

Tell It Slant: Real Life as Raw Material for Good Fiction

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OVERVIEW

It's received wisdom, handed down from generations of writing teachers and texts: write what you know. But what does that even mean, and how do we do it when we're writing fiction, which all but requires us to make stuff up? This is a generative workshop designed to help you answer those questions for yourself. In the process, we'll read and discuss some exemplary texts (Zadie Smith, John D'Agata, Jhumpa Lahiri, Edward P. Jones, etc), but our main drive will be to aid and abet one another in the mad alchemy of transubstantiating life as we know it into fiction that lives and breathes on terms of its own.

OBJECTIVE

What follows is an adapted and shortened version of a ten-week program I call [The Write Mindfulness Project](#). The standard program of that project focuses on writing nonfiction. We'll do some of that to start out, but we'll also be finding ways to turn the lives we live and the thoughts we think into fiction. There's nothing magic about these prompts or this program. It's designed to get you to engage your Creative Spirit, with a certain measure of faith that this engagement might end up helping you produce things you want to polish (etc). In the fourth week, we'll have a chance to do just that: revise (wholly re-see) something we've written for the workshop. All along the way, we'll be reading and discussing some exemplary texts to augment our overall conversation.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Come to the workshop having completed that week's reading and your 30 Things I Love Right Now list. We'll start with some pre-writing activities using that week's 30 Things list, then we'll discuss the reading for the week. We'll finish the second, third, and fourth session by reading and responding informally (supportively, constructively) to workshop members' prompts-in-progress; we'll set a schedule for this after the class list solidifies.

WEEK #1

Next Week's Reading Assignment

- [“The Half-Known World”](#) by Robert Boswell
- [“Round Trip”](#) by John D’Agata

This Week's Reading Discussion

- Flashes by [Abigail Thomas](#), [Tim O'Brien](#), and [Sandra Cisneros](#)

[Pre-Writing](#)

For your journal or [commonplace](#):

- **Write a list of 30 Things you love right now.** I have found this [exercise](#) to be a kind of meditation. A practice of gratitude and love, over and above what it does to enrich and inform my writing practice. It might not seem hard to come up with 30 Things You Love Right Now. But sometimes it really is. And if you try to do it on a semi-regular basis—especially if you try to come up with 30 *NEW* Things You Love Right Now—you’re constantly having to look at “The Glass” half-full. And you’re also having to ruminate on a lot of the things that have, of late, captured your imagination. So it can be a challenge. A good challenge, but a challenge nonetheless. The important thing to remember is there’s no *wrong way* to do a 30 Things. “Right Now” is a flexible concept too. (Last week is close enough.) As is “Love.” Heck, so is “30,” though there is something strangely perfect about that number. It’s not insurmountable but it’s usually not *easy* either. Kind of like 90 feet between home plate and first base, or 14 lines and 140 syllables to a sonnet.
- **Make a list of your current preoccupations.** Persons, places, things. Activities that have a hold of your imagination (mind, body, spirit). Your 30 Things list might provide some seeds for this, but it’s okay if you don’t love some of the things preoccupying you right now.
- **Do a short, focused [free write](#) on one of your preoccupations** (or one of your 30 things, if that works better). The only rule for a free write is that you write non-stop for a short, set amount of time (five or ten minutes). If you can’t think of anything to write, write nonsense or repeat the same word over and over again until some new train of thought emerges. In a “focused” free write, you can use your focal point as your touchstone—go back to that focus (a short phrase, maybe, or even a single word) to help re-set the neural pathways.
- **These are things that you might want to put in your journal or commonplace on a regular-ish basis:** song lyrics; quotes (from famous people and/or your friends and family); whole passages of books you love and/or hate; language you happen upon: in stores, driving down the highway, at temples and churches and mosques, in classrooms and doctor’s offices, on the boob tube, the interwebs, etc;

color copies of family photographs; black and white copies of family photographs; (copies of) copies of black and white copies of family photographs; stencils; etc.

This Week's Writing Prompts

Try your hand at one of the following *nonfiction* prompts:

- **750-Word Autobiography.** Write a 750-word autobiography. It has to be exactly 750 words. Write about who you are here-and-now. Don't try to fit your entire life into a short essay. Pick something finite (*probably* narrative [a scene or anecdote] but not *necessarily* narrative), something relatively small. Seemingly insignificant. But something that expresses an essential truth about you, your life. And, again, it has to be exactly 750 words. If you're stuck for something to write about, mine the territory of this week's 30 Things list or your list of creative preoccupations.
- **Explanatory Essay.** Write an essay that explains how something works or how something happened. You can take the opportunity to be humorous and/or ironic or you can be just as earnest and straight-ahead as you want to be. Again, your 30 Things list or creative preoccupations might provide some fodder for this exercise.
- **Experiential Essay.** Write about an actual experience you've had, preferably something you did (or do) with the express intention of writing about it later. (Disclaimer: Don't do anything dangerous or illegal.) It should be something rather ordinary—something almost anyone can do. Notice the exceptional in the ordinary.
- **Food Essay.** Write about a meaningful—emotionally weighted, memorable—meal you've eaten. Pick one where you ate a particularly significant dish. Maybe it's a family recipe or a regional or cultural classic. Maybe it was a signature dish at a famous (or infamous) restaurant. You get the idea. Pay particular attention to the food itself as both a sensory and emotional (and perhaps cultural) experience.
- **Family Essay.** Write a family story, preferably one with more than one version. Try to express—explicitly/implicitly—what role this story plays in your family's identity.

WEEK #2

Next Week's Reading Assignment

- "[Blocked](#)" and "[Parents' Morning Epiphany](#)" by Zadie Smith
- "[Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction](#)" by Zadie Smith

This Week's Reading Discussion

- "The Half-Known World" by [Robert Boswell](#)
- "Round Trip" by [John D'Agata](#)

Pre-Writing

For your journal or commonplace:

- Write a list of 30 things you love right now.
- Fill a page—the WHOLE page—in your notebook with the names of places you've been to in the world. Pick places that still have a hold of your heart, your mind, your spirit. Be imaginative and specific, literal and figurative
 - Do a short, focused free write about one of these places. Maybe it's a stream-of-consciousness recounting of the last ten minutes you spent there?
- Fill a page—the WHOLE page—in your notebook with the names of places in the world where you've NEVER been. Be imaginative and specific. Peru is a place. So is Lima. So is the inside of a blue whale's ear. Write big. Write small. Write in all kinds of different directions on the page. Maybe also in different colors. If you feel like it.
 - Do a short, focused free write about one of the places you've never been. Maybe it's a stream-of-consciousness / imaginary travelogue?
- Go for a short [walk](#). When you get back, write a short free write about the things you saw (particularly the things that seemed out of place or that might be typically overlooked).

This Week's Writing Prompts

Pick one of the following:

- Use your free write about your walk this week to spur a story/vignette.
- Write a story/vignette in the form of a fan letter.
- Set a story/vignette in one of the places where you've never been.
- Fictionalize your prompt from last week. Some strategies for doing so:
 - Add a fictional character.
 - Take a "character" away.
 - Add an explosion at the very beginning or the very end. An actual explosion.
 - Write from another "character's" point of view.
 - Change the setting. Remember setting is place *plus* time.
 - Add a ghost. Or a dead body. Or a divorce.

- Imagine an alternate ending that changes the emotional tenor.
- Get “meta.” Write a story about a character who is writing the essay prompt you wrote. Maybe it’s a loose version of yourself. Maybe it’s someone else altogether, and they wrote (or are writing) something completely different. If you’re really feeling bold, use second person POV, future tense.

WEEK #3

Next Week's Reading Assignment

- Workshop Stories: Jonas, Pamela, John, and Mark

For Further Reading/Consideration

- British writer [Zadie Smith](#) introduces her debut novel, *White Teeth* ([Charlie Rose, June 01, 2000](#))
- "[All Aunt Hagar's Children](#)" by Edward P. Jones
- "[The Boundary](#)" by Jhumpa Lahiri

Pre-Writing

For your journal or commonplace:

- Selected prompts from [Burn After Writing](#) by Sharon Jones

This Week's Writing Prompts

Pick one of the following:

- Take an interesting image or idea or shard of language from your pre-writing the past few weeks and turn it into a fictionalized scene or sequence of scenes.
- Write a story in which the following three settings feature prominently:
 - a barbershop or salon
 - a convenience store
 - a field or backyard(Base these settings on actual places you frequent.)
- Start a story or a scene with a meticulous description of someone cooking something simple for themselves to eat. Before you start writing, cook (and eat) the meal you're going to write about.
- Set a story or scene in the year of your birth in the city or town where your mother either **(A)** was born, **(B)** graduated from high school, **(C)** married your father. (Keep in mind: you and/or your mom need not have any direct role in the story.) Be sure to write something that could have happened in no other place, at no other time. Write in third-person POV, using past tense.
- It's Thanksgiving night (or well after the ball has dropped on New Year's Eve). The guests have gone home. The house is quiet. Find the story.

WEEK #4

This Week's Reading Discussion

- Workshop Stories: Jonas, Pamela, John, and Mark
- "All Aunt Hagar's Children" by [Edward P. Jones](#) (time permitting)
- "The Boundary" by [Jhumpa Lahiri](#) (time permitting)

Pre-Writing

Some possibilities for your journal or commonplace this week:

- Write a list of 30 things you love right now.
- Write a list of 30 things you hate right now.
- Write a list of 30 things you [fill in the blank] right now.
- Do a [blind contour drawing](#) of your hand.
- Take a 20-minute nap. No more, no less. Freewrite (longhand) or draw for ten minutes when you wake up.
- Keep a [dream journal](#) this week.
 - Do short, focused free writes about the two or three most compelling dreams.
- Write out the five hardest things about right now. What's useful about these things?
- Sit for ten minutes looking out a window. Make a list of everything you see in that time.
- Revisit your Week #1 list of creative preoccupations. Which have fallen by the wayside?
 - Use one of these as the subject of a focused free write.
- Revisit all your 30 things lists from the past four weeks. Make a master-list of ten things that endure.
 - Use the two or three most compelling things on the master-list as the focus of a free-write.

One-Size-Fits-All Revision Prompts

Wholly re-see (i.e., revise: [Origin: 1560–70; REVĪSERE to look back at, revisit, freq. of REVIDĒRE to see again;]) something that you've written during the workshop using one (or more) of the following strategies:

- Flesh out one of the vignettes or scenes you've written in response to one of the prompts in the workshop. Turn it into a full-length short story.
- Start with a climax you already have and write a new story. For instance, if you were Flannery O'Connor and you wanted to apply this strategy to "[A Good Man Is Hard to Find](#)," you would start your new story with the grandmother meeting her demise at the hands of the Misfit. In that case, the whole focus of the story would probably have to shift to the Misfit and his crew. (Of course, the mark of a great climax—like

O'Connor's in "A Good Man"—is that it feels so final. The idea of "what happens next?" is a moot point. The trick here will be to find a climax that feels a little squishy to you.)

- Change the point of view—from first person to third person or vice versa. Or if you're feeling bold, change the POV to second person.
- Condense the action so it all takes place in the space of a day. Or less. Don't be afraid to cut characters and settings.
- Change the setting of the story to the city or town in which you live, in the present day. Which is to say: expressly and conspicuously put the story in a place and time you know like the back of your hand.
- Count the words. Divide by two. Cut the number of words in the story by that number. (E.g., 2,500 words divided by 2 = 1,250 words.)
- Count the words. Multiply by two. Add that number of words to the story.
- Tack 500 new words onto the very end of the story. What happens? Do you have to keep going? Do you have to cut something? Do what you have to do. (An alternative version: tack 500 words onto the very beginning of the story. Change the rest of the story to suit the new material.)
- Write the story again, this time from the perspective of a minor character.
- Eliminate all adverbs and adjectives. By "all," I mean **ALL**. Replace abstractions with concrete nouns and verbs. Things and actions. Try to eliminate ANY instance of ANY form of the verb TO BE. Use third person, past tense. No sentences longer than fifteen words long. No punctuation other than periods and commas. (You can use up to two question marks, but only in dialogue.)
- More line-level cuts. Here's a good general exercise I've discovered and have been sharing widely because I think it's a useful thing to do in the late stages of completing any manuscript. The fiction writer [Matt Bell](#) has a simple exercise he calls "[Hunting Weasel Words](#)." He does it at the tail end of revisions for his novels and stories. He uses it to root out his writerly tics and pet filler words (which we all seem to have). Here are the words he searches for and cuts:

that, finally, suddenly, always, sometimes, again, really, even, still, like, something, anything, everything, thing, mostly, almost, surely, perhaps, maybe, at last, quite, then, and then, of them, of the, once, else, just, merely, seem, large, huge, big, wide, great, long, massive, giant, enormous, vast, tiny, small, little, hard, soft, weak, thick, thin, strong, strange, weird, think, understand, wonder, know, find, very, every, grin, smile, shrug, nod, look, see, watch

Feel free to send me a revision prompt anytime between now and the end of the year!