

# A Course of Study: Fiction

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## *What I Was Thinking*

For a long time my advice to students who aspired to write fiction was *please don't*. Their fiction overwhelmed me. I didn't know where to begin by way of response, it was so bad: bereft of plausibility, specificity, theme, coherence, and, especially, characters even remotely convincing or motivated. Novice fiction writers defined the genre as a daydream on paper: "My new story is about a C.I.A. agent who lives in Hawaii." Their plots went wherever they took them and ended—if the writer actually got that far before he or she surrendered to frustration—with the punch line *Then he woke up and realized it was all a dream*.

Kids had no concept of pace—enough plot happened in a page and a half to fill a novel. Often I couldn't tell who the main character was. When I could, I knew her hair color, complexion, eye color, birthday, and height to the half inch, but I didn't understand one thing about the character's needs, problems, feelings, or dreams. And theme was negligible. At best the conclusion presented a crude moral: "Erik learned that might doesn't make right, but he was glad he killed the evil wizard."

This series of lessons grew from a serious desire on the part of my students to write fiction—to pretend other lives, create from a different place than experience, and write what they love to read, which is, most often, fiction. Rudyard Kipling wrote that "Fiction is truth's older sister." My adolescent students clamored to make friends with the big sister.

I ask my kids to wait to attempt fiction until November, until after a course of study about the pitfalls and challenges of the genre, as well as lessons about approaches to creating fiction that provide scaffolds for their imaginations, for the hard work of invention.

We begin with a discussion of their memories of earlier, failed attempts at writing fiction and name what can go wrong. We look at what it takes to craft good fiction. We consider the themes, problems, and premises of the fiction they've been reading in reading workshop. Individuals develop lists of problems and premises they find intriguing and select one to explore in a short story (see Lesson 5: "Problems to Explore in Fiction"). Using a questionnaire, we collaborate in the creation of a main character, then discuss what they learned from the demonstration. As individuals are ready, they use a blank copy of the questionnaire to sketch their own main characters. And all along the way I read aloud good short stories, including the student short fiction in Appendix B and the published stories listed in Appendix E, so together we can tease out and name the ways that fictional narratives are structured and characters are developed.

This course of study doesn't guarantee great short stories, but it does put kids' feet under them as writers of fiction. Before they draft the first line, they have a sense of purpose, some good ideas that intrigue them, and a character they want to be with over the long weeks it takes to craft a convincing, compelling short story.

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