

Steering the Craft – Workbook

Exercises from:

Steering the Craft: A Twenty-First-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story

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EXERCISE ONE: Being Gorgeous

Part One

Write a paragraph to a page of narrative that's meant to be read aloud. Use onomatopoeia¹, alliteration², repetition, rhythmic effects, made-up words or names, dialect—any kind of sound effect you like—but NOT rhyme or meter³.

Soap-box hill looks a *lot* steeper when you're perched at the top, looking down through your feet, with a couple of strands of sisal string for steering. The piggy-squeak of a back tire slowed as Jody pushed me to the starting line; squeak, squeek, squeek, squeeeek, and then stopped completely.

"Ready?" he asked.

"OK. Let's do this" I said.

Jody pushed me over the crest. The cart began to move on it's own. The drumbeat tuk.... tuk.... tuk... tuk.. tuk of tires on concrete expansion joints sped up. Jogging beside me, he soon had to run as he shouted useless instructions. Trees, driveways and garbage cans were blurring when he gave up and I left him standing there.

I deked around a manhole, and barely made the slight jog onto the street's older sidewalk. The bumpy ride was sliding me to one side of the rough plank we called a seat, and I had to stretch to apply the "brakes" with my foot. To my surprise, the blocks of wood started smoking on the rubber tires.

And that's when the wheels fell off.

04.02.2024

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- 1 Onomatopoeia A word that sounds like what it means, like sizzle or hiss or slurp, is onomatopoeic. As for the word onomatopoeia, it sounds like onna-matta-peeya.
 - 2 Alliteration "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" is an alliterative sentence. So is "Great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts."
 - 3 Meter A regular rhythm or beat. Lub-dub-lub-dub . . . ta DUM ta DUM ta DUM . . . tidddy-dum, tidddy-dum, tidddy DUM DUM DUM . . . If prose develops meter for more than a few words in a row, it stops being prose and turns into poetry, whether you want it to or not.

Part Two

In a paragraph or so, describe an action, or a person feeling strong emotion—joy, fear, grief. Try to make the rhythm and movement of the sentences embody or represent the physical reality you're writing about.

The windowed manila envelope, with the university crest in the return address, arrived on a Tuesday of an otherwise forgettable week. She had been waiting months for this, and it was surreal that it was finally here. Fleeting thoughts about calling her mom to read it to her, or to calmly walk to the desk and use the letter opener, were superseded by her own unbidden hands roughly ripping the envelope open to pull out the single-page letter. Her eyes skimmed the text to land on: “We are pleased to inform you that have been accepted...”; the semester, campus and other details that followed were blurred by tears – and they really didn’t matter. She was in.

It might have been when she slammed the door, or her jumping up and down in heavy boots, or maybe her screams that brought everyone into the living-room, but she was soon surrounded by a hug-bundle of family all dancing around and laughing. The letter was held aloft like a victory flag announcing the best possible result from four years of trials and tribulations. Her big sister retrieved the bottle of Prosecco from the back of the fridge “for just such an occasion” and was passing around paper cups full – nobody minded that some was spilled on the carpet. Little sister tried to make everyone dance in unison by turning on the Ankeranon theme song, but that just added to the confusion. Eventually, everyone plonked down on the couch to read the letter in detail.

05.02.2025

EXERCISE TWO: Am I Saramago

Write a paragraph to a page (150–350 words) of narrative with no punctuation (and no paragraphs or other breaking devices).

Suggested subject: A group of people engaged in a hurried or hectic or confused activity, such as a revolution, or the scene of an accident, or the first few minutes of a one-day sale.

A group of five people joined us because we obviously stuck out with a huge two pole banner and whistles and they told us that they're kettling people on Darcy Street and that we should move upstreet towards the parliament buildings but it's hard to get a rag-tag group moving quickly so it took some minutes before the word spread but eventually all the chanting protesters with tambourines and placards and bullhorns started up the Avenue des Martyrs with the front phalanx linking arms to confronted the mounted police with horses wearing riot protection collars and the rent-a-cops with interlocking riot shields but in retrospect given the numbers it's hard to tell which wave broke through first because the cops and horses had mistakenly set up too close to the buildings with their backs to the steps and horses don't like stairs and the cops didn't have their usual peripheral safety buffer for emergency vehicles so despite significant pain from batons pepper spray and cannonading horses the crowd pushed the official resistance out of the way and mounted the processional steps to the doors of the government for a reckoning.

06.02.2025

EXERCISE THREE: Short and Long

Part One

*Write a paragraph of narrative, 100–150 words, in sentences of seven or fewer words. No sentence fragments!**⁴ *Each must have a subject and a verb.*

Suggested subjects: Some kind of tense, intense action—like a thief entering a room where someone’s sleeping.

Wallace stood at the free-throw line. The teams lined up on the key. The score was tied at eighty-six. The clock had run out. Only three foul shots remained. His Hail Mary wouldn’t have gone in. But then, Sheppard fouled him. Now, he’s the hero, or the goat. His palms were sweating. He wiped them on his jersey. He just needed one. He lined it up. He shot too hard. It bounced directly back off the rim. The crowd groaned. The angle was OK though. Again, he lined it up. The crowd held their collective breath. But this time it was too soft. His team and the bleachers grunted. A silence descended on him. He’d done this thousands of times. He pushed. The ball followed the perfect arc. He knew it the moment he released. A swish sound ended the slow-motion movie. Cheers erupted from the crowd. The court flooded with fans.

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4 Sentence fragment A piece of sentence used in place of a whole sentence.

A sentence has a subject (a noun or name or pronoun) and a predicate (a verb and its objects). (The subject of that sentence is sentence and the predicate is “has a subject and a predicate.”) A fragment lacks either the subject or the predicate or both:

- No sentence fragments!
- Going where?
- Too late, too late.

We use them all the time in talking, and in writing, too; but in writing, what’s left out must be clearly implied by the context around the fragment. Repeated use of fragments in narrative tends to sound either awkward or affected.

Part Two

Write a half page to a page of narrative, up to 350 words, that is all one sentence.

Suggested subjects: A very long sentence is suited to powerful, gathering emotion and to sweeping a lot of characters in together. You might try some family memory, fictional or real, such as a key moment at a dinner table or at a hospital bed.

It's difficult to point out exactly when the decision was made, but it could have been at the campfire at Killbear Provincial Park the last night of the August long weekend in 2020, when everyone in the extended family had made an effort to clear their busy schedules and haul ass out of Mississauga and Toronto to be there for mom's 85th birthday, and the sunburnt and sandy grand-children had maxed-out on enough S'mores and rowdy camp songs to now lie exhausted in the laps and under the sleeping bags and blankets of the parent "adults" – who were really just the kids from a few summers ago – being finally forced quiet enough to let the snap and crackle of the burning pine logs be heard, while the last westerling glow of a very long summer day faded, red and orange, over the lake, to be replaced by the pervasive gloaming darkness of the boreal forest at our backs, animated only by an occasional firefly and the shadows of the flickering flames on low hanging branches and squaw wood, when the conversation turns maudlin and voices are kept artificially low to avoid disturbing the inner peace and self contemplation one gets from staring into a fire, poking it with a stick, and occasionally shuffling ones piece of log, resembling a chair in only the crudest of forms, closer to the flames (on the smokeless side) to close up the semi-circle of people against the rapidly dropping temperature; it would be at that time, when life's goals are attained, siblings and friends have passed, prospects are limited, and everyone you care about is gathered around you, that a decision about fighting cancer, yet again, could be made with a clear conscience, and who would fault her for making such a personal choice – no matter what the outcome.

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