

## KICK-STARTS Beginning your story

The material for stories is everywhere. From the anecdote about a party you overheard on the bus this morning, to that old family story about your great-aunt Gladys and her ham radio, to the disastrous Thanksgiving dinner you ate at Denny's last year, the world is full of story ideas. However, if you still have no idea what you want to write about—if your fingers are frozen and your mind is blank—here are some exercises to give you that initial push. Over the years, these strategies have worked well for many of my students. At least one of them is likely to work for you, too.

1. Start keeping a journal. Today. Right now. Your journal can be a notebook of lined paper, or a word processing file on your hard drive, or even a blog. Write down every possible story idea you can think of, including ideas other writers have already used (you can always tweak the details). Draw pictures of characters and settings. Make lists. Take your journal to a crowded place—your school's cafeteria at lunchtime or the mall on Saturday. Discreetly listen to several conversations, and jot down the highlights. In short, throw everything into the bag. Then raid your journal for ideas when you're ready to write.
2. Quickly jot down the names of the five to ten most interesting people you know. Then take a closer look at the list. Which *two* people from that list would make the most sparks fly if they were put into a story together? What would be the nature of their conflict? Set them loose on each other and see what happens.
3. In his excellent book *Turning Life into Fiction*, Robin Hemley recommends the time-honored technique of mixing and matching the most intriguing characteristics from different people to create composite characters. Give it a try, and then look for ways to put those characters at odds with one another.

4. **Brainstorm.** This is an activity in which you cut loose with your pen or pencil or computer and let the ideas flow. Linda Flower advises: "The purpose of brainstorming is to stimulate creative thought. . . . When you come up with an idea or a phrase that isn't quite right, resist the temptation to throw it out and start again. Just write it down. . . . Don't stop to perfect spelling, grammar, or even phrasing. Keep working at the level of ideas." Flower notes that brainstorming differs from freewriting in that the latter method encourages the writer to spill out *anything* that occurs to him or her, while brainstorming "is not free association; it is a goal-directed effort to discover ideas relevant to your problem." Your goal is to write a short story, and your method is to open the floodgates and get everything that is even potentially relevant down on paper.
5. Because literary writing depends so heavily on images, you might want to focus your story around a specific object. Look slowly around the room you're in now until your eye alights on an object that suggests a story. Is that string of Christmas lights demanding that a story be told about why it was hung above the window? And what about the broken laptop stashed in the corner? Why does your protagonist refuse to throw it away?
6. If you have some extra time on your hands, go to a secondhand store. Look around for an object that is begging to be the centerpiece of a story. What is the story behind that peacoat with a big splash of chartreuse paint on the front? Did an artist get in a fight with her lover? Was an elderly man attacked by a paintball gang? Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Annie Proulx loves poking around among old things and recommends driving down back roads and stopping for yard sales. For Proulx, the attraction is not just the things she buys but also what she hears along the way: "I listen attentively in bars and cafés, while standing in line at the checkout counter, noting particular pronunciations and the rhythms of regional speech, vivid turns of speech and the duller talk of everyday life."
7. The smell and texture of an object can be great triggers for writing, but if you're pressed for time, you can use the Internet instead. Type a random noun—for example, "pineapple"—into the Google Image Search and see what turns up. A recent search resulted in plenty of photographs of pineapples, as one might expect. However, the search also showed a bare-chested young man holding two pineapple slices over his nipples. On the next page was a photo of the Pineapple Inn in Newport, Rhode Island. It doesn't take much imagination to realize that combining the young man and the inn could produce quite a story!
8. In a single sitting, write three to five openings for three to five different stories. Then put them aside for a day or two. Reread them, and choose the one that is most likely to make a reader want to keep reading.
9. The great short story writer John Cheever once said of his own work: "My favorite stories are those that were written in less than a week and were often

composed aloud." Take the "Cheever Challenge": Get a digital recorder, or a willing listener, and tell a story aloud. Give yourself less than a week to turn your oral version into a completed story on paper.

- ▶ 10. Write a story in which you reveal a secret about yourself, but have that secret apply to a character who is very much unlike you.
- ▶ 11. Write a story that could get you into trouble. Expose an uncomfortable truth about someone you know, or reveal a secret you promised never to disclose. Then transform your narrative into fiction by changing the setting and altering the characters' names and appearances.
- ▶ 12. "My writing often unfolds like a connect-the-dots exercise," says Lori Ostlund. "Anecdotes and images pop into my head, and my job is to figure out how they all tie together." Make a list of interesting anecdotes and images that may not have an obvious connection with one another. Then connect the dots between apparently disparate material and turn it into a story.
- ▶ 13. Tell the story that only you can tell—the story you have inside that's screaming to get out.
- ▶ 14. If you enrolled in this course with a longer story already in mind, go ahead and write it. Once you're finished, let it sit for a few days. Then go back and revise it, cutting out all the extraneous material. Often that merciless revision will result in a much stronger piece of fiction.
- ▶ 15. Read before you write. If you find yourself blocked, read some of the stories in this book's anthology. The excitement of reading a great piece of fiction can often motivate you to try to create one yourself. There are far too many excellent anthologies of short fiction than we have room to list here; however, if you'd like to see what the finest North American writers are currently writing, a good place to start is *The Best American Short Stories* series, which features a new guest editor each year.