

# The Creative Writer

Level Two: Essential Ingredients

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### Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data

Fishman, Boris, 1979–

The creative writer. Level two, Essential Ingredients / by Boris Fishman.

p. : ill. ; cm.

“... designed to be used in a mentor/student relationship, with teaching, guidance, and evaluation tips provided for the mentor or teacher.”

—Publisher's e-mail communication.

Interest grade level: 5-8.

ISBN: 978-1-933339-56-6

1. Creative writing (Elementary education)
2. Creative writing (Middle school)
3. English language--Composition and exercises--Study and teaching (Elementary)
4. English language--Composition and exercises--Study and teaching (Middle school)

I. Title.

II. Title: Growing your craft

LB1576 .F57 2012

372.62/3

2012931274

For a complete list of history, grammar, reading, and writing materials produced by Peace Hill Press, or to request a catalog, visit [peacehillpress.com](http://peacehillpress.com).

# The Creative Writer

Level Two: Essential Ingredients

*by Boris Fishman*



PEACE HILL PRESS  
CHARLES CITY, VA



# INTRODUCTION

## TO THE STUDENT

This is the second volume in a four-volume series. The previous volume, *The Creative Writer, Level One: Five Finger Exercises*, introduced beginning writers to some of the basics of storytelling: plot, character, dialogue. Are you a beginner? Then you may want to pick up that volume instead.

The exercises in this volume refresh and build on the lessons of *Level One*, but stand alone as well. So if you've tried your hand at some poems and short stories, and you read both fiction and poetry for pleasure, and the words "plot" or "dialogue" aren't foreign to you, feel free to start here. You can always backtrack.

This 36-week syllabus is divided into two parts: Fiction and Poetry. The first 18 weeks will focus on fiction, the remaining 18 on poetry. We will concentrate on fundamentals: What makes a short story a short story? How does an author capture the reader's attention and make him or her turn the page? *Why* is it *critical* to capture a reader's attention? But we will also step away from craft guidance to talk about *how writers think*. How should, say, a poet *pay attention to things* in order to come up with descriptions that might make for good poetry? Where do ideas for stories come from? And so on.

## FICTION

### The 5 Essentials

Some friends of mine have a 7-year-old daughter named Phoebe. Phoebe loves to write short stories. Asked to describe what makes a good short story, Phoebe said: "All you need are some people you care about and the problem they're going to solve." Mark Twain couldn't have put it better. Another way of making Phoebe's point is to say

that every story needs a **plot** and **characters**: Something that happens and someone involved in the action.

Unless you're writing a story in which every character is mute or for some reason communicates only by gesture (which would be kind of interesting, actually), your story will also need **dialogue**.

You'll also need to figure out from whose **point of view** you're going to tell the story. Will it be told by a third-person narrator who isn't part of the story or by one of the characters? Will the narrator be able to climb inside every character's thoughts, or will he be able to speak accurately only about his own?

Finally, your story will have to take place somewhere, won't it? Not all stories have an obvious **setting**—sometimes, not having a detailed setting is the author's way of indicating that the characters and story are meant to be universal—but this year, ours will.

There you have what might be called The 5 Essential Ingredients of a traditional short story. You can write a good short story without including every one of them, but first you must master the writing of short stories that include them. That will be our goal this year.

As you'll see in the table of contents that follows, we'll start each unit by focusing on one of the 5 Essentials, using the same short story each time, a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. If you think you're too old to use fairy tales to learn about creative writing, think again. In our time, "fairy tales" may be for children, but fairy tales like "Rapunzel" and "The Golden Goose" (this year's selection) are rarely the simple, sugary delights we think of as "fairy tales." The first editions of the Grimms' fairy tales, actually, were criticized because so much of the contents was deemed unsuitable for children by the reading public. So, think of these fairy tales as the *E.T.* and *Star Wars* of the 18th and 19th centuries: serious entertainment for kids and adults alike. (I guess that would make the Grimms the Steven Spielberg and George Lucas of their era.) These stories have endured for a reason: though they were written hundreds of years ago, they continue to make sense for our lives today.

What's more, such fairy tales make for excellent study of creative writing basics like plot. A lot of these stories originated as oral folktales—that is, people told them to each other; the Grimms were, in fact, the first to collect them in a printed edition—and as

anyone who has ever told a story or a joke knows, the first rule of story-telling is: You have to keep the audience's attention. There are many ways to do this, but the most obvious is to *get your listeners interested in what happens next*. I emphasize those words because you will be hearing them a lot in the course of this year's study. Here we'll remember Phoebe, our 7-year-old guide: If the characters in a story are interesting for one reason or another, the reader will want to know what happens to them. And if these characters find themselves in a situation whose outcome is unclear—like any good movie cliffhanger—it's a good bet readers will be at the edge of their seats, wanting to find out how the story ends.

When I started writing, it never occurred to me to think about my audience—that is, what would make the story interesting to *my readers*. And yet, if you asked me for whom I was writing, I'd say: an audience. I wasn't writing for my "desk drawer," so to speak; I wanted people to read my stories. And yet, I gave zero thought to what would make the stories interesting for *them* to read. Believe it or not, the random workings of our minds are not automatically interesting to other people, even if our stories are smart or well-written. More than intelligence and beautiful language is required if a piece of writing is to be called great *fiction*. Intelligent, original writing is good *writing*; intelligent, original storytelling is good *fiction*. That's what we're going to practice *a lot* in the fiction section: how to tell a *story*. The good news is: You already know how to do it. It isn't that different from the way you tell a story in ordinary life, or the way you time a joke. So you're halfway there.

## POETRY

### The 5 Essentials

Just like fiction, poetry can be said to have a handful of essentials. And as with fiction, five essentials help answer the question: What makes a poem a poem? You can probably guess several of them already. For instance, what do many poems have in common, something that immediately distinguishes them from short stories?

For one thing, poems use incomplete lines that "break" well before they've reached the right margin of the page. So, **line breaks** are an essential aspect of poetry.

As you must already know from your study of poetry in English class, many poems **rhyme**. This is especially true of older poetry. Modern poetry rhymes a lot less

frequently. Instead, contemporary poems use what's known as *free verse*; that is, verse that doesn't rhyme.

What else makes poetry unique? If you've studied any Shakespeare, you know that he often used something called iambic pentameter. This term refers to the rhythm created by the words in a line of poetry. In this case, "iambic" means that unstressed and stressed syllables will alternate. That probably sounds confusing, but all that "stress" refers to is which syllable gets an accent when we pronounce a word. Think of a word like "bouquet." We say bou-QUET, not BOU-quet, right? That is, we stress the second syllable, not the first. There are variations on this rule, but that's the basis of it.

And "pentameter" (from the Greek *pent-* or *penta-*, which means "five") means that a line will have five such unstressed-stressed combinations. A more playful way of putting it would be to say that a line of iambic pentameter sounds like this: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM.

The rhythmic structure of a poem is known as **meter**. Just like rhyme, strict meter is more common among older poems. But even contemporary poems use meter to some extent. In either case, it will be useful to learn how it works, because meter contributes so much to how a poem sounds. We'll begin to this year.

Which brings us to the next essential aspect of poetry, one that arguably takes in both rhyme and meter: **sound**. Sound is important in short stories, too, but because poems use far fewer words than stories, it's that much more important in poetry. Sound in poetry takes many different forms—rhyme, meter, repetition, other kinds of patterning—and is something we will explore across different lessons this year.

Also, we will discuss **how to decide what to write about**, as well as spend several lessons talking about **word choice**. That is, we will practice finding the ideal word for a line of poetry, individual word choice being that much more critical in a poem because of the far fewer words it uses. We're going to get up close and personal with words to see what they're made of.

But perhaps even more important, the longest unit this year will cast aside all this dutiful craft study and focus on *nonsense*. That's right. We're going to practice making as little sense as possible in our poetry. Why? Because poetry is about more than literal meaning. It's about sound, and conveying a certain feeling or mood. Very often,



conjuring these sensations has nothing to do with what the poem *means*. In fact, meaning can get in the way! We will explore this mysterious notion together this year.

## IN CLOSING

Before we move forward, one final but critical note: Creative writing isn't a science. Even though I talk about "rules," a more accurate term might be "guidelines." Unlike math, creative writing has no formulas. Anything goes, as long as you can make it original, interesting, and all the other qualities of good fiction and poetry. The best thing you can do for yourself as you begin this year's exercises is to discard the idea that there's an absolute right or wrong answer in most of the situations we will encounter along the way.

So, my challenge to you in the following pages is to not worry about "the right answer." Initially, all my talk about craft may sound like there are very specific ways to write. But that would misrepresent my point. As with so many things in life, the best writing comes from something a wise person once called "disciplined abandon"—that is, go wild, but help harness and shape your energy and talent with creative restrictions. How can restrictions be creative? This year's syllabus tries to answer that question.



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**FICTION**



FICTION • SECTION 1

# PLOT

WEEKS 1–4



# PLOT

**Purpose:** To examine how plot works in a short story.

Authors of fiction have different opinions about how much to plan before sitting down to write. Some authors don't plan at all, except for having a general idea and maybe the first sentence. Others come up with major plot points, and fill in the details as they go. Still others plot out every little thing in advance.

Different approaches work better for different authors. Generally speaking, the last of the three can be confining. If you plan out every detail in advance, you give your story little opportunity to “surprise” you. When we start writing, all sorts of unexpected things happen. For instance, a character we had planned on making minor might start speaking in such an infectiously funny voice that we realize we have to award them a larger role in the story. But if it was part of our “plan” to kill them off within two pages, that plan is pretty limiting, isn't it?

This said, this third approach—plot everything in advance—is a wonderful aid for beginning writers. A story is a scary thing to try to write. Even for seasoned writers, a blank page, whether in a notebook or on the computer, is a small nightmare. There are worse ways to start than by drawing up a 10-point plan to follow. Creating such a 10-point plan for a short story will be Part 2 of your assignment this week. Part 1 will be to read “The Golden Goose,” by the Brothers Grimm, in Appendix I and map out what the Grimms' 10-point plan could have been, if they had come up with one.

You may wish to read the story once for information, and then, as you read a second time, to mark each new plot development as you go. In brief, plot points answer the question, “What happened next?” Every time something new happens in the story,

that's a plot point. If you can come up with about 10 during your reading, you'll have done Part 1 of your assignment while reading the story!

## PART 1

What is the plot of "The Golden Goose"? In other words, what happens in the story?

To make plotting out easier, it may help to divide the story into several sections:

- I. What happens when Dullhead and his brothers go to the forest to chop wood.
- II. The events at the inn where Dullhead goes to spend the night with his goose.
- III. Dullhead's journey toward the town ruled by the king.
- IV. The challenges assigned to Dullhead by the king.

Quite a few things happen in each of these sections, but these are the main "movements," to use a musical term. When thinking about writing a story of your own, it may help, before you begin, to have this kind of general idea of the "movements" in a story. So, going back to "The Golden Goose," **the first part of your exercise this week is to map out a total of 10 connecting details in the "movements" detailed above.**

1. Try to highlight distinct, important plot developments, as opposed to every last detail.
2. If sentences 2 and 3 in a paragraph in the story serve as nothing more than elaborations of sentence 1, don't mention them.
3. Here's a handy guideline: Your plot summary should be detailed enough for someone who has never read the story to learn all its major plot developments. But you should do this in as few entries as possible.

A sample answer is provided below, but don't peek! Remember that your answers don't have to overlap with mine perfectly. Also, the number 10 is somewhat arbitrary. If your plot outline runs over or under by a couple of plot points, that's fine.

Plot points in “The Golden Goose”:

- I. What happens when Dullhead and his brothers go to the forest to chop wood.
  - a.
  - b.
  - c. (or however many you need)

II. The events at the inn where Dullhead goes to spend the night with his goose.

...

III. Dullhead’s journey toward the town ruled by the king.

...

IV. The challenges assigned to Dullhead by the king.

...

## **PART 2**

**Part 2 of your exercise is to reverse Part 1.** That is, come up with major plot movements for a story idea, and then populate them with 10 (or so) connecting plot points. For that, you’ll need some situations or story ideas. If you’re stuck, here are a few:

1. A character is spending the summer working in a bookshop. One day, a boy she really likes—not much of a reader, as far as she knows—comes into the store and tries to shoplift a book.
2. The day the president of the country came to town.
3. A young man whose father won’t let him sail by himself determines to show his father that he’s capable by taking the family boat out by himself in the middle of the night.

So, what you would do, if, say, you chose #1, is start by coming up with the major plot strokes of the story. Three or four should suffice. You can use “The Golden Goose” as a model.

1. Adelaide and Paul live in the same town and their families see each other often, but he hardly notices her.
2. Adelaide takes a job in a bookshop for the summer while Paul joins a lacrosse camp in town.
3. Adelaide's summer
4. Paul walks into Adelaide's bookshop and tries to steal a book.
5. Resolution

Note that these movements don't cover more than the basic directions of the plot. These "stage directions" don't explain everything that will happen—but what does happen should relate to these overarching movements. The next step would be to populate them with plot points, for instance:

1. Adelaide and Paul live in the same town and their families see each other often, but he hardly notices her.
    - a. The story opens at a local baseball game (the town hosts a AAA farm team). Many of the town's families are in attendance. We see Paul through Adelaide's eyes. She does several things to see if he'll notice her, but he seems occupied by the game and his friends.
    - b. Streaming out of the stadium after the game, Adelaide is shoved by someone rushing out. She assumes it's her little brother, but it's Paul, jostling with his friends.
    - c. The weather is finally turning warm in this northern town. Some paragraphs of description of the town, its character, and the season from Adelaide, leading into the second movement.
  2. Adelaide takes a job in a bookshop for the summer while Paul joins a lacrosse camp in town.
- ...

Note how several new details/concerns crept in as I worked on the plot points: baseball game, the town hosts a farm team, the town is far north, etc. Some of these details



may fall away or have to be changed as I work on the actual story, but they provide a wonderful starting point.

Now, you can continue on to creating plot points for the remaining movements of your story.

Before you move on to the challenge exercises, I'd like you to note that there are a lot of things in "The Golden Goose" that don't make sense. For instance, why does Dullhead head to the inn instead of returning home? I suppose it may have been too late to return home, but then why and where does he set off with the goose the next day? His journey makes no sense in the context of the information we've been given. And it's hard for us to believe that he wouldn't trouble

himself "in the least" about all these strange people stuck to his goose. Maybe we're meant to conclude that Dullhead is too simple-minded, kind as he is, to worry about these things, but these unjustified plot points did stick out in my mind. (The last one is an issue more of character than plot.) Were there any other details in the story that didn't make sense to you?



The reason I point this out is to demonstrate that even legendary stories have flaws. A short story, like a poem, remains a work in progress even when the author decides that s/he has "finished" it. Even the best authors and poets take shortcuts, leave things unexplained, or include unrealistic details. They're human beings, they're not perfect, and they're trying to sort out a lot of information at the same time. Short stories and poems can be thought of as complex machines with an extraordinary number of moving parts: An author is simultaneously trying to figure out plot, character, dialogue, etc. He's recreating a whole world from scratch! So it's a small miracle good stories are as good as they are. All of this is to say: Don't be daunted. Even the masters mess up.

## CHALLENGE EXERCISES

1. Cross out plot points 6–10 and write a new ending for “The Golden Goose.”
2. Imagine that the Grimms never got to write this story. Imagine they got started—“There was once a man who had three sons. The youngest of them was called Dullhead, and was sneered and jeered at and snubbed on every possible opportunity.”—and never returned to the story. Come up with a 10-point plot for a story beginning with these sentences that bears no resemblance to “The Golden Goose.” Remember that you can set this story in modern times and alter any details in the story. In fact, this challenge exercise requires you to.

In an upcoming lesson, you will practice creating suspense in your stories. Not in the “thriller” sense of “who robbed Columbia Savings Bank?” but in the sense of, “I’m curious to find out how this will resolve itself; that is, what will happen next.” Reread “The Golden Goose” and put a checkmark in the margin every time the story does something to make you wonder how things will turn out.

To give you an example, just yesterday I was reading a short story. I thought it was pretty boring. It described the relationship of a man and his wife. Not much happened in the story—just a lot of description of how they met, where they lived, and some special powers the woman possessed. Then the story seemed to settle down into an account of a very harsh winter. So harsh that this couple, who lived in a remote place, couldn’t even get out to go to the grocery store for supplies. My attention perked up. I began to wonder how things were going to turn out. Would they make it? The suspense of that was engaging. So, this would have been a spot I would have marked. Noticing our spikes in interest as we read can be difficult—the whole point is that when our interest spikes, we forget we’re reading a story and “fall into” the described world—but it’s a valuable skill to start practicing, because a good author is always thinking about what’s likely to stir his reader’s attention.

# SUSPENSE

**Purpose: To practice creating suspense in plot.**

This week, we're going to look more closely at how an author creates suspense in a short story. Creating suspense makes the reader wonder what's going to happen next. What's likely to do that?

There are many answers to that question, but here's the simplest: conflict. Let's say you pick up a short story in which the situation involves an underdog boxer from a down-and-out neighborhood taking on the cocky heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Naturally, we want to find out who's going to triumph in this conflict, so we read on. (Our interest, of course, depends on the characters being engaging. We'll discuss more what that means in the Character section.)

Here's a less literal alternative: Her whole life, Donna has been dreaming of going out-of-state to college. Her parents want her to remain in town. Will she achieve her dream?

What's the difference between the story about the boxers and the story about Donna? In the boxer story, the conflict is between two individuals. In Donna's, it's between Donna and her parents, but it's also between Donna and her dreams. Will Donna get to do what she wants? If we find Donna interesting, we'll want to know.

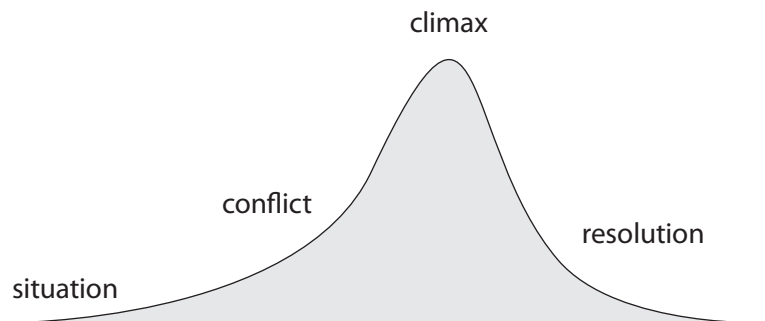
So, there are different kinds of conflict: You might write about a **literal** conflict between two forces—like two teams or two businesses or two countries, or two animals—or a less literal one, like Donna's above. In this latter type of story, the character tends to be on a **quest**.

In a quest story, what creates suspense is the desire of a character to achieve something in the face of long odds. Let's say a mountaineer is trying to become the first to climb a mountain in conditions no one has attempted before. Or a farmer is trying to grow vegetables at an altitude where no one has succeeded in growing anything but potatoes. Won't you be curious to find out what happens? "Quest" stories are a type of conflict story because what's a quest without something standing in its way? Not very suspenseful! (Think about it: Would you like to read a story about a teenager who decides to have a bake sale to benefit a local library, and the whole town decides to help, and everything turns out hunky-dory? Didn't think so.)

The basic outline of suspense in a story goes like this:

- A. Situation
- B. Conflict—either **literal** (between two opposing forces) or **quest** (between a character and whatever stands in the way of her goal)
- C. Climax
- D. Resolution

If you were to represent this sequence as a diagram, it would look like this:



So, to use an example from above:

1. **Situation:** Reinhard Tobolowsky has climbed every mountain in his native Austria except one. To set the record for having climbed all of Austria's peaks in record time, Tobolowsky has to climb the last one this winter. But because he got delayed returning from his last climb, it's fairly late in this season, and he risks getting trapped in a snowstorm.

2. **Conflict:** Will he make it?

3. **Climax:** Up on the mountain, Tobolowsky becomes trapped in a snowstorm. If he keeps going, he may die, though he will die a record holder—but only if he reaches the top.



4. **Resolution:** He pushes on. When he reaches the top, with his last strength, he wedges the poles of his tent as far into the snow as he can, so those who follow can see that he made it. The story ends with Reinhard clinging to life as the snow piles on and his supplies dwindle.

**Your assignment this week will be to come up with three situations and trace them through three conflicts, climaxes, and resolutions, respectively.** Aim to write about 25–50 words for each of the entries, as above. Make sure that at least one of your conflicts is **literal** and two **quest**, or vice versa.

In coming up with a **situation**, make sure yours answers one of two questions: Is it ripe for conflict? (Literal conflict) Or, does it include a character who wants something she's not sure she can get? (Quest conflict)

Then, the **conflict** becomes easy to figure out: Which of the two parties will come out on top? (Literal conflict) Or, does the character achieve his goal? (Quest conflict)

The **climax** is the moment which will answer these questions.

The **resolution** is what follows, the new order of things established by the resolution of the conflict.

If you're stuck for situations, I mention a couple below. Note that situations hardly have to be grandiose for readers to become interested: A local businessman who opens a restaurant in a "cursed" spot where five previous restaurants have failed is story enough. Also note that conflict doesn't have to be "literal"—a game, a competition, etc. Mom wanting to move homes, and Dad wanting to stay—that's conflict, too. (Note, also, that "conflict," in this sense, doesn't have to be rancorous; it merely refers to two sides with different views.)

More situations:

1. A remote farm has been enduring a record drought. If the rains don't come soon, the crop will wither, and with it, any chance of keeping the operation going. Out wandering one day, Riley, the youngest son, meets a Native American man who says he can direct him to a spring that holds enough water to irrigate the crops of 10 farms like his father's.
2. John is really short, but he's dying to make the basketball team.
3. Every time Mom plants flowers, a deer chews them up.