

“My Novel” Writing Course

ASSIGNMENT 1

AS THIS IS A PDF, YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO CLICK ON IT TO ENTER YOUR ANSWERS. PLEASE COPY THE QUESTION INTO YOUR WORD PROGRAM AND SEND ME A DOC OR DOCX FILE.

I USE WORD’S EXCELLENT TRACKING AND PROOFING TOOLS WHEN ‘MARKING’ YOUR WORK.

Hi, new student!

I’d like to make my mentoring responses as personal and appropriate as possible, so I’m going to start with some ‘getting to know you’ questions. Most are about your writing background and aspirations, so I hope you won’t find them too intrusive. However, some people are very cautious or private, so if you do find any question too nosey, just leave it blank.

- 1. NAME:**
- 2. AGE:** (asked only so I can see that a 15 yr old might not be expected to have the experiences of an older person)
- 3. ARE YOU NEW TO WRITING? AN OLD HAND?**
- 4. DO YOU HAVE A NOVEL STARTED THAT YOU WANT TO WORK ON?**
- 5. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ARE YOUR WRITING STRENGTHS?**
- 6. WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ARE YOUR WRITING WEAKNESSES?**
- 7. IN YOUR READING, WHICH GENRES APPEAL MOST TO YOU?** It has been argued that, for a novice writer, writing in the genre you love to *read* gives you a greater

chance of success because you know the nuances of the genre and know what avid readers of that genre expect

8. DO YOU HAVE A PARTICULAR WORLD ISSUE/LIFE EXPERIENCE/'HOBBYHORSE' YOU WOULD LIKE TO INCLUDE IN YOUR WRITING?

9. DO YOU HAVE A PASSION FOR SOMETHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO INCLUDE?

10. HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU HAVE TO DEVOTE TO WRITING?

PART A: FINDING INSPIRATION

Did you bring an idea to this novel plotting package that you are keen to work on? If so, great! If not, the following exercises may provide you with a starting idea that you can develop in order to, at least, learn and practice the basic principles of plotting a novel.

Please DO all the assignment exercises, even if you have a great idea already. Who knows, you may suddenly develop an even better one, or the exercise may free up your subconscious to help you further develop your original idea.

PART A: Question 1

Take **only one** of the following writing prompts and just keep writing the story. See what emerges. **Write ½ - 1 page [no more please - be kind!]**.

Treat it as the opening paragraph and demonstrate your understanding of writing an opening that will grab the reader. (Apply the principles of Action, Suspense and Hooks)

a) Cloe narrowed her eyes. "You assured me this would never happen again, John."

b) Lord Arkon gave a barely perceptible nod and they started – at first tentatively and then with a sudden frenzy.

c) There were four days I couldn't account for – still can't.

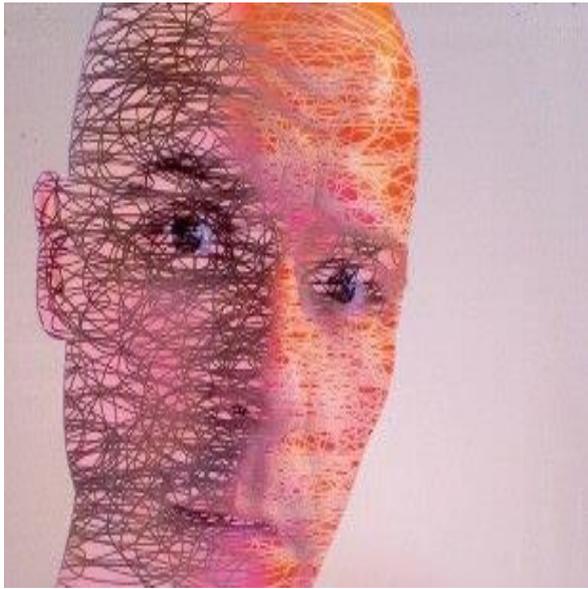
d) "You can open your eyes now," she said.

PART A: Question 2. If you already have a story you are burning to write, you may skip this exercise.

Some writers respond best to visual prompts. Choose **only one** of the 8 photos below and see what inspiration for a plot emerges. Of course, if several of the images have an influence, that's fine; but I don't want you trying to awkwardly scrunch in ideas for the sake of saying 'I used 4 photos'!

In this exercise, just list 4 to 6 ideas for one plot in point form... don't write flowing text or start a story.





PART A: Question 3.

Your turn to shine. *YOUR NOVEL!*

Write a basic rough plot IDEA for a novel of your own choosing (it doesn't have to be worked out to the last detail...you don't even have to know how it ends).

If you have an idea for a novel that has been eating away at you, this is your opportunity to spell it out. I would prefer a succinct plot outline of less than 1/2 page ... but a page is the

absolute max, please. One important writing skill you need to practice is to write succinctly so that you can send agents and publishers a precise synopsis of your novel.

EXAMPLE

Please don't feel intimidated by the exercise... if you can't yet put your plot into a concise form that reads well and could be called a plot outline or synopsis, that's fine. That comes later! Here's an example of all that is required right now:

"I want to write about a property manager in a real estate office (that's what I do, so I know about the setting) who somehow discovers a mass murderer in one of the rentals. She is too uncertain to go to the police, so starts checking on him. Her life is in danger because he works out she is snooping."

You notice there are no details... lots to be figured out???

As well, please note that I did not turn it into a book cover blurb – 'Will Marcia ever get her back rent from the killer? Will she find true love at the police station? Such 'teasers' are of no use to me because I can't evaluate your plot ideas.

PART A: Question 4.

Thinking outside the box.

When a student brings a story idea to this course, one they are itching to write, he or she has sometimes 'lived' it, written too much of it (even mentally), to be open to change. The creative impulse is past, ideas are fixed, and any suggestion from me that the writer should change to a different tense, use a different narrator, or change the ending, is met with dismay.

So, to goad your creativity and ensure that you are not locked into one idea, I want you to devise a second, alternative storyline – one you would be happy to develop through this course, should the first preference story idea prove impractical.[See footnote below]

Your alternative story concept can be of the same genre, if you choose, but must not use the same characters or setting, or be a sequel or part of a series.

Again, you need only provide the bare bones and do not need to know how the story ends.

FOOTNOTE: Why might your first idea be impractical? If it is a children's story, it may not have the complexity of plot or characterisation to allow you to gain the most from the course exercises. If it is overly ambitious, too 'literary', complex or avant garde to work well with the commercial novel basics I teach, again, you won't get value from the course. If you are trying to create a biographical novel, exploring and exposing people and incidents from your own life, there is often too little distancing from the truth to be able to create a good novel. My maxim is: Don't let the truth spoil a good story. For any of these reasons, I may recommend that you choose a different idea.

PART B: PLANNING YOUR NOVEL

You have now explored three or four possible ideas for a novel: one from a 'first line' prompt; one from a visual prompt; and two of your own choosing.

Crunch time! Which will you now develop into your novel plot over the next two assignments and write during the 20 module course?

A) What genre would you like to try? A good clue to what you'll write best is the genre you prefer to read.

B) Where would you like to set the story? Will it be contemporary or an historical future or fantasy world? (Remember, NO details...just bare bones, please)

C) Will the main character (MC) be male or female? Give him/her a name.

D) What does this character do in life?

E) What great goal will drive them throughout the story? (Catch the man who killed his daughter; win the heart of Samantha; kill the dragon; save the planet; pull off a bank heist, etc)

F) Who or what will try to stop him/her achieving this goal?

G) a) What will be your Main Character's (MC) Dominant Strength?

b) Will it be obvious from the start or will it have to develop or be found?

H) a) What is your character's Dominant Flaw?

b) Is it related to the Dominant Strength... and if so, in what way?

PART C. First Paragraph

In this section, you will write several passages which will give me an opportunity to assess your basic skills and ability to construct a story.

Identifying, Action, Suspense and Hooks

It is useful training to analyse how a published author achieves certain effects – in this case, how he opens his story. The following exercise is designed to heighten your understanding of a story as a deliberate construct – a way of manipulating the reader. Even (or especially) in the first few lines, the author is making decisions about how best to snare the reader, what to include, the 'voice' to use and the tone to employ. He or she has already make the decision whether to use 1st or 3rd person and whether to use past or present tense.

PART C: Question 1

This excerpt comes from a book which is unmistakably narrated in third person. The narrator tells us about the setting and the characters and we do not get inside the character's head to know what she is thinking. Nevertheless, the author skilfully uses dialogue to have the characters reveal their feelings and he also chooses his words to delicately manipulate *our* feelings about the incident.

This is the opening page from *Mouth to Mouth* by Michael Kimball.

On the crest of the hayfield, outside her sheep pasture, Ellen Chambers stood under a green canopy tent passively smiling while her son-in-law asphyxiated her daughter with wedding cake. Randy was apparently teaching Moreen the first lesson of their married life, a public punishment for the way she had fed him, mashing purple frosting into his sculpted goatee. The wedding guests laughed. Even Moreen's high school friends thought it was funny, the way her back bent over the table and her belly showed her swollen navel through the silk. But when Randy wiped his hands on Moreen's dress, then stalked away from her, Ellen lost her smile and went to head him off at the beer keg.

“Is it my imagination, or is the groom not the son-in-law of your dreams?”

Ellen heard the caution in her friend’s voice. In her heels and close-fitting skirt, Maddy was doing her best to keep pace with Ellen.

“He’s twenty-seven years old,” Ellen said. “She’s a junior in high school.”

“Shy girls always marry outlaws,” Maddy said. “You did.” She took hold of Ellen’s arm, a gentle grip meant to dissuade. “Anyway, you don’t want to make a scene today, not with all the cameras.”

Ellen stopped walking. She shut her eyes, took a deep breath.

Michael Kimball, *Mouth to Mouth*, Headline Book Publishing, London, 1999.

- a) What hooks can you identify?
- b) What do you think the writer is up to with that first line?
- c) What word choices subtly (or not so subtly) lead us to dislike the new son-in-law before we even see him?
- d) How does this passage meet the two requirements of a good opening paragraph – action and suspense? [*Please make sure you read the module material for **literary definitions** of action and suspense before you attempt this.*]

PART C: Question 3

You decided on a plot concept for your novel in Part B above.

Consider the different points at which your novel *could* start or the different perspectives, even different character POVs or narration styles.

Try to make the three paragraphs quite different. Write one in 1st person and one in 3rd person, so that I can evaluate your mastery of both.

End of ASSIGNMENT ONE.

Please re-name your completed assignment file as [Your Name] ASSIGNMENT 1 and send it to writing-course@hotmail.com. I am always delighted to get some background info about my clients and a photo makes me feel I’m talking to that person face-to-face, so feel free to say “Hi, Jim” and chat.