
9. Who does your character confide in?
10. What is your character's occupation?
11. What does your character believe in?
12. Political affiliation?
13. Religion?

14. Sexual habits?
15. What is your character most afraid of?
16. What makes your character happy?
17. How does your character speak? (accents, speech pattern, regionalism)
18. What's your character's favorite thing to do for pleasure?
19. What is your character most bothered by?
20. What is your character's name? Nickname?

You may also add to this list but here are some fill in the blank options that may help you get inside your character a bit more. Notice that the last half are directly from the character's point of view. Allow yourself to step directly into your character's shoes.

1. Last night he/she dreamt about \_\_\_\_\_
2. All he/she really wants is \_\_\_\_\_
3. Is she/he could runaway they'd go to \_\_\_\_\_
4. He/she spent the night \_\_\_\_\_
5. Outside it was \_\_\_\_\_ but inside \_\_\_\_\_
6. She/he almost never wears \_\_\_\_\_

From the character's point of view:

1. When I was five \_\_\_\_\_
2. As for God \_\_\_\_\_
3. My mother always said \_\_\_\_\_
4. What they'll never know about me is \_\_\_\_\_
5. Being good in my family was \_\_\_\_\_
6. I miss the smell of \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_\_ made me think of \_\_\_\_\_

8. At first I thought \_\_\_\_\_

9. What I meant was \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Part IV: Making a Scene**

Isn't that just like a baby? You've put your time and effort into giving it birth and now it wants to act out, make a scene. But that is precisely what we want our characters to do, to act up, to act out. Fiction is made of actions and reactions.

Now it's time to put all that you have discovered to work. You are going to write three separate scenes that may occur at different points in your story. You will go back and pull from the other exercises (the dialogue, the place, and what you found out about your character). The scenes will not necessarily be chronological. Try to write at least one to two pages for each scene. Allow yourself the freedom to write them quickly and carelessly. Natalie Goldberg once said at a conference I attended "Free yourself up to write the worst crap in America." Make sure your scene opens, closes and something takes place. The "something" is up to you.

A brief definition of a scene: A scene gives the illusion of real life in fiction. It slows things down to real time and allows a reader to see something happen. A scene most often includes dialogue and should include some combination of the things you've done above: description of the setting, a character's feelings and thoughts, gestures, action and observations from the narrator or author. A scene occurs in one place.

#### **Scene 1—Before the Conversation**

Imagine a time in your character's life before the conversation or before their problem. Write the scene. This could be immediately before they began the conversation

with the other character or long before, even to childhood. But it must be before the conversation. Go for it. Try to include all you know about this character so far. In thinking about their past even (if you choose to write from that place) what may have contributed to the problem they are experiencing now at the time of your story's invention.

### **Scene 2—During the Conversation**

Write a scene that occurs during the conversation. You will most likely rely heavily on your dialogue section here. Include the description of the setting; include any objects in the room that your character(s) may come in contact with. What gestures are they using? Do they have an accent? Are there interruptions? By whom? By what? Does your character's mind wander during the conversation? What is he/she thinking about?

### **Scene 3 After the Conversation.**

This scene occurs after the conversation. Include as many elements of scene as you think necessary but allow one of the following to occur.

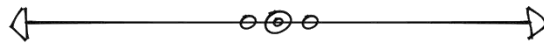
1. Your character's problem is solved.
2. Your character decides that this problem is going to be with them for awhile and so they must learn to deal with it.

For this scene think toward change, think toward some closure at this moment in your character's life.

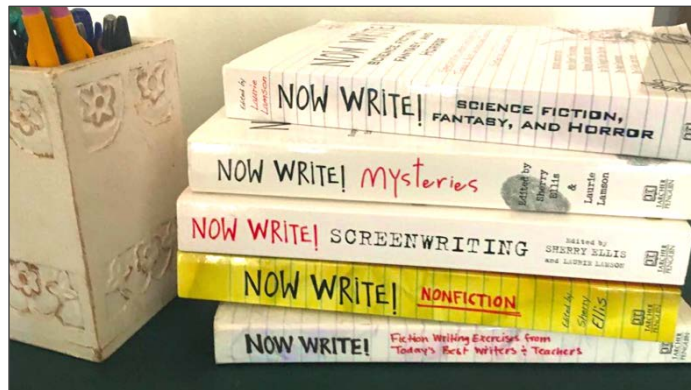
### **Purpose**

If you think of a story as having a beginning, middle, and an end, what you have in these three scenes could mimic the structure of a story. At this point you should have a skeleton of sorts in front of you, at least three pages toward a story that you can build on. In your

process you may have discovered that the story needs to begin with one of these three scenes or someplace else altogether. The objective here is to cover a lot of ground toward the invention of a story in a small amount of time. This exercise forces you to make some decisions that may address multiple possibilities for a single story idea. It is an interesting way of jumping into a story quickly instead of forming your decisions in a chronological or even logical way. It gets you out of thinker-pose and gets you writing.



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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