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Learning
Together

Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets

Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.

Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.

Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.
And keep Learning Together.**

Please note:

The following resource was created with love and care by a member of the Learning Together Network. We sincerely hope that the creator's work will be respected by distributors, readers and users, and will not be subject to plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Thank you for your cooperation.

ThinkLet #15

Introduction to Short Story Writing

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The title of this ThinkLet tells you nothing about the sense of enjoyment and power and you can get from writing short stories. Instead it should be called **Power to your Pen**. But that's the nature of writing: you always want to go back and change things, make them better. We'll get to drafting and editing later: what's important to say first of all, is that the short story can be endlessly flexible and fulfilling – but like anything worth doing – it's also demanding. It offers creative freedom, but it thrives on control. It rewards writers who know the rules, but who also have the courage to remake them for themselves.

A short story can be five lines or 500 or 5000; it can contain a few words, a world or just one observation; one organising emotion or many voices. The 'short' part provides some housing for your creative potential. And all of us, no matter where we grow up, how society impacts on us, the choices we make or what we become, are born creative. That's how babies, before they can speak, first make sense of the world on their own terms. Whenever I sit down at my desk to write, I try to remember this small truth. It helps me put aside any doubt over whether I *can* do it, or I *should* do it, or what people will think when I do, and just get started.

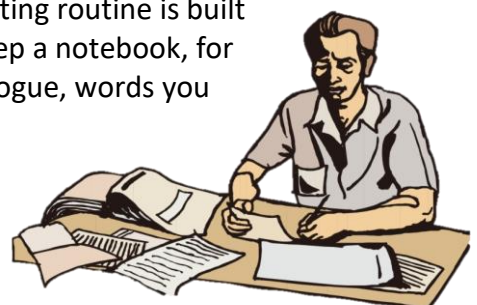
All of the writers who take part in Writing Together sessions at HMP Whitemoor come into the room with a swagger and nerves, ready to show themselves what they've got in terms of writing. They have to face the blank page and eventually read their drafts to each other for feedback. It takes courage. So: the first step is *wanting* to do it, then giving yourself the chance to make it happen. If you're reading this, congratulations, that part is already done.

Say to yourself: 'I am a writer.' Out loud. See how it feels. Now consider your blank page. It isn't easy for any writer to do this. But to get something finished, you have to show up to start it, and then see it through. Writing Together includes writers of all backgrounds, ages, faiths, genders, professions; some are under 21, some didn't finish school, others have advanced degrees; some have never had a job, some are also chefs and prison officers and parents. It does not matter at all; you begin by knowing that this is your time, and you've got something to say.

You want to use the short story form to say it? OK, let's go.

Good writing is a muscle: you have to train it regularly.

Routine helps here – a regular time of day, a place you feel you can work in; establish these and they will help to get you started, and keep you going. A writing routine is built over time; you can try different ways until it sticks. It also helps to keep a notebook, for your ideas, snatches of overheard conversation you might use as dialogue, words you like, lyrics and quotes that inspire you, and so on.



Finding your voice

When I write, I don't want to explain things to my reader, because that would mean making assumptions about who they are. That would mean I start trying to please them, based on my own limited idea of 'them'. So, when I write, if my characters speak a mix of languages, I don't translate their non-English into English, for example. There's a reason the word 'authority' contains the word 'author' – when you write you have to claim that authority, that sense of authorship and be true to who you are, the story you want to tell, and the way you want to tell it. It can always be improved, but the heart and all the other essential parts of it, belong to you.

Warm up: Free Writing

Every writing session you gift yourself, whether it's an hour, or ten minutes each day, or week, should begin with Free Writing. Just take a piece of paper, your pen or pencil and put down whatever is on your mind. It could be song lyrics, an issue you're hurting over, something you're hoping for or thinking about now, a shopping list, what you want next for dinner; even if you write 'I can't think of anything to write' just get the words down and try to aim for at least 10 lines. Now put it to one side.

Remember: the pen is light – but all you carry inside you, and all you want to say can feel like some heavy weight. It's time to put that weight down on the page and give it some proper *form*. To do this, you will have to make some decisions about:

1. Character/ Voice (**Who** is telling the story?)
2. Tense (**When** is it set?)
3. When (**What** year, month, day or moment is your story set in?)
4. How much time will it cover? (A short story can cover centuries, or seconds passing.)
5. **Where** (A place can act as a mirror, a metaphor, or a contrast to your characters feelings.)

But first you have to think ahead, and ask yourself one very important question: What do you want your readers to feel when they read?

A 'good' piece of writing is driven by emotion. Your feelings – why you want to write this story, now, matters. But an equally important thing is not only what *you* feel, but how you want your *reader* to feel. Think about that (but don't think about who the reader is. That, you can't control). What you choose to do with your writing – not just the story you want to tell, but how you tell it – will determine whether your reader feels the way you want them to feel by the end of the story.

Exercise 1

Here's a story by the author Rahawa Haile, published in *Midnight Breakfast* magazine.¹ Read it, and then read it again, but this second time read it as a writer trying to identify how the story works. And think about these questions:

- What is the central emotion of the story? (How do you feel when you have finished it?)
- How does the writer create that? To answer this, look at the sentences. Are they long or short? What is the effect of addressing the reader as 'you'? Can a cake be 'thoughtful'?
- What emotions does the narrator go through?
- Does the writer tell you the character's feelings explicitly? If not, how do they do it? Can you see the decisions the writer has made about voice, point of view and so on – and would the impact of the story be different if you change any of these? If so, how?

¹ (<http://midnightbreakfast.com/cake-seltzer>)

The Lives and Loves of Intricate Cakes

Last year I saw a photograph, poorly angled with shallow focus. Its subject was a thoughtful slice of cake. And inside the cake was what can only be described as intricacy. I hesitate to call them layers. There are many false foodstuffs stacked and rotting in my halls. This cake, my cake, went beyond. Cradled in a fashionable wedge of daylight, I wanted it more than any cake I'd ever seen. It called to me, and I felt changed throughout, not for the better or worse, but for the more complicated and perpetually dissatisfied. I found my teeth yearning for the cavities of subtlety and feared the days before me would yawn together in blandness and regret.

This is when the dreams began. The cake dreams. The mostly cake dreams. Once I was a Dippin' Dot and died alone, uneaten, though this was an anomaly. Frequently, I am about to be consumed. Note: I am not always consumed. Once I was a slice of chiffon on the Laurentian Plateau and froze mid-flight upon the wind, clay pigeon to the Ice Age. Often, I die in the recent past. I am savored in the 1880s but last mere seconds in the 1950s, even on the streets, where the dogs disembowel me and are rewarded with cigarettes and the promise of America.

Note: I am not always consumed. Underwater cake dreams are the saddest of the lot. When there is light, I float past pieces of myself and wait, perhaps, for the swiftness of gulls. When I am miles beneath, I hear nothing. I see nothing. I know only that I am tearing at the seams and lost.

Sometimes I am served with a tab of acid, and in the dream where I am cake I dream I am the plate as well and tremble with the algid loneliness of overshadowed porcelain. Once, I was the slice of Mussolini. Once, I was a cake in love and wept, unwanted by you.

I have asked my therapist the meaning of these dreams. She says, "Note: You are not *always* consumed?" She says to "self-examine." I have never baked a cake. I want to understand myself. I want to be better be better than this better enough to be enough to look better to look at a mirror and see better than nothing just better and stop gnawing at the air. I am unwell. My chin is dripping. I have begun to fear the rain.

Lately, I am attracting a certain sort at the cinema. After a passionate exchange, one man whispers I am not gluten-free. Some days, the children that gather have death in their eyes and fidget through the trailers; then, once the lights dim, they are all of them upon me and fanged. I do not have children in human or dream-cake form, and when the world collapses I will lack first-person-shooter-weaned progeny and succumb like a twig to the maelstrom. I miss my father. I have taken to prowling the streets for outdated technology to cope. It is becoming a problem, says my neighbor. I have framed our doors with radios and wrapped my arms in cassette tape. For three nights I sleep like I've limbs.

My office work is suffering. There are fresh signs around the entryway for adult counseling. I have consumed 258 cakes, died 362 times, and gained 47 pounds. I have worn these seasons like a slap to the face and am waiting for the marks to fade. I tell my colleagues, "Last year I saw a photograph," but still they avert their eyes. I'm not making any sense, they say. I am starting to falter at room temperature and nap for hours in the bathroom stalls. I am an embarrassment, says my boss, but in public I smell utterly delightful, even in the sun.

At my therapist's, my words spit me out of them. The crumbs litter the floor. She has suggested a hobby. Soccer, perhaps. "Have you ever seen American soccer fans?" I say. "They look like fucking idiots. Just like Americans." My therapist does not approve. She wishes to explore my self-loathing. I tell her I am exploring enough for the both of us. I tell her exploring doesn't begin to cover it.

In my last cake dream I am my very own cake. I sit on the kitchen table within the one hundred fifty square feet of my pending midlife crisis and breathe in the warm air. I am tender with myself. There is a lot to appreciate, after all. I am not so good as others at being so bad to most, and for this I am grateful. I keep looking up at myself, and up. And there upon my face, bite after bite, I see it. In my eyes, looking down, the gash of loving someone you do not love.

Exercise 2

Look again at the first paragraph of the story. Play around with the tense/ point of view/ place and time/ speaker. What happens?

Example: I see a photograph, poorly angled with shallow focus. Its subject is a thoughtful slice of cake. And inside the cake is what can only be described as intricacy. I hesitate to call them layers. There are many false foodstuffs stacked and rotting in my halls. This cake, my cake, is beyond. Cradled in a fashionable wedge of daylight, I want it more than any cake I've ever seen. It calls to me, and I feel changed throughout, not for the better or worse...

Example: Joey saw a photograph, poorly angled...

The story is about a memory of looking at a photograph. When you use memories and real-life events to inspire your creative work you can wrap them in different times and places, introduce imaginary characters, including animals and myths into the world you are making. Or, you can tell it straight.... Whichever, it needs to have a strong beginning, and a strong ending.

Exercise 3

Look at your piece of Free Writing. Choose three lines from it: One of these will be the **title of your piece**; One will be your **opening line**; One will be **the end**. How you decide on the lines isn't really important. They could be the most interesting, the funniest, the saddest, the shortest – just choose what feels right for you.

Why do this? You're giving your imagination and your voice some structure to be free within. All stories, short or long, need this specific 'housing' to allow what you want to say to hit home. Do you have an idea but don't know yet exactly what you want to say? No problem...You have a title, a first line and idea; you have an ending to work towards.

Exercise 4

Set yourself a word limit, or a time limit, or both. Say, 50-500 words, and 30 minutes to an hour. And if you want, you can use the images in this ThinkLet's 'Inspiration' pack to help spark your stories. Visual prompts are an excellent way to begin stilling any doubts you have about your writing as a whole, unlocking your creativity and finding your voice. Using them to write with also has a long literary tradition. Giving voice to images, or 'ekphrasis' comes from the Greek word for the description of a work of art, produced as a rhetorical exercise. Writers from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Philip Larkin in the 1950s, to American feminist, Adrienne Rich in the 1960s, to many contemporary writers including Ocean Vuong and Sarah Howe today do ekphrastic work.

Editing and drafts

When you have finished writing, get up, get a drink of water drink it, stretch, breathe, come back. Now try to look at your piece with fresh eyes. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the central emotion I want my reader to feel?
- Is everything I've done here reinforcing that? So – does the point of view reinforce that? Does the tense I have written in make that feeling stronger? What about the sentence length, the grammar – do I need every exclamation mark or full stop?
- Read the piece out loud, try different tenses and points of view. How does this change the sense of the work and the emotional impact?

Make some changes in another few drafts until you are happy with it; try not to over edit though – the secret to a 'good' piece is a) beginning it, b) persevering with it through drafts and c) knowing when it's done. For this, you have to learn to feel doubt, do the work and trust your instincts – and exercise like this helps you train yourself to do all three.

The Cool Down

Finally, take another blank piece of paper and write anything that comes to mind for 3 minutes; compare the experience, physical, mental, emotional, to how it was when first did this, when you began. You can do this as a routine to end your writing session, each time you sit down.