

# one | getting started

## the crafting of a story

ONE OF THE MOST common questions of aspiring fiction writers is *What do I have to write about?* You may have some ideas for **subject matter** but not be sure how to develop them, or you may even feel that your lived experience is not interesting enough to spark engaging stories in the first place. This kind of doubt is extremely common. In fact, at some point, writers at all stages experience the feeling that they've run out of ideas, need to live more interesting lives in order to write, or that they're better off just borrowing from common tropes and plots from existing fiction, movies, and television instead of trying to generate unique stories of their own. Depending on the degree, self-doubt can be distracting or even debilitating. Therefore, it's important at the outset to try your best to banish it by beginning to identify as someone with plenty of unique stories to tell. After all, there's only one you. Even if you've grown up in a family of close-knit siblings, each sibling has experienced the family dynamics and household differently. Even if you live in a small, quiet town where nothing much seems to happen, if you learn to observe the characters, setting, and goings-on around you more carefully, you'll see that there's plenty of drama and interest to draw on for stories. After all, the

CRAFTING STORIES

human condition, in itself—being born, growing older, dying—is vastly mysterious terrain, as are the social dynamics between people, their relationships with each other and with themselves: their struggles, triumphs, and disappointments.

In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, low-key questions and situations often spark wonderful short stories whereas elaborate plots and large casts of characters are often more difficult to render realistically within the compression of the form. And depending on your level of experience, it may be easier to start small and build up to longer, more complex stories as you go. All this being said, the question remains: *How to begin?* The short answer is: begin with your actual lived experience.

Begin by noticing and noting the people, places, things, and happenings directly around you or from your past. Keep a notebook or journal, small enough to carry with you, as well as your phone, to jot down or record ideas, lists, and bits of **dialogue** or conversation. You never know when something may strike you. For many of us, the best ideas come when we're sleepy or just about to doze off. And many creative people have particularly active dream lives. As unappealing as it may feel to turn on the light to jot down that last idea before falling asleep or recording your dreams before you've gotten out of the bed in the morning, it's good to catch it when it comes: before you forget it.

Once you've gotten in the habit of taking notes and doing some free writing, you may still struggle with carving out the necessary time to develop your first thoughts into stories. For many, this involves a process of trial and error: writing at a certain time each day, for example, or carving out a larger chunk of time a couple of times each week. Most fiction writers require a good deal of uninterrupted time to develop their ideas, and if you find that time is in short supply, this can pose problems. In this case, you'll have to get creative. Can you cancel appointments and get off of work on a Saturday to complete a story in progress? Can you write for an hour or two first thing in the morning or last thing at night? In any case, expect that your stories will require your time. Rather than this feeling like a burden, however, the time you're able to make for your creative work will feel precious. You may even find yourself craving it, guarding it, and trying to extend it. This is how you'll know you're hooked!

Alternately, if you've got lots of time on your hands, you may encounter another kind of obstacle: that all-too-familiar mode of procrastination. For some reason, we writers tend to have a difficult time getting started, and we can drag our heels when we feel stuck. The important thing here is again to find a schedule that works for you: a schedule that's realistic enough to stick to. Consider the analogy with exercise. If you aren't normally very athletic, but need to get in shape, it's usually better to find some mode of exercise that's fairly easy and enjoyable in order to begin

and continue. Once you're comfortable going to the gym for classes, or walking three days per week, you can gradually extend the time you're spending or the degree of difficulty in each exercise session. On the other hand, if you begin by setting an unrealistic goal for yourself of running ten miles per day from the start, you may very well quickly come to dread your own regimen and burn out. So, whether you have a lot of time or a little, make the process enjoyable by not only keeping your writing sessions relatively low-key at first, but also by writing in a comfortable spot at a time when you're sharp.

Are you a morning or evening person? When do you get your best ideas? Do you prefer writing at home or in a library, café, or other setting? There's no right place or schedule, only a right one for you personally. And this may change as you and your writing change. So, stay flexible while prioritizing your writing time and space. Once you've made this space, you'll somehow find more and more time and energy for your writing as you become more immersed in the world you're creating. As laborious as writing stories can sometimes feel, there is also much joy to be found in this kind of creative labor. As you hone your craft, you're bringing your imaginative life into focus so that others can benefit.

## Sources

As we've discussed, your actual lived experience is often the best place to start when first writing stories. Not only are you the expert on your own life, but also by using the concrete details you've experienced first-hand (the faded pink-and-white check dress you wanted to wear every day as a toddler; the flirtatious exchanges between the bus-driver of your route and her favorite daily passenger), you are more likely to avoid **clichés**, **melodrama**, and **stock characters** or stereotypes. Although it can be tempting to write a fantasy-version of your own life, you're better off sticking with reality at this stage, and gradually transforming it: by melding scenes, people, and stories, and by creating equally believable details.

We'll discuss details in greater depth in the following chapter. But for now, it may be helpful to begin by thinking about your relationships with family, friends, neighbors, older or younger people, and romantic partners, past or present. It's almost impossible to find a relationship that doesn't contain some degree of mixed emotion or **ambivalence**, as well as some sense of mystery, areas that are unresolved, and areas of **conflict**. All of these elements make for powerful stories. As you begin to transform people into characters, start by changing their names and picking and choosing aspects from each. For example, your aunt Rose's height and confidence may be melded with your neighbor's tendency to throw loud parties.

CRAFTING STORIES

If after mining your own experience for material, you find that you're still coming up short, it may be helpful to review the following list of sources. If you're in a class, you could discuss the ones you find useful and add some of your own to the list.

1. **Personal Experiences:** Are there experiences that shaped you, changed your perspective, or that simply stand out in your mind? These need not be overtly dramatic to prove valuable as sources. Powerful stories often simply chart some change in the protagonist's understanding. A character may struggle with issues of self-esteem until they meet someone whose sense of humor coaxes them out of their shell; in another story, a character may realize the importance of forgiveness after a conflict with a friend whom they find out is deeply damaged.
2. **Memorable Incidents:** Are there specific incidents you've witnessed that have stuck with you? Maybe your kitchen once caught on fire, or you saw someone stealing food from a supermarket shelf. What do you know about the incident? What don't you know? Fiction writers often fabricate entire stories around a memorable incident or moment. Again, this need not be a high-speed chase or bank robbery; it might be a relatively ordinary occurrence that sparks a story: your ninety-year old neighbor wears his pajamas to retrieve his mail at the end of his driveway each day until ...; a houseguest stays long after they're welcome, sparking a confrontation.
3. **Family Relationships:** No matter how close or distant, most of us have families, so, unsurprisingly, this is a fertile ground for stories. Consider what you know about your family members, what you don't know and would like to find out, and what you really *wouldn't* want to know if given the chance. Also, spend some time thinking about the complexities of your family relationships. Likely, you'll find personality traits, conflicts, and mysteries that you can use for your stories. As usual, feel free to mix and match traits from different individuals in order to create characters.
4. **Romantic Relationships:** Most of us have had at least one romantic relationship that has since ended. What did you love about that person you were with? What drove you crazy? In what ways were you compatible or incompatible? What were some of the sources of conflict, ambivalence, or tension? By reflecting back on this relationship with honesty, you'll be able to avoid writing cliché love stories, and instead find material for unique, believable characters and plots.

5. **Other Influential Relationships:** Many successful stories pair younger and older characters or include a generational mix. Spend some time contemplating people in your own life that have been especially influential, especially those who are much older or younger than you. Were there areas of misunderstanding? What did you learn from them? What may they have learned from you?
6. **Observations:** Everyday observations, the kind you jot down in your notebook or record on your phone, are rife with possibilities. Don't be too choosy at first. Just jot down your description of the smell in the air, the expression on the face of someone you love, the way a car in front of you screeched to a halt. When you come back to these observations later, you may find a good story-starter or a description you can use in an existing story to build atmosphere and texture.
7. **Places:** Even those of us who don't have particularly good memories seem to hold certain places in our mind. And creating a vivid setting or sense of place is an essential part of crafting short stories. Think back to the places that are most memorable and evocative for you: your grandmother's attic, the basketball court where you spent most of your free time, a place to which you regularly escaped. Call on your five senses to describe these places in detail. It's very likely that you'll be able to use one of these places or a composite for a short story.

### Active Reading

Most writers agree that reading the work of others is the most important thing they can do to grow. Reading carefully, with an eye toward craft, will be especially helpful to you as you begin to draft your own stories. The various reading you do—from assignments to your own discoveries—may at times confirm a direction you're taking and, at others, help you uncover possibilities you hadn't ever considered. As you read, almost all of the observations you make and questions you raise are potentially useful; even if you detest a story you're reading for a class, for instance, reading it may help to confirm ways in which you *don't* want to write. The process of imitation and admiration of some techniques and styles and rejection of others is a vital aspect of developing your own aesthetic. Most of us gradually cobble together ways of doing things until our own inclinations begin to emerge. And even then, growing through the reading we do is a lifelong process.

As you read, it's useful to get in the habit of marking up passages that seem significant, notable, and perplexing. This process will likely make the reading you do more active and engaging, as well as serving as a

## CRAFTING STORIES

useful reminder when you return to the story. It's also a good idea to get in the habit of looking up words with which you're unfamiliar or rusty in a reputable online dictionary such as merriam-webster.com. In order to model this process of active reading, the following story by contemporary United States writer, Sandra Cisneros (b. 1954) is annotated.

### ✿ Barbie-Q

Yours is the one with mean eyes and a ponytail. Striped swimsuit, stilettos, sunglasses, and gold hoop earrings. Mine is the one with bubble hair. Red swimsuit, stilettos, pearl earrings, and a wire stand. But that's all we can afford, besides one extra outfit apiece. Yours, "Red Flair," sophisticated A-line coatdress with a Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, white gloves, handbag, and heels included. Mine, "Solo in the Spotlight," evening elegance in black glitter strapless gown with a puffy skirt at the bottom like a mermaid tail, formal-length gloves, pink chiffon scarf, and mike included. From so much dressing and undressing, the black glitter wears off where her titties stick out. This and a dress invented from an old sock when we cut holes here and here and here, the cuff rolled over for the glamorous, fancy-free, off-the-shoulder look.

relationship btwn speaker & "you"?

great details

Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky! Only Ken's invisible, right? Because we don't have money for a stupid-looking boy doll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas. We have to make do with your mean-eyed Barbie and my bubblehead Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including the sock dress.

speaker's age? poverty

Until next Sunday when we are walking through the flea market on Maxwell Street and there! Lying on the street next to some tool bits, and platform shoes with the heels all squashed, and a fluorescent green wicker wastebasket, and aluminum foil, and hubcaps, and a pink shag rug, and windshield wiper blades, and dusty mason jars, and a coffee can full of rusty nails. There! Where? Two Mattel boxes. One with the "Career Gal" ensemble, snappy black-and-white business suit, three-quarter-length sleeve jacket with kick-pleated skirt, red sleeveless shell, gloves, pumps, and matching hat included. The other, "Sweet Dreams," dreamy pink-and-white plaid nightgown and matching robe, lace-trimmed slippers,

setting

women's roles

hair-brush and hand mirror included. How much? Please, please, please, please, please, please, until they say okay. *dialogue style*

On the outside you and me skipping and humming but inside we are doing loopity-loops and pirouetting. Until at the next vendor’s stand, next to boxed pies, and bright orange toilet brushes, and rubber gloves, and wrench sets, and bouquets of feather flowers, and glass towel racks, and steel wool, and Alvin and the Chipmunks records, there! And there! And there! And there! and there! and there! and there! Bendable Legs Barbie with her new page-boy hairdo, Midge, Barbie’s best friend. Ken, Barbie’s boyfriend. Skipper, Barbie’s little sister. Tutti and Todd, Barbie and Skipper’s tiny twin sister and brother. Skipper’s friends, Scooter and Ricky. Alan, Ken’s buddy. And Francie, Barbie’s MOD’ern cousin.

Everybody today selling toys, all of them damaged with water smelling of smoke. Because a big toy warehouse on Halsted Street burned down yesterday—see there?—the smoke still rising and drifting across the Dan Ryan expressway. And now there is a big fire sale at Maxwell Street, today only.

So what if we didn’t get our new Bendable Legs Barbie and Midge and Ken and Skipper and Tutti and Todd and Scooter and Ricky and Alan and Francie in nice clean boxes and had to buy them on Maxwell Street, all water-soaked and sooty. So what if our Barbies smell like smoke when you hold them up to your nose even after you wash and wash and wash them. And if the prettiest doll, Barbie’s MOD’ern cousin Francie with real eyelashes, eyelash brush included, has a left foot that’s melted a little—so? If you dress her in her new “Prom Pinks” outfit, satin splendor with matching coat, gold belt, clutch, and hair bow included, so long as you don’t lift her dress, right?—who’s to know.

*why don't they care that their toys are damaged?*

*Craft Questions* .....

- Describe the voice of the speaker. What do we know about her through how she speaks? Who is the “you” in the story?
- What details does Cisneros use to bring the story to life?
- Why do you think Cisneros runs in dialogue without using quotes?
- Note places where the speaker directly addresses the reader. How does this form of address affect the story’s tone?
- What gender roles do the Barbies model for the girls? In what ways do the girls seem to accept or reject these roles?

CRAFTING STORIES

- Identify sources of conflict in the story. Who or what seems to prevail?
  - In what ways does Cisneros’s story deal with issues of class and race?
- .....

Technically a short-short story, “Barbie Q” is a highly compressed, focused piece of fiction. Like a snapshot, Cisneros’s piece presents us with an instant in time that nonetheless suggests a story. What do we know about the background, motivations, and relationship between the two characters? What do we know about the world they inhabit? Although you may not be able to agree on a single focus in discussion, it’s clear that Cisneros has mapped out a certain territory of thought, feeling, and experience. Her story transports us into its world, letting us make the final determination on what impression we take away with us, rather than leading us to draw a specific moral or conclusion.

Remember, the process of writing is almost always messy. If this is not the case, you may run into problems later. In other words, no matter how attached you may be to a certain idea for a story, it’s important to let it live and breathe a life of its own. For example, you may begin by wanting to write about a falling-out between siblings but find that one of your siblings seems rather lifeless in comparison to the other. If you’ve tried working on both characters, and hit a wall, it might be time to consider that the story would be stronger if you focused on a single protagonist or if you changed the viewpoint entirely. Most often, you’ll only discover the real focus of the story as you write, or even after the story is done. As you take up the various suggestions in this chapter, stay open.

To begin writing your own short stories, try a few of the following jump-starts. Have fun. Feel free to alter them as you see fit. And see if you can generate a jump-start or two of your own to share with others. For now, your only goal should be to start generating material; we’ll take up ways to shape and craft your material in the chapters that follow.

**Exercises**

**Jump-Starts:** Use any of these jump-starts to generate material. Once you’ve completed an exercise, set it aside for at least a day, come back to it later, and try gradually turning your notes into a story.

1. Write a list of the most fascinating or mysterious people you’ve encountered. They could be unusual in some way, or maybe you’ve always wondered about their stories. What are their physical characteristics? What do you know about their lives? What do you want to know? Use one or two of these people as the foundation for characters. Whatever you don’t know, make it up.



2. Begin by reading some of the first sentences of the stories collected in this text. Notice what you learn right away and what you want to know more about. Similarly aiming to place your reader **in medias res**, or in the middle of things, write at least five first sentences for five different stories. Choose the one that seems most promising as the beginning of a story.
3. Speak a story, or part of a story, into your phone.
4. Tell two secrets and one lie about yourself. Apply these three ideas to a character.
5. Close your eyes. Imagine a basement you've been in. It could be your current basement, one you grew up with, or one you've visited. You walk down the stairs. When you open your eyes, what is the first object that you see? Describe it.
6. Close your eyes. Imagine that you're taking a long car trip somewhere. When you open your eyes, what do you see? Describe the scene.
7. Find an object in your home to write about. What's the object's backstory? Begin a story by describing the object.