**Homework Practice Assignments**

These assignments should be more than a page (400-500 words), typed or ink, at least two hours of open-minded effort toward a creative and readable response to the prompt. You may want to do some brainstorming or sketching before you draft each homework practice, but it’s supposed to be an experiment, not a finished story. I don’t accept these late or written in pencil. If your writing is not legible, you must type. These are graded on clarity and fulfilling the assignment. So enjoy yourself and give it a try.

**Practice 1: showing and telling**

Choose one of these:

1. Write a scene where your character is deprived of one of his or her five senses. Then set the character in a situation where missing that particular sense would have an especially significant impact. The situation might put the character at an advantage or disadvantage, but in any case he or she will have to compensate, writing every bit of useful information possible from the other senses. Make it a dramatic situation, one where need or desire for some object is overwhelming. Here are some examples (use one or invent your own):

* A child standing blindfolded in front of a piñata really wants that candy inside.
* A man (who is spying) can see, but not hear, his wife as she talks to her ex-husband or lover.
* Someone on a very strict diet is at a party and stuck in a boring conversation near the snack table.

1. Focus on touch. We sometimes forget to use tactile descriptions in our stories, but we touch things every minute. Shopping for shoes or avocados, shaking hands, petting a cat, scrubbing pots, playing basketball Think of what it means to touch an odd, rare, holy or disgusting object. Consider temperature, moisture content, texture and weight.

Use these ideas to describe the way an action or event feels—putting on a piece of clothing, exercising, eating something tough or squishy, dancing, walking through a crowd, carrying groceries into the house, kissing, washing the car, digging a hole for a tree—whatever. Think about what kind of mood or impression your description gives the reader and then extend it by adding another character and a few lines of dialogue about another topic. Let the mood of the physical description impact the dialogue.

1. Focus on taste. There are four main types of tastes and each has its own words: sweet (sugary, saccharine), sour (acidic, tart), bitter (acrid, biting), and salty (briny, brackish). There are also lots of objects that have familiar but distinctive tastes and so are useful in description (lemons, garlic, candy, pickles, marshmallows, beer, coffee, etc.).

Take some characters out for dinner. Describe a particular course or even a whole meal zeroing in on the taste (see above). What mood or impression does your description communicate? What do your characters have to say about this meal?

1. Create metaphors or similes as quickly as you can. Write down one thing that is (or is like) another. Go wild. Start with a place where you might locate a story. The beach is a cake; the beach is a gardenia; the beach is nothing but wind; the beach is like a sad carpet; the beach is a long distance truck driver.

Write a couple sentences at the end picking your favorites and saying why you like those—what mood or logic or craziness they open up.

**Practice 2: Character**

Choose one of these:

1. Write a “dossier” for your character: as much background information as possible: name, age, gender, parents’ background and family members, occupation, income, job, notable co-workers, housing, hometown, sports team, hobbies, religious beliefs, biggest fears, fondest hope, most embarrassing moment, thing he or she is most proud of, favorite books and music, favorite sweatshirt/shoes, first pet, mode of transportation, things he collects, fitness level, weight, etc. This can be a bullet list if you want, and feel free to add categories.

OR you could do this as a scene in which your character sets up his or her online dating profile and has to think about whether to tell the truth on *everything* or not.

1. Sometimes we’re reluctant to get our characters into a lot of trouble, especially if they’re based closely on people we know and our own experiences. Push yourself a little to get your character into real trouble; make him or her mess up badly. Does she make a fool of herself at work? Is he too stubborn to admit he’s wrong even when it’s completely obvious? Maybe your character has chosen to do something clearly wrong. An indiscretion? An “experiment”? A theft? Shirking responsibility?
2. Write two versions of an opening paragraph of a story. In one, you the author will introduce a character by telling the reader some of the basics (age, gender, class, region, nationality, etc.) but also include some details about the character’s personality and desires, values and emotions. In your second version, let another character introduce the first. What is this second character’s attitude toward the first? What does he or she know, guess, suspect?
3. Every family has a black sheep, an eccentric, an embarrassment. For a couple pages, describe that person in your own (extended) family and all the anecdotes you can remember or imagine involving him or her. It may be someone others talk about and disapprove of, but whom you find intriguing. Is there the germ of a story in the rumors, the envy, and the half-told tales? Or maybe the story grows out of the actual encounters you or others have had with this person.

**Practice 3: Dialogue**

Choose one of these:

1. Go to a coffee shop, mall, park, or some other public place and eavesdrop. In your notebook, write down some lines of dialogue you overhear—anything that captures your attention. Add a few gestures, background noise, and physical details to get the voices context.
2. A good way to get a scene going is by starting it with the “non-apology.” Write and exchange that begins, “I’m sorry, but . . . “ Have the other character answer and then in the ensuing back-and-forth reveal the circumstances that got them into this situation.
3. Often we fight about the small things because the big things are too big and scary, too likely to get out of hand. Write a scene between two characters almost having a big fight, but not quite. Have the real tension be about something bigger than the trivial issue at hand (for example, it’s not really about the remote control but rather about control and being remote and power and who has it in the relationship).
4. Have one character imagine a conversation with another. The conversation he or she is anticipating and rehearsing mentally should be unavoidable. It could be something the character dreads (a shameful confession, bad news, etc.) or something the character looks forward to sharing (a new promotion or raise, a proposal of marriage, good luck of any kind).

**Practice 4: Story world**

Choose one of these:

1. Have your character accept a ride from someone she doesn’t know well. Describe the ride and the car, particularly its interior. Instead of naming or generalizing about your character’s feelings, focus on the details and let them reveal her emotional state and comfort level.
2. Put a character in conflict with a setting. Imagine a character who misunderstands the nature of the place, or overlooks something important, who is the only person of his gender, age or ethnic background at a party, or is oblivious to the danger suggested by certain details. Or imagine a character whose reaction to a place is the opposite of what we would expect: she is carefree in a dark urban alley; he is tranquil at a shooting range; she is giddy and childish in a funeral home.
3. Photographers and filmmakers use a technique called depth of field. So do fiction writers. Write a scene in which you move back and forth between two “fields of action.” Have two things going on at once—one involving your characters in the foreground and a second having to do with the back-ground. For instance, you might give us some dialogue among the characters on a picnic, then a paragraph about that storm brewing on the horizon, then back to the picnic, and so on. Don’t worry too much about making explicit connections or creating transitions between paragraphs. In time, the two strands will find a way of interweaving or relating.
4. This exercise involves two steps. First, describe a publicplace (not inside a house) from your own childhood that continues to evoke powerful emotional memories. It could be the street where you played hide and seek, it could be the 7-11, it could be the backfield at your high school, your fourth grade classroom, the flea market, the barbershop. Now set a scene in this location. Use dialogue, description, action and the thoughts of at least one of your characters. The scene should involve at least two characters, both of whom are **uncomfortable** in this setting.

**Practice 5: Plot**

Choose one of these:

1. You are going to create what Jerome Stern calls the “Bear at the Door” scene. In this scene, your character must have an external problem (“Honey, there’s a bear at the door”). The problem should be significant. (“Honey, it’s a grizzly bear.”) The problem should be pressing. (“Honey, I think it’s trying to get in.”) And the problem should force your character to act. (“Honey, do something!”). Your character should ALSO have an internal conflict that affects her/his ability to deal with this problem—the bear within him/herself.
   1. Come up with a list of external conflicts, avoiding the overly dramatic (murder, war) or overly mundane (wrong toenail color). Choose the most intriguing one.
   2. Write the above sequence so that the character is in the middle of this external conflict. Complicate the situation with the characters’ internal needs and desires.
2. For each character in one of your stories-in-progress, list all the predictable actions each could take to keep the plot moving. Now try mixing up the characters and actions and see if you come up with a more interesting and surprising plot. Write a summary of that sequence of actions.
3. Imagine an intriguing circumstance, something puzzling that you have witnessed, heard, or read about. For example, maybe you saw three women, once with an empty baby stroller, standing in the 7-11 parking lot at 3 am. Maybe you know a guy who met a Chinese woman online and was planning a wedding without ever meeting in person. Maybe you saw a birthday cake in the middle of the road, or a burned-out car at the bottom of a ravine.

Now write three very brief stories (200 words), each offering a different explanation for the same circumstance. Each story should have different characters and a different plot. Consider that in each story the same circumstance may be the beginning, middle or end.

1. Imagine some deceit growing out of control. Your character “borrowed” something (car, cash, jewelry, gun, computer) and now it’s broken or lost. Or the babysitter was on the phone and now one of the kids is missing; a character told a lie that seemed harmless. Now the little lie is very big; it has come back to haunt him or her.

Now crank it up another notch: The lost item is irreplaceable; the missing child has a medical condition, etc. How might this trouble be related to the character’s desire? She was desperate to impress others; he was fixated on getting into Berkeley, etc.