

Working with Creative Writing Students

Tutoring Beginning Poets & Fiction Writers

On-Campus Writing Lab

This presentation will cover :

Outline

- 1 Overview of introductory creative writing classes
- 2 Common pitfalls for beginning poets
- 3 Common pitfalls for beginning fiction writers
- 4 Tactics for tutoring beginning creative writers
- 5 Advice for creative writers

Overview of Introductory Creative Writing Classes

An intro creative writing course often...

- **Covers two genres within one semester**
 - Commonly, this course will be half fiction and half poetry, though some courses might focus on just one genre, whereas others might include different genres (creative nonfiction, screenwriting, etc.)
- **Introduces students to a variety of contemporary writers**
- **Teaches students to read as writers rather than literary critics**
- **Emphasizes foundational elements of craft**
 - Poetry: language, line break, form, image
 - Fiction: narration, scene, character, setting

Creative writing students...

- May or may not be English majors
- May be taking the course for credit, as an elective, or for fun
- Will likely be a variety of years—freshmen through seniors
- May or may not be aspiring writers
- Have usually not yet experienced a workshop setting
- Have often read little or no contemporary writing



The Beginning Poet's Pitfalls

- Uses abstraction more than image
- Falls back on clichés
- Stays focused on only one subject
- Is often sentimental about the subject



Image vs. Abstraction

Beginning poets often...

- Still believe that poetry must be “deep,” mysterious, and difficult
- Favor *abstract* words like “despair,” “pain,” “heaven, or “evil”
 - These words are loaded but too general

Image vs. Abstraction

What to tell them:

- Specificity = universality
- Generality = cliché
- Concrete images involve a reader's senses
- Images are more unique to the writer and the writer's particular experience

Reliance on Clichés

Clichés...

- Hold truth, but have little impact on the reader
- Are often placeholders for something the student can't yet express well
- Are general and impersonal

Reliance on Clichés

Examples of “poetic” clichés:

The lake was a mirror.

Her skin was like porcelain.

The sunset looked like fire.

Cliches can be descriptive but aren't very surprising or new.

Reliance on Clichés

Try altering the language or getting more specific.

Cliché	Possible Revisions
The lake was a mirror.	The lake mirrored the mountains. OR The lake was a bowl of sky.

Reliance on Clichés

Other ways to help:



Brainstorm images to replace abstractions

What colors, objects, or images evoke “despair” without needing to use that word?



Talke about the emotion or story behind the poem



Examine the “placeholders”

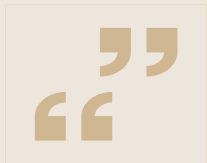
What were they *really* getting at there?

Leave the Triggering Subject

Beginning poets often get stuck. They may...



Describe one thing in detail, then stop.



Write poems that leave you with a “so what?” feeling



Still be searching for subjects that deeply interest them

Leave the Triggering Subject



Richard
Hugo's two
poetic
subjects:

1. **Triggering subject:** what got the writer started
2. **Found subject:** what the writer discovered while writing



Encourage poets to free associate subjects, images, and ideas as they write

Free Association Example

Say a student writes a poem about “autumn rain.”

- Ask questions:
 - What memories does this subject call up for the speaker in the poem?
 - How is autumn rain different from summer rain, spring rain, etc.?
 - What does it look, feel, taste, sound, or smell like?



Avoiding Sentimentality

Beginning poets often rely on sentimental language. They may...

1

Write about personal experiences

2

Write about family or significant others

3

Write the equivalent of a greeting card (with seemingly genuine feeling that could apply to almost anyone)

Avoiding Sentimentality

Emotion = Good. Sappy = Bad. Encourage students to...

Explore emotion through image

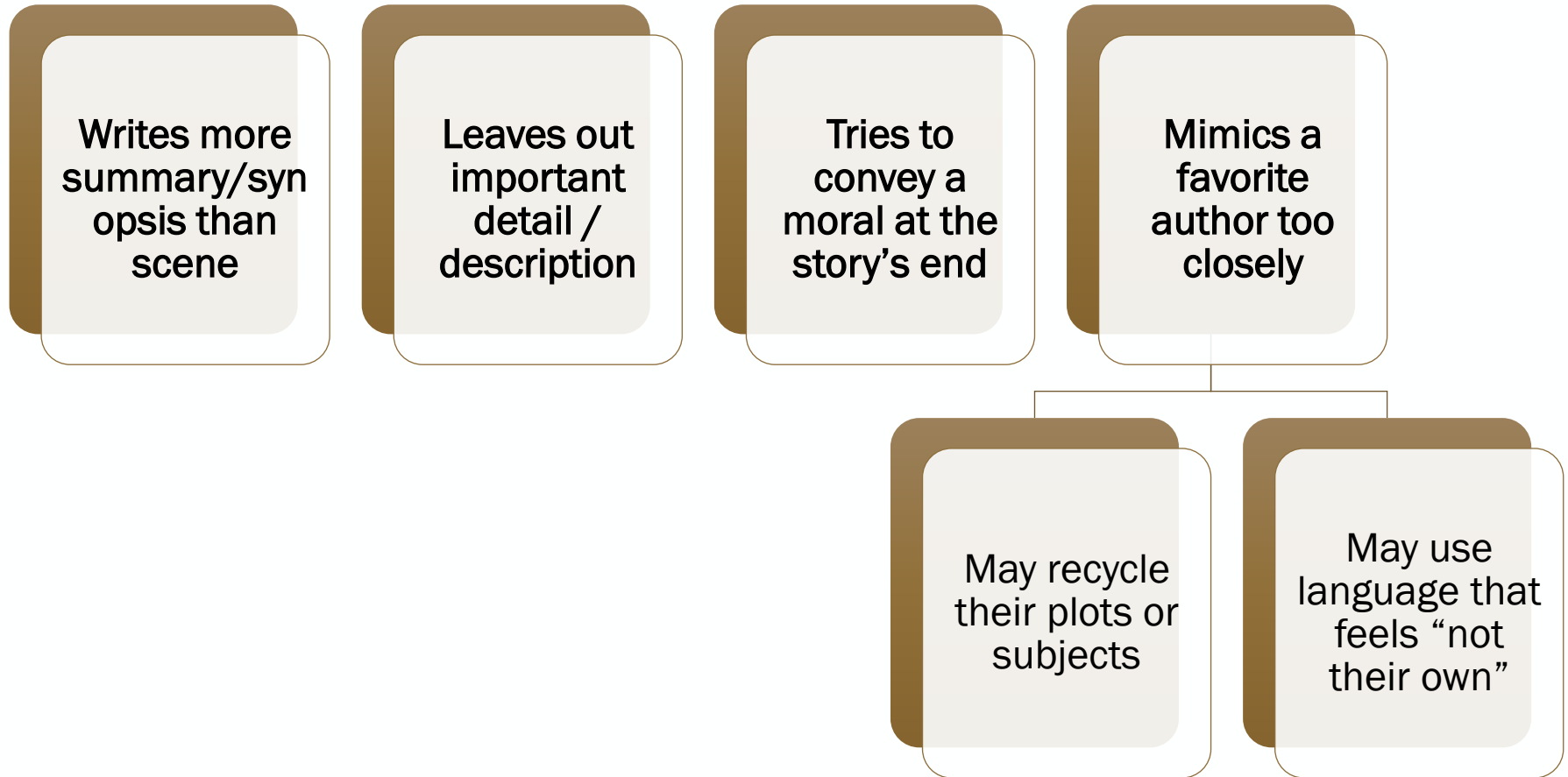


Let emotions be complex, even ambivalent



Steer clear of subjects still “too close to the bone”

The Beginning Fiction Writer



Summary vs. Scene

- *Summary* “tells” and moves quickly through information
 - Background information
- *Scene* “shows” and takes place in real-time, like a movie
 - Important interactions and events



Summary vs. Scene

Encourage students to...

- *Jump into the middle of the action*
- *Capture the reader's attention in the very first paragraph*
- *Introduce the main character right away*



Important Detail

- **Beginning fiction writers may neglect to...**
 - Fully describe characters as they enter the story
 - Give enough description of the setting
 - Break up dialogue with gestures or other details
- **Encourage students to slow down and describe.**

Important Detail

Beginning fiction writers often use “the police rundown” to describe characters.

- Examples:
 - He was six feet tall with brown hair and blue eyes.
 - She was so beautiful she could have been a model.

Character Description

- **Physical description + gesture = better characters**
- *Possible Revisions:*
 - She had long brown hair that constantly fell in her face. She was always tucking it behind her ears.
 - He often massaged the wrinkle between his eyebrows when he was worried or tired.



Summing Up with a Moral

These stories may suffer from...

**Stereotyped
characters**

**Predictable
plots**

**That “after
school
special” feel**



Summing Up with a Moral



Remind students that writing with a moral in mind...

1. Constricts action and character development
2. Limits their audience



The most compelling moments in life are rarely “black and white”

Working with Writerly Role Models

Encourage students to...



Articulate what they admire about their favorite author's work



Consider what new perspective they might have on the author's subjects



Find their own voice, style, and subject matter

General Advice to Avoid

Don't advise students...

To write only what
they know

To write about
difficult personal
situations before the
student is ready to
explore them

To show work to their
roommates or family
members without
thought

Advice to Give

Do tell students...



What inspired a reaction in you as a reader



To read, read, and read some more



To find writers whose work they admire



To write what they see, *hear, taste, touch, and smell* in every scene or poem

Want More?

Visit the Purdue OWL Creative Writing Webpage and ask the creative writing faculty at your school for more advice!

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/creative_writing/index.html



Thank You

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