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INTRODUCTION

Are mid-grade students too young for a course in creative writing? Having mentored many 4th, 5th and 6th grade students, and having given several "crash courses"--one-day seminars--to 7th and 8th grade students on the subject, I don't think so. True, many of those I worked with were hand-picked; but virtually all of them were receptive to the approach suggested here. None came away with a best-seller in progress, but several surprised themselves and their teachers with the quality of their work. In all cases, writing skills were improved.

Students today are constantly exposed to story lines and narratives through books, movies, television, and songs. They are far more sophisticated as story tellers than most adults realize, having watched cartoons, fantasy, science fiction, drama, and comedy from the time they were able to sit in front of a television set. They have hidden talents that are waiting to be uncovered: not just the "bright" ones with the ability to handle the conventions of writing, but the problem kids too, who can't get interested in anything other than sex and drugs.

When problem students discover they are actually good at something, in some cases, they can be turned around. It gives them a reason to learn the conventions of writing, in that--through writing--they can let others know how "cool" they are. The course in creative writing outlined here is also a course in critical thinking. When problem students are encouraged to think critically with a purpose, the results can be heartening and educationally significant, in that real change in behavior can occur.

This Guide has been designed around my book, *Leonardo's Hand*. But there are countless books the course could be designed around. Not surprisingly, I hope you'll use *Leonardo's Hand*; but please feel free to use the course materials here with whatever novel you wish.

COURSE OVERVIEW

For students, the goal of this course is three-fold: to "taste" the writer's life; to gain insights into the craft of fiction; and to either complete a work of fiction (short story or novella), or have one in progress by the end of the term. However, teachers may have a hidden agenda: to improve the writing skills of students. Most writers will tell you they work every day, and I believe the best results will follow by modeling the course on that reality. Ideally, the teacher would devote one class-time hour a day to this course, for a minimum of four weeks and a maximum of seven. It also would require five to six hours of homework each week.

The first five days should be used to read *Leonardo's Hand*, or the novel selected. If another book is used, make sure it will capture and entertain the students. It is a mistake to use a book students *ought* to read because of its content, unless it is also a very good read.

The work can be read aloud in class at approximately 40 pages a day. If there are enough books to go around, reading can be assigned as homework. Following each

segment, another fifteen minutes should be devoted to reinforcing what has been covered, making sure that key points of the story have been understood.

At least three days should be devoted to acquiring a "seed", or "peanut": the core idea that will drive the student's work. The term "fiction" should be discussed at this point, and the genres of fiction distinguished from one another. One or more weeks should then be devoted to the planning stage, during which the teacher will give tips and instruction on researching the core idea; present and discuss "how-to's" in the area of character selection and setting; and work through problems of plotting with the students. This Guide illustrates how *Leonardo's Hand* can be used to model those steps.

One or more weeks is then used for the writing stage. Here, the language of the craft of fiction is introduced or reinforced, and illustrated. Again, this Guide uses *Leonardo's Hand* as the model.

The course should conclude with a section on "letting go." Once a novel is sold to a publisher, it no longer belongs to the person who wrote it. What happens to it? Does the author have any control over the work, once the kid has moved out of the house? Few if any of the students will face that problem, but the section will end the course on a positive note.

ABOUT MAGICAL REALISM

Leonardo's Hand is an example of magical realism: a genre that is one step

removed from realistic fiction. The stories take place in a realistic world, where believable things happen--except for one tear in the fabric of reality; one quirky wrinkle in its membrane. That thread is magical.

The genre has a long tradition in literature. *Stuart Little*, by E. B. White, is a prime example. However, it can and should be distinguished from fantasy and science fiction, where the setting is in a world of the author's creation. Magical realism is between realism, and fantasy.

In the opinion of this author, magical realism is the ideal choice as a springboard into the subject of creative writing. It immediately gives students permission to let their imaginations dictate the premise of their work. It also aims them in the direction of critical thinking. What is fiction? What is genre? What are the parameters? What are the elements? Can the student distinguish between the four main genres: realism, magical realism, science fiction and fantasy? Student involvement in searching for answers to these questions will pique their interest and can arouse their enthusiasm.

They will come to realize that all fiction is magical, in a very real sense of the word. The characters in Richard Peck's novels have never lived, no matter how alive they are in the imaginations of his readers. The controlling word here is "imagination," in that the world and the characters in Peck's novels are experienced--not in real life--but in the imagination. They will also discover (with the teacher's help) other ingredients of the craft. How the author is responsible for establishing the premise for the story; for creating a fictional world. That world must be portrayed with enough skill and vitality to come to life in the imagination of readers, who must be persuaded to accept the premise. Once the contract between writer and reader has been entered into, the success or failure

of the work will often depend on how well the magical world of fiction, often characterized as the illusion of reality, is maintained.

PLOT SUMMARY

Leonard Smith, called "Nard", is a 13-year-old orphan born without a left hand. He knows very little about himself, other than that he was abandoned as an infant, has strange dreams of a disembodied left hand, and is unusually bright and inventive. He also knows what it's like to be dirt poor, and hungers to be hugely rich.

His caseworker finds a foster home for him on a farm owned by Anna Swedenborge, a crusty old woman with a huge heart. Large suburban estates have sprung up in the country surrounding the farm, but Anna refuses to sell even though her wealthy neighbors consider her property an eye-sore. It has been in her family for generations, and is where she lives with her slow-witted nephew Farley and his 13-year-old daughter Julie; a gifted athlete who dreams of becoming a modern dancer. Julie's mother had run off to be a dancer, then was killed in an auto accident.

Nard, a "city" orphan, must adapt to his new situation. He connects with Julie, in part because both of them are misfits at the rich suburban school they go to. Yet Nard likes it because it is far better than any school he's ever attended. He also amazes Anna with the labor-saving devices he invents for the farm. But there's trouble, too. The rich kids in the neighborhood commit destructive pranks. The Sheriff can't control them.

Julie suffers from chronic back pain, and that summer, doctors confirm her worst fears. Without an operation, she'll be wheel-chair bound before she's 20. But the operation will cost over \$50,000, far more than Anna or Farley have. Farley tries robbing a bank, fails, and is caught, leaving Anna with no choice. She has to sell her farm.

Then the left hand of Leonardo da Vinci walks into Nard's life. The Hand insists on calling Nard "Master," which is what da Vinci had been called during his life in the Renaissance. The Hand informs Nard that he has a mission in life: "to work miracles" that will benefit mankind.

Nard could care less about working miracles for the benefit of mankind. He envisions fast-buck schemes, such as taking the Hand on tour and having it draw pictures of *The Mona Lisa*. But the Hand (whom Nard names "Vinci") has the conscience of Leonardo da Vinci and is appalled by the suggestion. Yet Vinci agrees to work with Nard when the *C*U*T*A! Foundation* (Clean Up The Air!) sponsors a contest for a human-powered flying machine. The prize money to the winner of the contest would be more than enough to pay for Julie's operation.

Nard invents a "flycycle"--flying bicycle--and Vinci provides the sketches. Anna, Julie and Farley enthusiastically pitch in to help. But the apparatus takes two hands to fly, which rules Nard out. Julie, however, with her superb physical skills, can fly it with ease, which she loves doing for the thrill of it. Anna puts up the entry fee and they enter the contest . . . when Nard is assailed by second thoughts. His idea might actually work. Why should he give away his invention?

READING THE WORK

LESSONS 1 - 5

Leonardo's Hand has 201 pages, and lends itself to five segments of about the same length: Day 1, pgs. 1-45; Day 2, pgs. 46-92; Day 3, pgs. 93-124; Day 4, pgs. 125-159; and Day 5, pgs. 160-201. Ideally, each student will have access to their own copy to use during the course.

Lesson 1

Before reading, introduce the purpose and goal of the course: to simulate the life of a writer, to gain insights into the craft of fiction, and by the end of the course, to either complete a work of fiction (short story or novella), or have a work in progress. Provide the students with writer's notebooks, organized with divider headings for at least the following: story ideas, planning strategies, writing strategies, text. The notebooks should be three-ring loose-leaf, with a hundred sheets and extra dividers. Tell the students they are writers now, never certain when a flash of genius will strike, but experienced enough to know they'd better write it down quick or they'll forget it. They should keep their notebooks with them at all times, even when they go to bed!

Within the limits of school policy, notebooks should be treated as the sole and exclusive property of the students. No one, including the teacher, should have access without permission from the student. The notebooks should not be graded. Tests can be devised and written assignments can be required and graded; but if possible, let the notebook remain the private domain of the student.

Explain that most writers write what they like to read, becoming familiar with their favorite genre. For class purposes, however, a book has been selected that hopefully all will enjoy. The students will be expected to become familiar with it as a writer might: both as a story to enjoy, and as a work of fiction to analyze for the purpose of gaining a greater understanding into the craft of fiction.

Read the first chapter aloud, reinforce with questions, and assign pages 7 - 45.

Lesson 2

Reinforce the story line through page 45, covering the following: the kind of boy Nard is (inventive and bright), his problems (orphan with no left hand, poor, emotionally unable to trust), and his dreams (make tons of money). Do the same for Julie (a gifted athlete, a bit arrogant, who dislikes the rich kids in the neighborhood and hates the environmental degradation their money has inflicted on the countryside; with burning ambition to be a modern dancer, but despairing of ever becoming one because of her diseased back); Anna (crusty, tough, loving old woman with heart, who may be forced to sell her prized possession); and Farley (a mentally slow loser on the brink of disaster who will do anything to salvage a life for his daughter). What are their impressions of the Hand? Can they guess what the police want with Nard?

Generally, what are their expectations?

During the first week, only the story line should be reinforced, although students should be given permission to think beyond it to material that will be covered later: getting the seed idea or the peanut, the planning stage, and the writing stage. They should also be encouraged, on their own, to make notes about aspects of the story they like or dislike.

Read Chapter 8 aloud, reinforce with questions, and assign pages 54-92.

Lesson 3

Reinforce the story line through page 92, covering the following: How Farley tries to solve his problems and the consequences (robbery attempts; makes things harder for Anna); the Bergen Heights Burglars; the reaction of Julie and Anna to the mess in the house (skeptical) and how that impacts on Nard; Farley on TV and Julie's emotional response (sympathy and mortification); Anna's deal with the father of Erik, the leader of the Bergen Heights Burglars; the kind of "person" Vinci is (idealistic, on a mission to save the world from human excess, quirky, from another time); Nard's callous raid on petty cash; Julie's reaction to that, and to Vinci; why adults don't see him; how Julie saves Nard from exposure and the bond it creates between them; learning about the contest for human-powered flight.

Read Chapter 14 aloud, reinforce with questions, and assign pages 99-124.

Lesson 4

Reinforce the story line as in Lessons 2 and 3. Read Chapter 19 aloud, reinforce with questions, and assign pages 132-159.

Lesson 5

Reinforce the story line as before, read Chapter 24 aloud, reinforce with questions and assign pages 168-201. (The final story line reinforcement can be used in part to introduce the next section of the course: Getting a Peanut.)

GETTING THE PEANUT

LESSONS 6 - 8

Two or three days should be devoted to acquiring a "seed", or "peanut": the core idea that will drive the student's work. Because students make up their minds too quickly, strategies need to be employed to keep them from locking in on a seed idea too soon. One strategy is simply to withhold from them permission to talk about their seeds, until the teacher allows them to bring the subject up.

Lesson 6

Before moving into the subject of getting a peanut, reinforce the remaining story line of *Leonardo's Hand* as before. Use it to lead into a discussion of fiction and genre.

To define fiction simply as the creation of the illusion of reality isn't enough. Consider talking about the wonder and magic involved, when one person's imagination (that of the writer) can use written words to bring whole new worlds, often filled with action, adventure and intrigue, to other imaginations. How is it possible? Explain that all works of fiction start with a set of premises which the reader must accept, involving settings, characters, and problems. The writer promises to stay true to the premises, creating expectations in the reader's imagination which must be fulfilled if the work is to be successful.

Move to a discussion of the term genre. Fictional genres are often classified by plot (mystery, courtroom drama, juvenile, romance), but that can be very cumbersome. Consider classifying them by setting. All fiction operates in a world of the author's

choosing; and sorting genres in terms of the backgrounds created is comprehensive, simple, and easy to understand.

If the author has chosen a true-to-life world where believable things happen, the genre is *realistic fiction*. Historical fiction, most action and suspense, and most mainstream fiction are included in this genre. *Magical realism* is one step away. It too is set in a true-to-life world where believable things happen, except for one tear in the fabric of reality, one quirky wrinkle in its membrane. *Fantasy* is an imaginative, fanciful or supernatural world, and *science fiction* involves worlds operating under the laws of other planets, and/or the earth, usually as seen from the perspective of the future and impacted by evolving science. Give examples of each genre from novels familiar to the class.

Move into the subject of "peanut". Ask them what's at the root of many works of fiction? Suggest that most writers are motivated, pushed, dragged perhaps, by an idea that demands action on their part; that won't let them rest until they get it down on paper where it can be shaped and molded into a Story with a capital "S". Empower each student with the conviction that they can get an idea like that. Tell them that, to many writers, their "peanut" or "seed" is quite literally alive in their imagination, with demands of its own, but in need of the right kind of nourishment to grow.

Then say no more about the subject. Let it "cook" in their minds. Using *Leonardo's Hand* and two or three other novels with which the students are familiar, assign them the tasks of identifying both the genres and the premises upon which each story is built; and of describing the expectations generated by the authors.

Lesson 7

Engage the students as writers, whenever possible. Rather than discussing

concepts and material orally, ask them questions; then give them time to think about their answers, which they have to write down. Ask them to read what they have written. Try to create in them habits that require written expression of thought.

Using that method, go over the homework assignment. Pose questions about the concept of genre and its categories, the particular genre of the novels assigned (for *Leonardo's Hand*, magical realism) and ask them to explain their answers in writing.

Explore the premises in the same manner. Where are the stories set, meaning where and when does the action take place? (*Leonardo's Hand* takes place in the present. The settings include a farm surrounded by a suburban neighborhood, a hang-gliding school, Sierra City, etc.) The premises also include the characters (Nard, Anna, Julie, Farley, Vinci, the Bergen Heights burglars, and their qualities, failings, attitudes), and their problems (Julie's conflicted situation because of her dance ambition and her back, tensions between Nard and Farley, and Nard and Vinci; Anna's struggle to live her life without compromise, versus her need for money, etc.).

Investigate the expectations of the reader for all novels assigned, in both general and specific terms. What needs to happen, for the reader to be satisfied with the book? Can the student express expectations in terms of solutions or resolutions of problems? Can the student trace the way the expectations grew out of the premises?

Re-visit the concept of "peanut" and speculate about the peanut for *Leonardo's Hand*. Assign them the task of guessing what it was, promising you will give them the answer at the next session. Assign the task of guessing the author's peanut from other novels as well.

Lesson 8

The seed, or peanut, for *Leonardo's Hand* is a story in itself. The author had children whom he teased at the dinner table, from their infancy into their childhood, by standing his hand on its fingers and walking it toward them. "Here comes Walter Quickerwalkie," he would say. "He's going to get you!" Walter might then run up the arm of a child and pinch him lightly on the nose. Or Walter might leap off the table-top.

Then one evening, one of the author's sons couldn't swallow his spinach. As Walter approached, the little boy sneezed. Soggy spinach was spewed all over Walter, and the author--staring at his hand and glaring at his son--did not like it at all. It was disgusting. If he were Walter, he knew what he would do. He would leave. But how? He would simply disengage himself at the wrist, jump off the table, and run away.

That was the peanut for *Leonardo's Hand*, an idea that would not let the author alone. What he did with his peanut is what the students can do with theirs, once they acquire them. He put a face on the hand, meaning he gave it a persona. He developed characters to interact with the hand and placed all of them in a location or setting that would hold them. He gave them problems to solve. A story began to take shape which eventually grew into a work of fiction.

Spend the rest of the class developing seed ideas, or peanuts. Speaking generally, there are two types: (1) those that "tickle the fancy" of the author, and (2) those designed to make a point. "What if?" peanuts generally provide the platform for the first category. What if a hand, or a mouse, could have its own life? (*Leonardo's Hand*; *Stuart Little*), or what if there were specially gifted people who, from time to time, could inhabit a magical world? (The *Harry Potter* series.) Novels such as *The Oxbow Incident*, by Walter Van Tilburg Clark; or *The Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens, are generated from a desire

to make a point.

Students should come to realize that seeds scattered on rocks won't grow. In other words, they need to select seeds that can be fed with faces or characters that can interact: settings that can be made real: and problems that will intrigue and fascinate. Encourage them to write down their ideas no matter how nutty or bizarre. They can be analyzed later for their potential.

Hopefully, each student will have a peanut by the end of the session. Assign them the task of writing it down in one page or less; but explain to them that the "peanut" they start with does not have to be the one they end up with. Many writers will tell you that their peanuts often gets traded in for better models.

THE PLANNING STAGE

LESSONS 9 - 13

Five sessions should be allotted to planning, with each one focusing on a specific aspect of their work: identifying and naming characters (*faces*), locating settings in space and time (*places*), asking questions and finding answers (*research*), articulating problems and conflicts in need of resolution (*problems*), and planning the work in a way that will maximize its potential (*plot*).

Let the students know that their words and ideas are *not* carved in stone. As writers, they are god-like, in that they create their own world and have the power to

change their creation whenever they want. That freedom continues until their work is complete.

Arrange for activities in these sessions, such as small "brain-storming" groups or short writing exercises. Don't be afraid to interrupt with instructional observations. Let them know that the creative process hardly ever works lineally, and give them permission to jump from one section in their notebooks to another. Encourage them to write down ideas and even snippets of dialogue or scenes. Aim for lively-but-intense activity; and, although none of the sessions to follow can be structured in a strict way, each can focus on one of the stages most writers go through when planning a work of fiction.

Lesson 9: Faces

Using *Leonardo's Hand* as a model, discuss the selection by the author of the faces he chose in his story about a disembodied hand. Could his peanut have led him down other paths? (It could, and did. He tried a story titled *The Adventures of Walter Quickerwalkie*, which didn't go anywhere.) If you had been the author, what kind of face for a disembodied hand would you have chosen? (One that grabbed your imagination? One with side benefits perhaps, such as reader appeal? One that lends itself to intriguing situations, contrasts, conflicts?) What of the faces of the other characters? Were they randomly selected, or chosen to complement Vinci?

Have them work with each other in finding faces that will enhance their peanut. Try to stimulate and excite their imaginations. Tell them to put their faces in action, allowing the faces to do what the students see them doing in their story. Allow narrative threads to develop. Who do they see their main interacting face with? Work with those other faces too, listening to the ideas of other students who may think "he" should be a

"she" or even a pet gerbil. Reinforce the idea that they are in charge of their creation, and that as the work progresses, they need to keep their minds open to better ideas. Changing a face during the planning stage is much, much simpler than changing it after several chapters have been written.

Assign them the task of naming and describing three of the faces in their work. Each description must be at least one paragraph, and must include physical details (such as sex, age, size, what and who the person looks like), superficial characteristics (such as active, couch potato, interested in, sounds like, good and bad points), and core (such as ambitious, curious, principled, driven, not driven).

Lesson 10: Places

Using *Leonardo's Hand* as a model, ask questions that will prompt the students to analyze the author's selection of the setting. Could the story have been set somewhere other than Sierra City? (Of course.) On an island in the South Pacific? (No.) What purposes are served by selecting a farm surrounded by suburbia? (Nard's inventive genius needed a setting that could display his talents. It also allowed traits of Julie, Anna and Farley space and opportunity to develop.) Point out that the author is from Denver, Colorado, and the settings are similar to the Denver region. Writers will tell you it's easier to write about that with which you are familiar. But it isn't essential. If the peanut had required an ocean, the author--and the student--would have done the research needed to write knowingly about oceans.

Consider a writing exercise to help them with their setting. Have them close their eyes and "see" the place where significant action occurs. With their eyes closed, ask them to look around inside their head at the scene, memorizing everything. If inside a

room, the color of the walls, the furniture, the people in the room, the way it smells, how things feel when touched. If outside, the weather, the sky, the trees, the mountains, the names of animals and people, who is there. (Don't force this activity on students, of course. For many, it can be frightening. Let those students "see" their setting in their imaginations, with their eyes open.)

When they are ready, ask them to write down as much as they can about what they have seen and memorized. Then tell them something has happened in their setting: funny, tragic, out-of-the-ordinary, or even violent. Ask them to visualize that incident too with the same amount of care, the same attention to detail. Then have them write it-- but not starting when the gun goes off. Lead up to it. Back up a bit. Get a running start.

For homework, assign the task of finding two articles that relate to their setting. They must read them, write short reports about them, and pull from each some bit of information that illuminates their work.

Lesson 11: *Research*

Ask, do you think the author of *Leonardo's Hand* engaged in any research? (Yes! Extensive research into the life of Leonardo Da Vinci revealed one of the most creative and imaginative minds produced by the Renaissance. Called "the Master" even by kings, he recorded scientific observations centuries before his time; developed long-living theories of art, architecture, and life; made notes and wrote essays that displayed his ironic humor and wide-open mind; was possessed of a mind-set that allowed him to inquire into the taboo subjects of his day; made volumes of drawings and sketches that illustrated his inventions, ideas, and inquiries into the sciences; was a leading Renaissance painter; was left-handed, idealistic, and kept voluminous journals written in

longhand from right to left. The author also researched orphans, hang-gliding, modern dance, small farms. Virtually everything in the novel was confirmed by research.)

In groups, have them identify what needs to be researched in their work and the work of others. Was the homework assignment a waste of time, or has their setting been illuminated by it? Do they see it a bit more clearly? Impress upon them that research pays huge dividends. The more they know about their subjects, meaning places and faces at this point, the easier it is to breathe life into their work.

Talk about information-gathering. How does a reporter get the facts needed to write the story? How does a scientist gather the data for an experiment? How do writers develop the background for their work, get answers to specific questions, information about specific facts? Pose problems for them to resolve or act out: reporting an accident; life for a dog in an animal shelter; what Martha Washington's maiden name was and what her life was like before she met George. Go over the tools available for research: telephone interviews; personal interviews; the library; the internet; going there; doing it.

Assign them the task of following through on what they and others in their group have identified as areas of research. Have them develop a plan for each area, starting with a written description of what they need to know, followed by a written summary of how they intend to get the information and answers they need.

Lesson 12: Problems

With *Leonardo's Hand* as the model, ask them to identify the big problems the characters in the novel needed to solve. (Money for Julie's back operation, the bank loan, and lawyer's fees, all hinging on winning the contest) Did the problems create expectations for the reader? (Yes. The reader wants plausible "cool" solutions.) What

does that tell them about the problems in their work? (Make sure they can be solved, unless the story is about failure and coping with consequences.) Did the "faces" have problems too? (Yes. A partial list: Nard, loneliness and an inability to trust; Julie, arrogance and too much ambition; Farley, getting a grip; Anna, peaceful co-existence.)

To make the most of their peanut, tell the students that problems are needed. Put them in discussion groups to help one another find problems for their faces to solve. Keep them writing, even when in groups. Try to instill in them the habit of thinking, then writing down their thoughts. Ideas in the air dissipate, disappear and dissolve. Write them down! They have notebooks and should use them. Encourage writing at every level. Also at this stage, let them know that problems may change just like faces and places and they should not "lock in" on anything. Reinforce an attitude of open-minded inquiry, encouraging them to continue searching through the planning stage for better ways to heighten, tighten, and dramatize their peanut.

Do they think all the problems developed in *Leonardo's Hand* occurred to the author in his planning stage? Could the interaction between and among the stages have stimulated his imagination? Did he keep his mind open for more intriguing ideas and problems? Did he keep a notebook, so he wouldn't forget? Most writers of fiction will tell you that ideas and changes happen until the work is done. Many will admit that their notebooks, figuratively speaking, have saved their lives. And some will tell you of wonderful ideas that got away because they weren't written down and were lost.

Assign the task of writing out the peanut, and the main problems they have chosen to make the most of their idea. Assign also the task of naming all the faces, and stating the problems each face has to solve. Even though they may have done portions of

this assignment before, have them do it again. Tell them this version will be a new and improved model, and to let changes happen.

Lesson 13: *Plot*

(At some point, the teacher needs to let the students know that no two authors of fiction work the same way. Some simply start writing and "let it happen," although it's possible that many of those have a tendency to romanticize the process. Others don't think in terms of peanuts, or ideas that drive them forward; many don't keep notebooks; some are far more meticulous about the process than what is suggested here; and many will tell you they don't know themselves, and that the subject can't be taught. This course is based on the methods of one writer, but he does not want students or anyone else to regard it as the last word. It is one of many ways to introduce the process of creative writing of fiction to mid-grade and high school students, but there are many, many books on the subject which students should be encouraged to read.)

Introduce the concepts of "plot" and "narrative". Because our culture is oriented so heavily in the direction of stories, most students will start with a basic understanding of the terms. A plot is the scheme or plan developed by the writer to accomplish the purpose of the work. "Good" plots often hide the purpose until the end, then reveal it like the punch-line of a joke. Such plots reach for a sudden dramatic point or final resolution, often a surprise, where the expectations of the reader are satisfied.

A narrative is generally a story which has been told about an episode or series of episodes in the life of a person or group of people. Narratives are story-lines. Make the point that the standard work of fiction is a narrative that follows a plot.

Can there be a narrative without a plot, or a plot without a narrative? Encourage

them to distinguish between them. Plots are outlines, frameworks, blueprints; narratives are storylines, tales, accounts. Plots have a punch-line; narratives can meander endlessly. Plots are "in the abstract" while narratives are the nitty-gritty.

Tell the students that now--at least figuratively--they have many index cards that can be arranged or sorted into a rough plotline. (The analogy of "puzzle" doesn't work.) Each card describes a face, a problem, an event, a setting, or other bit of information needed to tell it; and not just any story but one that will make the most out of their particular peanut. The cards must be put in order.

(It may sound simple, but it isn't. The plot for a work of fiction takes most writers--those who proceed along the lines suggested here--weeks and months to develop. Often they are several pages long, as each chapter in a book is outlined and broken into scenes describing the action. Many are triple-spaced, allowing lots of room for new ideas, changes, deletions, revisions. Some are alarmingly messy and filled with bad language as expletives get scribbled in the margins, expressing the frustration and outrage of an author who has been forced to deal with some aspect of the plan that doesn't work.

(Here, the students have roughly one day to develop a plot. The hope is it will do more than give them a taste of the process and the chance to simulate it. They need enough of a frame to start their work.)

Put them in groups, asking them to help each other develop a plotline for their work. But continue encouraging them to write down their suggestions and exchange ideas in writing. Tell them of the benefits of writing ideas down: how it seems to slow down the thought process, which helps one focus clearly on one idea at a time; how it magnifies each idea, helping one to express it with greater clarity and precision; how it

seems to force one to "think it through."

Suggest that they break their plotlines into scenes. For example, a plotline might be as follows: "Alice was in a really bad mood that day and when she got to school, she got in a big fight with her teacher. The principal sent her home but when she got there, her mom had gone out. Then Alice smelled smoke. She ran into the kitchen and saw that the stove was on fire. Thinking quickly, she called 911 and reported it, then ran back into the kitchen and shut all the doors and windows. She turned the water on in the sink, filled the dishpan, and doused the fire; then repeated the process. She almost had the fire out when help arrived. Everybody treated her like a hero."

Starting at the beginning: "Alice was in a really bad mood that day" can be cast into a scene where an event occurs that puts Alice in a bad mood. Encourage the student to see it as a scene, with people and action. Who are the people? Do they have faces? What is the action? Does she have a clear idea as to the setting? "When she got to school" is also a scene. Did she walk? Ride her bicycle? Is she alone or with someone? Does an adult drop her off? What of the faces and settings? "She got in a big fight with her teacher" is obvious. Where does it happen? Who is the teacher? What exactly was the fight about? What was said? Who was present? Was it embarrassing or humiliating? Did Alice cry?

Encourage them to think in terms of their readers. Ask them: isn't your real purpose to be read? True, many writers--especially poets--write purely for their own enjoyment; but most writers have something to say, and write to an audience. Ask them to put a face on their audience--a friendly face--and write to that face.

Ask them also whether they will continue reading something that doesn't quickly

catch their interest. What does that suggest to them, as far as their plot?

For homework, assign them the task of developing their plot, their grand plan, from which their narrative can hang, or be built, or otherwise be brought into existence. A good plot starts by describing a scene that will grab the reader's interest. It will be followed with a description of the sequence of scenes that march toward the perfect solution. Each scene is firmly set in a particular location and well-planned in terms of action, people, and problems that demand solutions and create expectations. The final scene or scenes describe how all the problems are solved and expectations satisfied.

Needless to say, the teacher should not expect too much, although you are allowed to hope for the best.

THE WRITING STAGE

LESSONS 14 - 18 (or more)

Allow at least five sessions for writing, and more if possible. The first four or five sessions should focus on specific aspects of the process: selecting the story-teller (tone, voice, point-of-view); "hooks", foreshadowing, and other dramatic techniques; dialogue, description, getting-to-there-from-here (meaning transitions between scenes and bridging time); and revision and polish. Only four subject areas are covered, and doing it in five lessons will be a challenge. Try to devote a few days for the sole purpose of writing.

Tell the students that now they will officially start on their work, recognizing that many have already begun. Reinforce the attitude that, as in the planning stage, their words, ideas, settings, descriptions and narrative thread can be modified. They are still god-like, in total charge of their creation, and in a position to change and revise any of it at any time.

Continue with "brain-storming" groups and writing exercises, but allow for fifteen and twenty minute stretches of individual concentration on writing. Reinforce the notion that the creative process rarely works lineally and that they have the freedom to jump back and forth and up and down, figuratively, as they move from one scene to another, or jot down ideas in their notebooks. When they write, encourage them to double or triple space, allowing lots of room for changes. Tell them they are in too much of a hurry to use erasers. Let them draw lines through what they don't want without worrying about how messy it looks. The time will come when they can do nice, clean copies.

For writers, the methods and techniques of the craft of fiction are the tools of the trade. Using them is automatic, done without thinking, like a carpenter hammering in a nail. Few of the students will develop that kind of ease, but when they "see them in action," so to speak, as they are modeled by *Leonardo's Hand* and other novels, usually the light will go on, even if dimly. As students are shown where the nails are in the work of a professional novelist, follow it up by having them hammer in the nails needed to build their own work. Aim for a tangible understanding of the craft of fiction.

Lesson 14: *Selecting the story-teller*

"Faces" or characters were chosen by the students in the planning stage and most of them will conclude that their story-teller is the main face. However, the "story-teller"

in a work of fiction is more than one of the faces. Though many stories are narrated by the main character or a witness, they are told just as frequently by the author from an omniscient point-of-view. The point is that the story-teller is more than the narrator. It is the personality, the soul, the spirit of a work that binds it into a cohesive whole; an illusory personage, bounded by a point-of-view, with its own unique voice.

The concept of story-teller as used here is felt, more than understood.

Start this lesson with a discussion that touches on the concept, but don't expect much in the way of real understanding. Go to the practical problems the students are faced with: point-of-view, tone, and voice. Encourage them to feel what is meant here, even if they can't articulate it.

Leonardo's Hand, for example, is narrated by a 13-year-old boy, in the first-person point-of-view. The voice is that of a bright, inventive, imaginative orphan with a glaring physical disability. Can the students "hear" his voice? Does it echo with the loneliness and distrust, tempered with the "street smarts" and humor that one might expect of such a person?

Other novels should be used to illustrate what is meant by point-of-view and voice. *Define Normal* by Julie Peters, *Hush* by Jacqueline Woodson, and *Strays Like Us* by Richard Peck are excellent examples of voices of girls in first-person; *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry, of a boy from the third-person; *Blue Heron*, by Avi, a girl from third-person; and Cornelia Funke's *The Thief Lord*, a group of boys and girls from third-person. Each has its own voice, but another voice can also be heard; a personage who is above the story, pulling the strings like a puppeteer, so skillfully that the audience can't see the strings and is only aware of the dance of the puppets.

How long does a friend have to talk to a person on the telephone for the person to recognize the voice? And when recognized, doesn't that voice-recognition go beyond the sound? Doesn't it instantly fill the mind with the unique personality, the pimples and grins, that are the special imprint of the person's friend? Suggest to the students that works of fiction bring readers a similar kind of voice that can be heard.

The differences between first- and third-person need to be pointed out. The peanut and plot of many stories planned by the students may require a distance that isn't possible when told by an "I". Students in groups may help one another come to those understandings, or direct teacher-involvement may be required. Ask the students to "listen" as they read, and more importantly as they write their own work, for voices: not only those of the characters portrayed, but also the story-teller.

Try also to inject the concept of "tone" into the mix. Tone is like the weather is to the day; beautiful, menacing, calm-before-the-storm; the atmosphere a book is imbedded in. Don't worry about logical distinctions, such as whether or not the tone of a work is part of the voice. Novels that come in series, such as the R. L. Stein books (infused with an expectation of horror) or the books by Lemony Snicket (silliness) illustrate tone. Often the tone will be an outgrowth of the work, something the author doesn't consciously consider; but to understand the craft of fiction, tell the students that they need at least to be aware of the notion.

After having inserted these difficult concepts into the course, both teachers and students need to realize they should not agonize over any of them. Let the problems introduced here work themselves out in the writing, which is the way it happens with most authors. The students need to start writing. Assign them the task of spending at

least one hour on their work; enough to get it started, or to get into it.

Lesson 15: "Hooks", foreshadowing, and other dramatic techniques

Many writers of fiction, including the author of *Leonardo's Hand*, struggle with two basic problems: plausibility and narrative tension.

A major technique in converting implausible circumstances into plausible ones is to foreshadow them; to prepare the reader for the strangeness in advance. In *Leonardo's Hand*, the novel depends on reader acceptance of a magical premise: Vinci as the hand of Leonardo Da Vinci, and Nard as his reincarnation. The author gained that acceptance by foreshadowing the oddities before dropping them into the story. (Nard's name; his disability; his "summer place" in a culvert and his inventive tricks to keep others out; labor-saving inventions on the farm; talking to Julie about a disembodied hand, pages 14-15; dreaming of one, page 17.) That human-powered flying would be central to the plot also needed foreshadowing to make it plausible, which started when Nard told Mrs. Cousins that "You have to be able to fly" (p. 2) to get into his "summer place."

Narrative tension refers to the unseen forces that push a story forward, or drag readers into it and pull and drag them to the end. One method of creating such tension is to splash a scene with conflict. A bland conversation can put a reader to sleep, but an argument will keep the reader reading. Encourage the students to think in terms of conflict and help them find those little nodes or protuberances in their plotlines that can be magnified by pitting faces against themselves or other faces. Also, most of the problems identified by the students for their work can be heightened by casting them in the framework of conflict.

Examples of conflict-generated narrative tension abound in *Leonardo's Hand*.

The conflict between Vinci's idealism and Nard's ambition; Nard's internal conflict when he tries to patent his invention, brought about by his warm feelings of affection and trust for Anna and Julie and sincere desire to help them, torn by the poverty he has known and wants to avoid; Julie's ambitions thwarted by her back; Farley's desperate attempts to save his daughter; the location of a pig farm in a subdivision; Anna's conflicts. But smaller ones also propel the story forward, as when Nard tries to lift Julie out of the mental pit she has fallen into (Chapter 6), resulting in a fight.

The "hook" is another device used to generate narrative tension. Hooks are those dramatic imbalances writers create that leave the reader in a state of suspension, wondering what will happen next. Writers work at ending chapters on such dramatic notes, hoping always to induce the reader into going on to the next chapter. Most chapters in *Leonardo's Hand* end in that fashion. Chapter 4, with a warning that sets up an expectation of danger; Chapter 7 on a suspenseful note; Chapter 14, in curiosity about Nard's invention; Chapter 16 with an expectation of disaster; Chapter 19, of hope; and Chapter 20, despair. The author's favorite chapter-ending hook is Chapter 26. It ends with Julie flying over the heads of the crowd after barely accomplishing one problem, creating a larger one that engenders danger, suspense, and large expectations.

For their homework assignment, they are to write at least an hour on their work, incorporating one or more of the techniques described above.

Lesson 16: Dialogue, description, getting-to-there-from-here

Most authors aim at a particular audience, and hope to capture those in attendance in some fashion or other, holding their interest to the last page. Their work may also be designed to instruct, or change attitudes, or promote a higher awareness; but without first

capturing that audience of readers, they don't get read.

How does one capture their audience? Some readers require entertainment, others intrigue and suspense, a few need intellectual challenge. How should the writer begin?

A basic step is to identify the audience. Once identified, the work should be tailored to suit those tastes. With that purpose in mind, the students are better able to approach the nitty-gritty aspects of the craft of fiction: the management of scenes through dialogue, descriptive passages, and the movement or transition from scene to scene.

Good dialogue takes work. Each face needs to "sound" real, what is said must push the story forward, and no two faces can sound alike. The reader should know who the face is, without being told. Select passages of *Leonardo's Hand* and read them out loud to see if the students can identify the speaker. (Its author could be in for a rude awakening.) Would any other face say what is said in the same way? How does the passage move the story along?

Most audiences get bored with long descriptive passages. Suggest that descriptions are easier to ingest when broken up. In *Leonardo's Hand*, the author had to describe the operation of the flycycle. Was this done in one passage?

In describing a place, the most frequently-used strategy of writers is to show it to the reader as it is seen or experienced by a character. Care must be taken to stay in the point-of-view of the face. The reader can't "see" what the face isn't in a position to see, physically or intellectually. Pages 5 and 6 of *Leonardo's Hand* model that technique.

"Getting-to-there-from-here", or transitions through time, can cause problems. Moving *Leonardo's Hand* from Nard's arrival at the pig farm in the spring until the action picks up again in the summer was one. Chapter 4 is how the author resolved it. Often

the problems can be handled with ease; simply ending a scene and starting the next one a few days later. But students should be cautioned to make sure a clue or two is dropped so readers know where they are. Ask them to examine the chapter breaks in *Leonardo's Hand*, at the concluding sentence of one and the beginning sentence of the next one. In most cases there has been a passage of time, but done so readers aren't lost.

As their homework assignment, give them the task of identifying their audience. Tell them to describe the characteristics of their readers in terms of their interests, then list the kinds of stories they like. They must also review their own work with their audience in mind and honestly answer the question: Is this the "right" kind of story for them? Is it told in a way that will capture them?

Tell them they must also do a clean copy of their work to that point and bring it to school the next day. Triple-spaced.

Lesson 17: Revision and polish

It isn't easy to get students to see their imperfections. Rather than presenting the subject of revision and polish through the prism of correcting mistakes, do it by focusing on improvements. Have the students aim for "cool," and encourage them to continue improving their work until it's "the coolest."

Get into the subject of critiquing one another's work, and its benefits. By looking critically at the work of their friend (and either don't use the term "critically" or define it with care) they will find ways to improve their own work. But laughing at the work of another is against the law. The person offering a critique must only do so in good faith. *Con*-structive assessments, comments and suggestions are allowed, but *de*-structive, sarcastic, negative and hurtful observations are punishable with death.

Talk also about the responsibilities of those on the receiving end. They must assume the good faith of the other student, and must make a serious effort to understand what is meant. When responding to suggestions or comments, they are not allowed to justify what they've written: only to ask questions to clarify an observation.

Have them practice helpful ways of pointing out problems they might see in someone else's work, such as point out the good before the bad, always with the aim of improving their work and those of others. Then break them into small groups of three or four and have them pass around their homework assignment; the clean triple-spaced copy of their work. Let the first critiques be in writing, then have the students, taking one effort at a time, talk about them. The one whose work is under consideration must listen and take notes.

Lesson 18 - 21: *Concentrated writing*

Allow for quiet, concentrated writing. Work individually with students, but remain ready to interrupt the class with observations and comments of your own. If a writing exercise is helpful, do it. Group sessions too can be continued. Be encouraging and aim for improvement. If students are stuck, have them read an appropriate work of your selection, or do some research. Try for intensity, but keep them writing.

FINAL LESSON: LETTING GO

Not many of the students will have completed their work, and it is very unlikely

that any will have found a publisher. But the final lesson should be about what to expect, if and when that hoped-for event occurs. Just as parents must deal with the time when their children are grown and leave home, so must authors deal with letting go of their work.

If possible, bring in a professional writer to talk about the subject. If not, consider telling them the following. Getting published has its own set of problems, as well as its rewards. One must work first with an agent, who will usually require a few revisions and modifications before sending the work out. Then comes the emotional roller-coaster the author goes through waiting and hoping that the work will sell to a publisher.

At last! A publisher agrees to take it on.

But publishers have editors. Usually the book will be assigned to someone the author has never seen before and is suspicious of, who will go through the author's work with a magnifying glass. He or she will not have taken this course and won't know how to criticize in an even-tempered way. He or she may chop the author's sweat, blood and tissue to pieces with a meat cleaver. But the surprising truth is, after the author has been forced by the editor to listen and understand and revise the work, it is transformed into something far better than before and the author and editor become great friends.

There are also aspects of publication authors have no choice about, and simply must endure. They have no control over the appearance of the dust jacket and the writing; the time it takes before the book is in the stores; etc. And when it's "out there" at last, how will others see it? What will reviewers say about it?

Most authors stay in touch with their creations. But it isn't always as easy as it seems.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wick Downing has been in the business of writing for a long time. His first novel was published in 1974, by Saturday Review Press, which at that time was a division of E. P. Dutton & Co. The hard-cover edition cost \$5.95.

His early work was mystery and suspense and brought him some great press. Charles Willeford, a legendary reviewer for *The Miami Herald*, rated two of his first three novels as among the ten best mysteries of the year. Major newspapers everywhere, from California to Colorado (to be expected: Downing is from Denver) to the *New York Times*, wrote glowing reviews of his work. Foreign publication rights were sold to major publishing houses in France, Germany, Italy and Denmark, and the books sold abroad. He thought he was launched

But it didn't happen. No movie deals, no best-sellers, and the money that trickled in was not enough to feed him and his family. Fortunately, he had another occupation to fall back on: law. In the '90's, after a stint as District Attorney in rural Colorado, he turned to courtroom drama. Of those four novels, three won the Colorado Author's League Top Hand Award, and two were nominated for the Colorado Book Award. He also wrote a novel for young readers titled *Kid Curry's Last Ride* (Orchard Books), a Richard Jackson Imprint, published in paper-back by HarperCollins. *Leonardo's Hand* is also a book for young readers.

The novels he has written are: *The Player* (E. P. Dutton, 1974); *The Mountains West of Town* (E. P. Dutton, 1975); *The Gambler, the Minstrel, and the Dance Hall Queen* (E. P. Dutton, 1976); *Kid Curry's Last Ride* (Orchard Books, 1989); *A Clear Case of Murder* (Pocket Books, 1990); *The Water Cure* (Pocket Books, 1992); *A Lingering Doubt* (Pocket Books, 1993); *Choice of Evils* (Pocket Books, 1994) and *Leonardo's Hand* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

Houghton Mifflin will publish another novel of his in 2008. Also for young readers, it is titled *The Trials of Kate Hope*. It just might be the beginning of a new genre: legal thrillers for teens. Set in Denver in 1973, the novel will chronicle the courtroom trials of Kate Hope who – through a loop-hole in Colorado law – becomes a lawyer at the age of 14.

Downing continues to write. The one thing in his life about which he is deadly serious is the craft of fiction.