YOU CAN TEACH YOUR CLASS TO WRITE A GOOD STORY

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This workshop is suited for teachers of all levels from pre-intermediate upwards. The workshop concentrates on tactics of story-writing that are easy to teach. Included are two fun activities, uncomplicated and that bring the whole class together in an enjoyable way. These two activities, described at the end of this article, make students aware of the importance of communication, both in writing and by other means, and serve to stimulate imagination, control and practice of narrative tenses, as well as improve overall skills in structuring and writing a story.

Stories and story-telling are part of mankind and as old as mankind:

> "Only a man harrowing clods
> In a slow silent walk
> With an old horse that stumbles and nods
> Half asleep as they stalk.
> "Only thin smoke without flame
> From the heaps of couch grass;
> Yet this will go onward the same
> Though Dynasties pass.
> "Yonder maid and her wight
> Come whispering by:
> War's annals will cloud into night
> Ere their story die."

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations', Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

By teaching your class to write a good story you will be teaching your students also something about themselves and communication, about the very life we lead. You may believe that:

> "a story-teller is born, as well as a poet"

The Guardian, No. 24, Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729)

but there is an overall strategy, together with narrative tactics, that can be taught without excessive effort, as a result of which students will not only learn to write a good story but also enjoy the experience of being shown how to do this.

The overall *Strategy*:

"Always Remember the Reader"

is easily understood by students and must never be forgotten. Each of the students must be made aware that she or he is communicating ideas, images, a whole sequence of life, in the written text. Moreover, students must learn to check and choose words with the precision of a legal document. Finally, through the two fun activities which follow, everybody in the class will realise how the written word, which is read without the author at the reader's side to correct impressions, can and often is understood, for many reasons, in a different way from that originally intended. This is true of life and it is never too soon for students to learn this, even as a game!

There are five basic *narrative tactics*:

1) The Title

2) The Setting

3) The Sequence of Acts and Events

4) How the Story is told: The three Watchwords "*Variety, Precision and Concision*"

5) The Conclusion.

In all but the last case **SUSPENSE** as an additional and overriding *narrative tactic* must always be borne in mind: *do not give the game away too soon!*

The following is an analysis and explanation as to how each of the above *narrative tactics* functions.

1. The Title

The Title is more than just a means of identifying the story, or the book, as we fetch this off a shelf. By careful choice of words in *the Title,* the writer can inform the reader not only about (i) *the action*, i.e. the acts and events, but also, where appropriate, (ii) *the message*, i.e. the lesson, contained in the story. Such *a Title* should include *Key Words* or ideas later expressed in the story and which above all, in a well-structured narrative, will be echoed in *the Conclusion*. (See below).

Here it is where the tactic of *Suspense* can first be seen at work. The story's *Title* should give *some* intimation but *not* reveal *all* there is to say about the story's contents. Just enough to guide the reader in the right direction, without telling her or him too much about the terrain they will pass over or the exact destination they will reach as a result of the 'journey' the story will take them on.

The Title should say enough to arouse a strong sense of curiosity in the reader, an interest that should be maintained right up to the very last words of the denouement (i.e*. the Conclusion*).

The importance of a well-chosen *Title* cannot be over-emphasised and, for the reasons given, should now be quite clear. Nevertheless, all too often students fail to realise this importance and 'forget' to give their story *a Title*. Students should always be encouraged carefully to consider their choice of *Title*, with due reference to *the Conclusion* (see below) of their story. *Indeed, the narrative simply must not be accepted as finished until the story has received its appropriate, carefully considered <u>Title</u>*.

2. The Setting

This consists of the following three elements: (i) *The People*, (ii) *The Place* and (iii) *The Time* of the story. *The People* are the characters described that act in the story; *the Place* must be understood in a very general sense and can in fact be more than one location; finally, *the Time* of the story is subject to the shifts in temporal perspective-*flashback, time of the story* and *premonition* (see below)- that the characteristics of the narrative may require.

The Setting of the story is presented in the first paragraph(s) of the narrative text and should not become diffuse. Long-winded *Settings* can discourage the reader, detract from and perhaps even destroy the interest of the ensuing action. *Get to the point quickly!*

This being said, *Suspense* is the ever-present *narrative tactic* that must always be brought into play at appropriate moments. Do not offer too much information about the story in these first lines. For example, discovery of the true identity of one or more of the main characters (*anagnorisis*) can be left until later. Alternatively, do not reveal immediately the precise *Time* of the story: the initial acts and events of the story described here could be as true and life-like in 2000 B.C. as in 2000 A.D. There are scenes that belong to all times and the story could start out with one of these. Keep the reader guessing a little. *Never be totally predictable!*

3. The Sequence of Acts and Events

Where and _how_ should the story begin? Knowing _at what chronological point_ and _how_ to start the narrative is a vital feature of good story-writing. Here are the possibilities, with examples.

(i) _Where?_

(a) Conventional chronology

The story begins at the _chronological start_ of the sequence of acts and events, as in the case of _(auto)biographies_. Two examples:

"Lope de Vega was born in 1562 in Madrid. In this city (....)." and

"The events I shall go on to describe began some twenty years ago, on a dismal cold day

of November. (....)."

(b) At a highpoint in the action

The writer can start the story at a significantly dramatic point in the narrative's sequence of acts and events, perhaps even at _the turning-point_. This is a feature typical of _adventure stories_, also called _thrillers_. Two examples follow.

"Three short, muffled sounds were heard, apparently insignificant: _tac, tac, tac_. The man's body came to rest, as if in sleep, on the heavily polished, mahogany desk-top. (....)." (_dramatic highpoint_) and

"She stared at the photograph, slightly discoloured with age, that had come to light as she opened the old book. The face, the background, everything in the faded picture seemed strangely familiar. (....)."

(_turning-point_)

(c) At the end of the story

A story can in fact start at the end of all the acts and events and resort to the device of _flashback_ to recount what led to this denouement. _Detective stories_ frequently begin in this way. Here is an example.

"The police led away the drunken driver. The woman detective, slightly queasy in the stomach at the sight of the distorted shapes of the two cars, sat down to try to reconstruct the sequence of events. (.....)."

(ii) _How?_

Knowing _how_ to start the story means knowing how to attract the reader's attention from the very first and stimulate a sense of curiosity that necessarily must be fed and maintained until the last lines of the narrative. A little time needs to be spent on teaching this aspect of story-writing before the whole story goes on to be produced.

As said above, _Suspense_ will play a vital role at this stage. Here is an example of _a Setting_, where the four main narrative tenses are practised and the introduction of a question at the end serves to link, as of necessity, the text of this _Setting_ with the corresponding answer provided in the action continued in the ensuing paragraphs.

"Her cheeks were wet. She had been crying all night. Outside, the sun had risen and a soft rain was falling. Would he ever come back?"

In this _Setting_, _Suspense_ is maintained by not identifying explicitly _the People_ (the apparent main characters) and only giving minimal information as to _Place_ (inside somewhere) and _Time_ (dawn). Additionally, there is a shift between the three temporal perspectives possible (see below): from the _time of the story_ (_Past Simple_ and _Past Progressive_) to _flashback_ (_Past Perfect Simple_ and _Past_

Perfect Progressive) and on to *premonition* (Conditional). Lastly, as pointed out before, the question posed at the end of *the Setting* serves as a linking device and invites the reader to continue so as to find out the answer in the narrative text that follows.

Indeed, the class can be made aware of the significance of this phase in story-writing by means of a fun activity, described at the end of this article, in which the above four main narrative tenses (*Past Simple* and *Past Progressive*, *Past Perfect Simple* and *Past Perfect Progressive*) are practised and students are helped to realise the complexity of communication, i.e. how the written word is often understood differently from what was intended.

4. How the Story is Told

This is where it is absolutely essential to put into practice the narrative tactic collectively described by *the three Watchwords*: *Variety, Precision and Concision.*

Here are the main features of each of these, with a few words to help in their understanding.

(i) Variety *should be seen in*

- The Structure of the Story (see above)

- Grammar (e.g. *additional verb tenses can be introduced in direct speech; verbs with different structures are especially possible in reported speech, see below; unreal conditionals*

are useful for speculation or premonition; relative clauses for linking information)

- Vocabulary (i.e. *avoid repetition: use synonyms and periphrasis. In this way, the story will*

become enriched with new words and expressions)

- Perspective:

  - *spatial* [e.g. *Anthea* (.....). *Her eyes* (....); viz. from the *macroscopic* to the *microscopic view* or vice-versa]

  - *temporal* [i.e. the "past" (*flashback*, acts and events occurring *before* the time of the story); the "present" (*the time of the story*); and the "future" (*prediction* or *premonition*). See

the above example of *a Setting*]

  - *authorial* [e.g. *The teacher was speaking at the front of the class. At the back, Georgina was thinking* (....)]

 - Speech:

  - *direct speech* for dramatically important words or moments and evincing a suitably wide variety of *verbs of speaking* such as *whisper, shout, complain, threaten, warn, suggest, advise* .... and, if appropriate, an adverb of manner (e.g. *"I love you," he whispered*; or: *"Let's wait a little," she suggested gently.*)

  - *indirect speech* to move the story on. Again, introduce a wide range of *verbs of reporting*, with their associated structures. In this case, report only *the essential text* using *written register* (e.g. *"Please, please don't leave me! I can't live without you!"* is *reported* as: *He begged her not to leave him.*)

  - *internal monologues* (i.e. when a character's thoughts are reported: see the question the person asks herself at the end of the above *Setting*)

- <u>How Sentences and Paragraphs are started</u> [i.e. *vary the part of speech* with which *sentences* and *paragraphs* are begun. Considerations of linking ideas also apply here, e.g. *Andrew came to Barcelona 20 years ago. In this city* (....).]

- <u>Sentence and Paragraph length</u>. In general English sentences and paragraphs are *shorter* than their Catalan or Castilian counterparts. *Length can also be varied for dramatic effect*. For example:

At the top of the cliffs stood an old house, occupied by enemy troops. The commando force had surrounded the building and, after checking the terrain, decided to attack. From all three accessible sides, the force attacked, firing and throwing grenades. The men entered the wrecked dwelling.

No-one there.

Far below, a little boat drew away from the cliff face. The enemy troops had escaped.

- <u>The use of leitmotivs</u>. These can be as follows:

- *colour* (i.e. a particular colour can always be associated with, for example, a certain person, e.g. he or she dresses in *green*, or wears a *green* scarf, or carries a *green* bag ....)

- *an object* (e.g. the character wears a certain heirloom such as *bracelet*, or perhaps a mysterious or magical *ring*

- *sound* (e.g. certain music may always be associated with a character, as in Wagnerian operas)

- *weather conditions* (e.g. a house is always seen in dismal, rainy conditions)

- <u>Punctuation</u>. *A thorough, correct command of punctuation is vital*. Poor punctuation can mar or even disguise meaning. *Variety of punctuation avoids uniformity and reflects not only the exact tone of the story, similar to the "melody" and changes of intonation in spoken speech, but can also suggest differences in narrative pace.* Use all the forms of punctuation available. For example: " (.....)" / *! / ? / ; / : / .... / - / , /.*

(ii) <u>Precision</u> *should be seen in*

- <u>The careful use of a dictionary</u>, (i.e. ensure that you have the correct word or expression. If you cannot find *"le mot juste"*, perhaps- as the French writer Gustave Flaubert used to say- you have not yet obtained a clear idea of what you want to say!)

Note: Students must be taught how to use a dictionary!

- <u>The avoidance of pronouns</u>. *Be specific!* Pronouns are ambiguous and uninteresting.

Use synonyms or periphrasis as far as reasonably possible, although not obsessively*;*

e.g. Andrew Sandilands, our English teacher (.......). *Andrew* (.....). *Our English teacher* (.....). *The man who teaches us English* (.....).

- <u>The use of the appropriate register</u> (i.e. written, not spoken register except when introducing direct speech or quotations. Hence, normally:

- *no contractions*

- *no colloquialisms or slang*

- *avoid "get" expressions*

- *care with idioms*

- care with multi-word verbs (more usually spoken than written)

- <u>Maintenance of focus</u> (i.e. avoid unnecessary digressions; *keep to the point!* Consider *fronting*, e.g.

Redhill *is where I was born*).

(iii) <u>Concision</u> *should be seen in*

- <u>No rambling:</u> *Never say in three words what you can say in two!* English phraseology is generally shorter than its Catalan or Castilian counterparts. Avoid long sentences with numerous subordinate clauses. *Keep paragraphs reasonably short!*

- <u>Quick focussing on the topic</u>. This is particularly important when writing *the Setting.* Three or four sentences, not too long, should suffice in such a case. See the above example.

- <u>Careful linking of ideas</u> [e.g. through the use of relative clauses: *Anthea, who lives next door, has decided to study Catalan*; or linking expressions: *She gave him an expensive watch as his birthday present. However,* (.....).] (contrast)

- <u>The use of participles.</u> These can act as reduced relative clauses, e.g. *The girl wearing the purple scarf*; or: *The man dressed in black.*

- <u>The use of prepositional phrases</u> (e.g. *The woman in the pink silk blouse*; or: *The little boy with the cut finger.*)

- <u>The use of compound expressions</u> (e.g. compound adjectives: *The dark-eyed girl*; or compound nouns: *a football fan*).

5. The Conclusion

This should be short and clear. Reference back to the story's *Title* should be made either by introducing the text which constitutes *the Title* or at least *the Key Words* from the *Title*. In this way, *the end of the story is also its beginning*, as Graham Greene once said, i.e. the circular effect of planned writing is seen, which inevitably calls to mind the cycle of life; for as said at the outset of this article all stories reflect, each in its own way, our life, the life of mankind.

Finally, *the Conclusion* should wherever possible offer the reader *a message* (i.e. a lesson), whether implicit or explicit. Thus, the reader should be left with the impression of having enjoyed a story and also learnt something about life from the experience.

Below follow two Fun Activities which make use of the ideas taught in this Workshop.

THE TWO FUN ACTIVITIES

There now follow the detailed descriptions of two fun activities that bring the class together in an enjoyable way and make students aware both of the importance and the complexities of communication.

As will be seen, both games are suitable for all levels from pre-intermediate upwards (but especially relevant to pre-intermediate and intermediate students) and for all age groups from about 12 upwards.

For both games, preliminary instruction in the overall strategy and narrative tactics in story-writing, as taught in this workshop, is advisable. In this way, the games can illustrate in an enjoyable way what is being taught about story-writing in class. However, the second game can also be used as an oral activity at any time and in any circumstances (but especially after a holiday), i.e. just for sheer enjoyment. From this second game the teacher can then draw students' attention to the complexities of communication. In this way, the second game could in fact be used as a general, light-hearted introduction to the art of story-writing.

1. *The Setting* **Game**

This activity lasts over several one-hour classes but for each session need not take up the whole of the class. The activity practises all four skills: *speaking listening writing and reading* (in this order).

(i)   Revise the narrative tenses: *Past Simple, Past Progressive, Past Perfect Simple* and *Past Perfect Progressive*, or whichever of these the class is able to use (e.g. just the first two of the tenses).

in prior lessons.

(ii)   Write an example of *a Setting* on the class white/blackboard (e.g. the example given in

this workshop and shown below in the Appendix).

(iii) Divide the class into two equal halves, ideally an even number. Important: *For the duration of* the activity students must keep to their allotted half of the class.

(iv) In each of the halves divide the students into pairs. (If there is an odd number in one half, make up one group of three).

(v)   Now, *always speaking together in English* each of the pairs in the two halves of the class must, in collaboration, produce a single, short text (about three or four sentences, as in the example), which forms *the Setting* of a story. The pairs can consult their teacher or any work of reference, but *not* any other pair in the class. *Their text is secret!*

(vi) If they have not done this before, each of the pairs now considers *how their story would proceed* and *how it would end*. As shown in the workshop, the students' *Setting* can be *the chronological start* or *a highpoint* or *the end* of their story. *The pairs must remember this!* (They can take a few *brief* notes).

(vii) Each person in the pair (a) copies down on a separate piece of blank paper the text of *the Setting* the pair has composed and (b) signs this text with a pseudonym different from her or his partner's, e.g. *Jill* and *Jack* could be the pseudonyms of one pair. *(Note: If the teacher wishes to prolong the oral activity at the later stage, each of the pairs should write <u>in brackets</u> after her or his pseudonym the partner's pseudonym).* Finally, <u>no title must be given to the Setting.</u>

The students then fold up the papers, ready for the teacher to collect.

(viii) The teacher collects in the separate pieces of paper from each pair, keeping the piles of texts from each half *totally separate*. *(<u>End of first session</u>. The teacher later corrects the texts to ensure clarity, no more).*

At this stage the overall strategy and tactics of story-writing can be taught, if not done before.

(ix) <u>Next session.</u> At the end of a class, *not before* (to avoid consultation between different pairs), the teacher invites students to choose *a Setting* at random from the other half's pile of folded papers. And vice-versa with the other students and the papers from the other half. Now each half of the class takes home *a Setting* written by a pair of students in the other half. The students must keep their *Setting* secret from each other and must not consult each other. *(This is part of the game but also has its purpose).*

(x)   At home the students now have to (a) read *the Setting* on their chosen piece of paper; (b) decide *how to continue and end the story* this *Setting* suggests to them, using the overall narrative strategy and narrative tactics

taught in class; (c) plan and write this story; (d) give their story an appropriate *Title*, bearing in mind *the Conclusion* and any *message* their story offers.

(xi)   Give the students enough time to write a good story for homework. Then, on the allotted day, students bring to class the stories they have written as a result of continuing from another pair's *Setting*. At this stage, the teacher has a choice:

(a) <u>A class relatively skilled in English for its level.</u> First each of the students in one half seeks out, in the other half, the student whose pseudonym appears on her or his paper. She or he then tells that student the finished story, consulting the written text but not reading from it. The other student then tells her or him how the original pair decided to continue and end the story.

(This stage is prolonged one step more, if the teacher previously so decided, by the first student thereupon seeking out in the other half of the class, the other student whose pseudonym follows in brackets after the first pseudonym. Give everyone enough time to tell their stories before moving on to this <u>optional</u> last stage).

The same process is then carried out with the other half, i.e. now the students from the second half seek out in the other half of the class, using the pseudonym for reference, the author of their *Setting.*

(*<u>With particularly gifted classes</u>. Before the teacher collects in the stories, each of the original pairs receives two stories, written by two different students, preferably from the other half of the class. In pencil under two columns at the end of each story, these pairs now list the <u>positive and negative points </u>they see in the story, according to the overall narrative strategy and tactics taught in class. With suitable guidance from the teacher, a mark may also be suggested for the stories, the students being challenged to see if they can reach the same conclusion as their teacher).*

(b) <u>A less skilled class. </u>Once the students have sat in their respective halves of the class, the teacher collects in the stories that have been continued and ended and corrects them.

In a later lesson and at a suitable moment, once the stories have been corrected, the process as in (a) above is carried out.

<u>NOTE: In both cases (a) and (b), the stories, once corrected by the teacher, should be passed round in class, so that as many students as possible can read them, see the mark and comments on each story, and benefit from each other's writing skills and the teacher's correction. In this way, the activity is used to its maximum effect.</u>

(xii) Finally, the teacher draws students' attention to what they should in fact have already noticed: that *one* single *Setting* has produced *three* different stories (the first pair's and those of two more students). How similar or different each of those stories is, will be a measure of how successfully the original text communicated its authors' ideas and also of the inspiration of the other writers!

In this way, the original pair of students will also be shown the further suggestive possibilities of their text (*the Setting*), just as if it were a poem.

In fact, this activity has *a message* about *perspectives on truth*: the "truth" being the text written by the original pair of students. This is a lesson about life that is as old as mankind itself, just like story-writing, which has been the means of teaching it!

(In the workshop you will practise a quicker, oral version of this game, which can be performed at any level of English)

APPENDIX

Here is an example of a Setting:

MODEL SETTING

Her cheeks were wet. She had been crying all night. Outside, the sun had risen and a soft rain was falling. Would he ever come back?

This Setting practises:

(a) **The Four Main Narrative Tenses:** Past Simple, Past Progressive, Past Perfect Simple and Past Perfect Progressive; and

(b) **Temporal Perspective:** viz., shifts between "The Present" (i.e. "the Time of the Story",

represented by the use of the Past Simple and the Past Progressive), "The Past" (i.e. "Flashback",

namely: "The Acts and Events occurring before 'The Time of the Story' ", represented by the use of the Past Perfect Simple and the Past Perfect Progressive), and "The Future" (i.e. "Premonition"

or "Prediction", represented by the use of the Conditional); and

(c) **Internal Monologue:** (i.e. a form of Indirect Speech which also gives information about

the character whose thoughts are reported in this way); and

(d) **The Narrative Tactic of Suspense:** evoked by *the absence of identification* and the *Question* posed at the end of the Setting. This *Question* will need to be answered in the rest of the narrative text and so the reader is thereby encouraged to continue with the story in order to find out what happens; and

(e) **The Linking Device of Question and Answer:** viz. here the paragraph that constitutes the Setting ends with a *Question* which will be answered in the subsequent text of the story.

2. The *Drawing* Game

This is a short, easily organised activity, mainly oral.

(i)   Divide the class into two equal halves.

(ii)   Each student in each half of the class has to think about a memorable episode or experience in her or his life (e.g. a holiday, birthday or family experience). *No consultation   between students!*

(iii)   On a piece of paper each student *draws* TWO OBJECTS (*not* mutually associated) that played an important part in this episode or experience. *Again, no consultation between students!*

(iv)   Each student now signs the piece of paper with a pseudonym, folds it up. The teacher collects all the folded papers, keeping the papers from each half of the class separate.

(v)   In turn, the teacher mixes up each pile of papers, puts them in a box or similar and passes round the other half of the class: *each student chooses a paper from the other half of the class.*

(vii) All the students now open their respective papers and make up an episode or an experience based on the TWO OBJECTS drawn on the papers. This is mainly an oral activity but students should check vocabulary and take a few notes so as to remember their narrative (and learn more English). If the student is unsure what a drawing represents, this does not matter. Such uncertainty or

ambiguity is part of the game, which also teaches about the complexities of communication, not just by spoken or written word, but according to the drawn figure.

(viii) Once all students have finished preparing, in turn the students from each half of the class seek out the student whose pseudonym appears on their paper and tell her/him their story. Next, the other student tells *the true story*!

Once one half of the class has performed the activity, the other half does the same seeking out the other student by means of the pseudonym.

(If the teacher so wishes she or he can then round off the lesson by pointing out how this game has illustrated the complexities of communication, i.e. how even the drawn figure can be understood in different ways and suggest different episodes or experiences).

NOTE: This activity can be prolonged by setting as homework the writing of the story derived from the TWO OBJECTS drawn on the paper. The teacher can then correct the stories and the students later find out the person who drew the TWO OBJECTS and tell her/him their story.