

"Nicholas Delbanco is one of our country's finest fiction writers. He also happens to be one of our country's finest master teachers. The fusion of his talents in this instructive and delightful manual makes for an irresistible combination."

—Alan Cheuse, *National Public Radio* book critic

The SINCEREST FORM

WRITING
FICTION
BY
IMITATION



THE MCGRAW-HILL COMPANIES
FOR DONATION ONLY
NOT FOR RESALE
HIGHER EDUCATION
23-ASA-006

Nicholas Delbanco

Contents

How to Use This Book xiii
Acknowledgments xix
Theory and Practice: An Introduction xxi

PART 1

Reading and Imitating the Master Stylists 1

CHAPTER 1 PLOT AND STRUCTURE 3

The Art of the Echo

ANDREA BARRETT 3

“*The Behavior of the Hawkweeds*” 4

■ Notes on Craft and Context 21

On Point of View in Structure 21

On Characterization in Structure 21

On Theme in Structure 21

On Theme in Plot 22

On Time Span: The Structure of Plot 22

On Plot and Structure: Putting It Together 23

On History and Invention 23

■ Applications and Connections 26

● Exercises 26

CHAPTER 2 A PRIMER FOR NARRATIVE STYLES 28

Self-Reflexive Fiction and the World within the Word

JOHN BARTH 28

“*Lost in the Funhouse*” 30

■ Notes on Craft and Context 49

	<i>On Form and Language in Style</i>	49
	<i>On Theme in Style</i>	50
	<i>Author as Character, Character as Author</i>	51
	<i>On Fiction about Fiction</i>	52
	<i>“Lost in the Funhouse” as a Primer for Narrative Styles</i>	53
	<i>On Self-Reflexive Imitation</i>	53
	• Applications and Connections	54
	• Exercises	55
	• Examples of Student Work	55
CHAPTER 3	CHARACTER AND THE EPIPHANIC MOMENT	57
	<i>Learning to Reveal the Hidden</i>	
	CHARLES BAXTER	57
	<i>“Fenstad’s Mother”</i>	58
	• Notes on Craft and Context	70
	<i>On Plot in Characterization</i>	70
	<i>Counterpointed Characterization: Protagonist and Antagonist</i>	71
	<i>The Epiphanic Moment</i>	71
	<i>Humor and Dialogue in Characterization</i>	72
	<i>Extras: Allusions in Characterization</i>	72
	<i>Life off the Page: Development of Minor Characters</i>	73
	<i>On Real Characters</i>	73
	• Applications and Connections	74
	• Exercises	74
CHAPTER 4	DIALOGUE	76
	<i>Minimalism and the Monologue</i>	
	RAYMOND CARVER	76
	<i>“A Small, Good Thing”</i>	77
	• Notes on Craft and Context	97
	<i>On Economy in Language and Dialogue</i>	97
	<i>On Expansion as Revision</i>	98
	<i>Fleshing Out a Story</i>	99
	<i>On Character: Names and Distance</i>	100
	<i>On Point of View and Distance</i>	100
	<i>On the Selection of Details</i>	101
	<i>On Dialogue and Monologue</i>	101
	<i>On Evoking Emotional Intensity through Restraint</i>	103
	• Applications and Connections	103
	• Exercises	104
	• Examples of Student Work	104

CHAPTER 5	THEME AND THE SELECTION OF DETAIL	107
	<i>Writing Up Close and at a Distance</i>	
	RICHARD FORD	107
	“Communist”	108
	▪ Notes on Craft and Context	122
	<i>Details: On Time Span</i>	122
	<i>Writing Up Close</i>	123
	<i>Writing at a Distance</i>	123
	<i>Summary vs. Dialogue</i>	123
	<i>Details: On What’s Left Unsaid</i>	124
	<i>The Selection of Details</i>	124
	<i>On Details in Theme</i>	125
	<i>On Setting in Theme</i>	125
	▪ Applications and Connections	126
	▪ Exercises	127
CHAPTER 6	COMPRESSION	128
	<i>Prose as Architecture</i>	
	ERNEST HEMINGWAY	128
	“Chapter VII”	130
	▪ Notes on Craft and Context	130
	<i>On Compression and Style</i>	130
	<i>On Point of View in Style</i>	131
	<i>On Word Choice and Syntax</i>	131
	“In Another Country”	132
	▪ Notes on Craft and Context	136
	<i>On Tense and Point of View</i>	136
	<i>On Dialogue and Language</i>	137
	<i>On Prose as Architecture</i>	137
	▪ Applications and Connections	138
	▪ Exercises	139
	▪ Examples of Student Work	140
CHAPTER 7	SETTING	145
	<i>Perception, Place, and Displacement</i>	
	BHARATI MUKHERJEE	145
	“The Management of Grief”	147
	▪ Notes on Craft and Context	161
	<i>On Setting: Empathy and the Unfamiliar</i>	161
	<i>The Facts: Setting the Scene</i>	162
	<i>On Collective Catastrophes and Shared Grief</i>	162

- On Place and Displacement* 162
- On Fate* 163
- On Displaced Characters* 163
- On the Unreliable Narrator* 164
- On Perception and Displacement* 164
- On Displacement as Bond and Conflict* 165
- On Time and Place in Displacement* 165
- Applications and Connections 166
- Exercises 166

CHAPTER 8 POINT OF VIEW AND COMIC TIMING 168

You and I

LORRIE MOORE 168

"How to Become a Writer" 170

- Notes on Craft and Context 176
 - On Second-Person Point of View* 176
 - You as You and I* 176
 - On Parody* 177
 - On Nontraditional Plot* 177
 - Not One Climax, but Many: Episodic Plot* 178
 - Humor: Rhythm and Diction* 178
 - Point of View: Sharing the Joke and the Darkness* 179
- Applications and Connections 179
- Exercises 180
- Examples of Student Work 180

CHAPTER 9 DRAMATIC ENCOUNTER 184

Mixing the Accidental and the Foreordained

FLANNERY O'CONNOR 184

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" 185

- Notes on Craft and Context 199
 - On the Plot* 199
 - On the Foreordained* 200
 - On Humor and Horror* 200
 - Plot: Escalating Danger* 200
 - On Character Driving Plot* 201
 - On Hints from Minor Characters* 201
 - On Free Will and Predestination* 201
 - On Pace and the Dramatic Encounter: Sustaining Hope* 202
 - On Character and Grace* 202

	<i>On Symbolic and Thematic Implications</i>	203
	<i>After the Dramatic Encounter</i>	203
	▮ Applications and Connections	204
	▮ Exercises	205
CHAPTER 10	LANGUAGE AND FORM	206
	<i>The Power of Data and Lists</i>	
	TIM O'BRIEN	206
	" <i>The Things They Carried</i> "	208
	▮ Notes on Craft and Context	223
	<i>The Challenges of "True" Narrative</i>	223
	<i>On Form: The List Story</i>	223
	<i>On the Tonality and Weight of Lists</i>	224
	<i>On Style and Rhythm</i>	225
	<i>On Dialogue and Specific Language</i>	226
	<i>On the Individual and Universal Character</i>	226
	<i>On Invention as Truth Seeking</i>	
	<i>and Narrative Posturing</i>	227
	<i>Drawing Connections: Hemingway and Barth</i>	228
	<i>From Imitation to Original Creation</i>	228
	▮ Applications and Connections	228
	▮ Exercises	229
	▮ Examples of Student Work	230
CHAPTER 11	THE PROCESS OF REVISION	233
	<i>Inflected English</i>	
	BERNARD MALAMUD	233
	" <i>The Magic Barrel</i> "	235
	▮ Notes on Craft and Context	249
	<i>Revision as Creation</i>	250
	<i>On the Process of Revision</i>	250
	<i>On Creating and Revising Characters</i>	253
	<i>On Magical Realism</i>	253
	<i>On Style and Dialogue</i>	253
	<i>On Style and Description</i>	254
	<i>On Plot and Point of View</i>	254
	<i>Getting the Ending Right</i>	254
	<i>On Theme without Reduction</i>	255
	▮ Applications and Connections	255
	▮ Exercises	256

CHAPTER 12 AUTOBIOGRAPHY VS. INVENTION 257

Blending Fantasy and Reality

JAMAICA KINCAID 257

"My Mother" 258

■ Notes on Craft and Context 262

Reading Genre: Fantasy or Reality? 262 *On Autobiography in Fiction* 263 *On Culture: Reinventing Narrative* 263 *On Autobiography and Symbol* 264 *Representative Character and Conflict* 264 *Episodic Plot: Transformation and Flux* 265 *Concrete Detail in Invention* 265 *On Imitation and Autobiography* 266 *On Interchangeable Identity and Language* 266 *The Concrete in the Abstract* 267

■ Applications and Connections 267

■ Exercises 268

■ Examples of Student Work 268

PART II*An Anthology* 273

(A short story by each of the following authors, with ten exercises attached)

JOHN CHEEVER, "Reunion" 275

PETER HO DAVIES, "Relief" 279

JUNOT DIAZ, "How to Date a Brown girl, Black girl, White girl, or Halfie" 288

STUART DYBEK, "We Didn't" 292

AMY HEMPEL, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" 302

GISH JEN, "Who's Irish?" 310

JHUMPA LAHIRI, "Sexy" 320

REGINALD MCKNIGHT, "The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas" 337

GRACE PALEY, "Faith in the Afternoon" 348

GEORGE SAUNDERS, "The Wavemaker Falters" 359

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, "*Forever Overhead*" 366

EUDORA WELTY, "*Why I Live at the P.O.*" 375

Glossary G-1

Credits C-1

Index I-1

Please visit the website at www.mhhe.com/delbanco for Additional Exercises
(Advanced Level Exercises for further study)