



SI Leeds Literary Prize Workshops - Beginning Fiction

The Elements of Fiction

First, I would like to suggest 'free writing' as a warm-up exercise. This is writing continuously for 3 to 5 minutes without pausing, thinking about what goes next or criticising your work. It is simply letting the words flow. As an exercise, this is triply effective: it literally 'warms up' your hand and arm muscles, it helps you clear your head of the 'noise of the day' and finally, it ends the tyranny of being faced with an empty sheet of paper.

Second, I would like to introduce you to the skill of fiction writing, by which I mean primarily novels and short stories. I am going to do this by focussing on the decisions which you need to make **BEFORE** you start writing your story.

The first decisions are to pick a **LOCATION** and a **TIME PERIOD**. This is essential to anchor your characters. Some writers get so caught up in describing the action which pushes their story forward, they don't notice that their characters are floating in an unspecific space-time continuum, rather than acting in a defined geographical location.

Time period is important as well – for instance if your plot involved a woman wandering alone on the Yorkshire Moors (like Jane Eyre) and you need to sustain this. You don't want the reader thinking: 'why doesn't she just use her mobile phone call to the police?' as this will ruin the tension which should build up before her eventual rescue. So, to make this convincing, you have to set the *whole novel* in the historical past, **BEFORE** mobile phones became common. Making this decision before you've finished your first draft will save you a lot of time later on.

LOCATION and **TIME PERIOD** will often be decided by **GENRE**.

Genre means a type of story. Some are: action, thriller, romance, crime. How many genres can you think of? What is their typical location? Time period? Science fiction, is by its nature, not tied to the present but can take place in the future. However, **CRIME** stories tend to be contemporary.

Now, you will also need **CHARACTERS** and a **PLOT**. We will talk more about plotting next time, but until then, don't be afraid of stealing a plot. Helen Fielding's first Bridget Jones book famously stole the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* (her leading man is even called Mark Darcy!).

Also, who are your **GENRE's** 'stock characters'? For example, in the Cowboy genre, the typical characters are male and reasonably youthful because plots tend to depend on *action*. In terms of period, cowboy stories are usually historical. They tend to be located in the western states of the US, hence the other name for the genre, the Western.

Genres often have repetitive STORIES as well – we'll talk more about this when we look at story structure.

As an exercise try writing a 'waking up' scene (see Beginning Fiction download). This is a common technique among novelists often used to introduce or flesh out a character to the reader. It is used to illustrate how the character experiences their world, that is, the place and times in which they live.

Finally, consider POINT OF VIEW:

We need to choose between first person, which is using 'I', or third person which is 'he or she'. Rewrite your waking-up exercise in the first or third person and compare which you think firstly, works best and, secondly, comes more naturally to you as a writer.

The 'Waking Up' exercise which you can download in this month's handout is a good way of introducing your location, your time period and your characters.