

### THIS GUIDE CONTAINS:

- Meaningful definitions and guidelines for shaping works of fiction that can be applied to this activity and other fiction-writing assignments
- 1 activity specifically designed to move students' writing beyond their own experience
- A list of Suggested Readings, Works Cited and Additional Recommended Resources

### TIME FRAME:

- Flexible: 1 day to 1 week

### TARGET AGE:

- 10-12 grade

### DISCIPLINE:

- LANGUAGE ARTS

# A Study Guide from Chicago Humanities Festival 2009 SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

## FICTION with *Bayo Ojikutu*



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BAYO OJIKUTU is the author of *47th Street Black*, winner of the Washington Prize for Fiction and the Great American Book Contest. He currently teaches in the department of English at DePaul University. Ojikutu was born and raised in Chicago, where he still lives.

## Successful fiction writers need to see beyond their own experiences.

Bayo Ojikutu focuses on the writing process and the limitations and challenges that writers face as they encounter fiction writing. Specifically, Ojikutu discusses the danger of writers limiting themselves to their own experiences. Getting students to see beyond their own particular vantage point is a key component to opening up opportunities for good fiction writing.

### ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, to enjoy, and to support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities—at a low ticket price—depends in part on the generosity of its committed and enthusiastic supporters. [www.chicagohumanities.org](http://www.chicagohumanities.org)

The following literary vocabulary lists, essays, and exercises were developed and shared by Bayo Ojikutu following his presentation during the 2009 SIT.

### #1 KNOWING YOUR TERMS: FIVE ELEMENTS OF FICTION

The five elements were identified by R.V. Cassill in his 1975 text, *Writing Fiction*; the summary definitions are Ojikutu's own.

**Action:** What happens, as per what happened before that . . . ?

**Character:** Who was involved in this happening; to whom did this happening occur?

**Language:** How do you (the writer) deploy your faculty with language to express the above and below; and how does your language inform, endow, invigorate the what, who, when, where and why?

**Setting:** When and where do the happenings take place?

**Theme:** What does the author (consciously and subconsciously, through omission and commission) intend for it to “all mean”?

### #2 ANTI-THESIS EXERCISE: BEGINNING THE FICTIVE

The overriding objective of this exercise is to encourage the student to embrace the idea that fiction is *not about the writer* (never directly about the writer, that is); embrace and appreciate that fiction is, instead, about *what the writer knows*, and how the writer's *knowledge fosters his/her imagination, and informs creation*.

Carefully read the following bullet-pointed prompts and have students write their responses into a journal specifically dedicated to their fiction writing.

- In 10-15 lines, no more, no less, define “yourself” by responding to the following: where are you from, are you fe/male, how do you look, what language do you primarily speak (or what dialect thereof), do you believe in/practice belief in a divine being (what do you call this Divine), where do you go each day, do you/did you aspire to a specific profession in life, did you make it (how did you make your way into said profession), what are you doing to realize your aspirations, who are your favorite artists (musical or otherwise), what/whom do you love, what/whom do you detest?
- Read and re-read your responses to the above, then in *one-to-two paragraph(s)*, identify and describe a character who is the opposite to the person whom you defined yourself to be. That is, consider each descriptive bit offered above, imagine the opposite (or antithesis), and describe this fictive persona, the antithetical you.
- In one to two paragraphs, describe this character's morning routine. What wakes s/he from slumber, how does the character cover his/her body after rising from bed, in what order does the character proceed in the restroom while cleansing away sleep's remain, in what sort of clothing does the character dress for the day, does s/he eat or drink anything before leaving the house – what? – does this antithetical being watch television, listen to the radio, surf the Internet amidst his/her preparation – to or for what? Where is s/he going for the day?

- **In one paragraph**, introduce a problem which serves as an impediment to this character completing the day as planned. This problem may arise amidst your anti-thesis' commute to his/her identified destination, or it may manifest after the character has arrived at that destination during some later portion of the day; the problem itself may take any shape or form, or emerge from whatever well-spring the author so desires (so long as the author recognizes that the identification/deployment of this problem inevitably determines the genre in which the remaining story will operate). The only problem-identifying dictates are that the problem must emerge after your antithesis has left home in the morning, post the routine, and that it must be of sufficient capacity that it will serve as an obstacle to the meting-out of the character's intended day.

### **#3 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

**SCALE IN FICTION:** The literal and figurative, emotional and physical, geographic, political and historical space afforded to the telling of a tale. Scale and stakes are determining factors in defining the form in which the fiction writer is working; both are determined by the writer him/herself relative to that writer's identified fictive objectives and imaginative undertakings.

**STAKES IN FICTION:** That which stands to be gained, or lost, by the characters in the processional conveyance of action.

**SHAPE IN FICTION:** Fictive tales, across the categories – novel, novella, short, stage, tele-, or screenplay – take a shape in narration. The shape of the story as told may be deliberately plotted by the tale's author; or it may be merely read from the work of a writer who has unconsciously followed geometric design in constructing his/her story. Either way,

a shape is present within the story informed by western world tradition, otherwise following the fictive tale is difficult, if not impossible, for a reader (who may be steeped in those very same traditions) to follow.

**Shapes** taken by the fictive tale in our traditionalized imaginations:

**Arch:** The foundational shape for the fictive tale is that of the old Roman arch. At the left/entry of this construct is found the “*introduction of the norm*” for the story's significant people, places and things; followed by *the rising bow*, which represents *building action* and *progress* (and should include the introduction of a key *problem* encountered by the story's players, a disturbance of some sort which works to disarray the established norm and afford the story its galvanizing *conflict*); the bow finds its pinnacle at the point of *climax*, the combustive narrative happenstance that *affords clarity* to that which has transpired thus far amidst the action's build, and *points the way toward the thematic meaning* to be suggested as the story proceeds toward its culmination; prior that closing, the Arch reveals a descending bow representative of declining action (within this fall, the writer typically traces narrative *dénouement* – that is, the *path toward closure* and/or the *evocation of narrative meaning*). At the low's right/end of the arch is *finality*: “*closure*,” “*resolution*,” “*final punctuation*,” the “*re-setting of the norm*,” or, better, the “*establishment of a new normal*” for the story's key players.

**Circle:** As premised upon that foundation, the narrative circle closes via the consciously plotted return to some discernible action, place, time, or condition which the author had viscerally introduced at the outset of the story's telling.

**Line:** Prior the mid-20th century, the overriding expectation imposed upon fiction by the western world's literary/intellectual establishment was that proper stories were to be told in *linearity*. That is, progression from happenstance to happenstance, action born of preceding action and tracked by a *structurally-flat* “*process of revelation*”. *Consequence* is key in the delivery of the linear tale, as it is the matter of consequence that conveys *stakes* (see above) in such a tale, builds drama, and affords such narration a buoyancy that allows the linear narrative to distinguish itself from what EM Forster called the simple flat story: “*and then [this happened]* . . . *and then [that happened]* . . . *and then [the other happened]*” which, to paraphrase Forster, depends on the reader's base curiosity for its animation.

**Triangle:** The shape identified in the three-act stage play, or in works based upon that traditional form (teleplays, screenplays, theatrical novels, etc.). *Act One* serves as the triangle's baseline, where the two proceeding acts rise from either end of that line, or one angle (*Act Three*) extends from the other (*Act Two*). The *apex* of the triangular narrative is the moment of kernel climax, the *dénouement*, or the grand epiphany invoked post-climax. The function of the apex in such a narrative shape is determined by whether the author has constructed a right, isosceles or obtuse triangle in telling her/his tale.

**Square:** Shape usually reserved for the *epic novel* – or, in more rare cases, the epic short (which inevitably amounts to a *novella*). Featuring four lines (parts) extending from each other, drawn by conflict and consequence, meeting in, hopefully, well-plotted order.

## #4 THE NOVEL

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A work of literary invention of a constructed scale and requisite imaginative stakes that is suited to the class of “long-form” fiction. How long? Some thirty years ago, Stephen King opined that the minimum word-count for a novel is 40,000 words; from someone else (I do not recall who at the moment - perhaps an agent, editor or similar sort) that the expanse of the contemporary novel falls between 45,000–75,000 words. I am not sure what such a manner of defining the category says for Proust, Wright, Pynchon, Foster Wallace, and various Russian scribes; whether their work was merely antiquated, or whether those writers’ prose mused toward something beyond the novel as we know it?

## SHORT/FLASH/MICRO-FICTION

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*Awww!*

an essay on flash  
by Randall Brown

To describe these writings, I prefer flash. It reminds me of what Juliet says to Romeo: “It is too rash, too unadvis’d, too sudden; / Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say / It lightens.” An urgency exists in the word flash, something that must be read before it’s gone. Kerouac, unknowingly, describes the writers of flash in *On the Road*:

...mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’

Great flash pieces have that “centerlight pop”; without it, the flash does not burn brightly enough to justify its brevity, its suddenness. Something “mad” resides in the center, around which the spidery threads take form.

The Dionysian realm resides in that center. Pre-conscious, the world perceived by the senses, in which human passions burn, ever on the verge of exploding into unchecked monstrous appetite. And while the desire of every text is for the end, so strongly does the flash crave its ending that the flash razes the hundreds of pages it might fill.

The Apollonian—that ordering principle of rational structure—prevents the few pages left behind from turning to ash. Direction, purpose, meaning, design—these form the ephemeral strands that hold the centerlight pop together for that instant before it dissolves into chaos.

As readers, we enter with such abruptness that only at the end does the writer allow us to exhale.

“Awww!” Flash. “Awww!” Pop. Awwwlll gone.

## **The TABLE Metaphor**

The entry into the narrative arch as traditionally captured in Western terms might otherwise be characterized as a writer setting the table at the outset of a story's telling. That is, the writer places his/her characters (all of the five elements of fiction at work in the tale, in fact) relative to a set piece and its "shaped" (triangular, rectangular or circular tabletop) surroundings. In doing so -- s/he (the writer) -- is establishing the normative circumstantial conditions as they exist prior to the narrative itself, prior to and as we enter the confines of story. It is the eventual disruption of that table -- the breaking of its legs, the settings cast awry, table cloth flung about, splattering of red & cream sauces -- that renders manifest the emergence of a problem, which affords catalyst, drama, tension, conflict, functional antagonism, purpose, to the narrative. It is the characters' attempt to reconstruct the table setting, or re-situate some version of a table at which they might rest, that affords movement, shape & context to the story. Hence, the fictive narrative requires both the setting and dismemberment of table for its functional telling.

## **SUGGESTED READING**

Novels and shorts stories by Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, John Edgar Wideman.

## **WORKS CITED**

Brown, Randall. "Awww! An Essay on Flash," <http://www.smokelong.com/features/012605.asp>  
Cassill, R.V., *Writing Fiction*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS**

Diogenes, Marvin. *Crafting Fiction: In Theory, In Practice*. McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2000.  
Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1986, 2005.  
Lamott, Annie. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.  
Lerman, Liz and John Borstel. *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*. Available at: <http://www.danceexchange.org/performance/criticalresponse.html>

*McSweeney's*, especially Issue #31 (March 2009) on Form.

Postman, Neil, "Future Schlock" from *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education*. New York: First Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 162-174.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

SmokeLong Quarterly, an online journal of flash fiction-- [www.smokelong.com](http://www.smokelong.com)

Teachers and Writers Collaborative: [www.twc.org](http://www.twc.org)

Teachers & Writers Collaborative (T&W) seeks to educate the imagination by offering innovative creative writing programs for students and teachers, and by providing a variety of publications and resources to support learning through the literary arts.

## **SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS (SIT)**

Each year, the Chicago Humanities Festival offers the Summer Institute for Teachers (SIT). This three-day workshop is designed for educators interested in personal and professional growth with lectures, workshops, and discussions from presenters who work in professional fields related to the yearly topic. The 2009 SIT theme was Creative Writing: Innovative Approaches to Writing & Reading in the Classroom. Presenters included cin salach on POETRY, Lawrence Weschler on NARRATIVE NON-FICTION, Stuart Flack on PLAYWRIGHTING, Josh Elder on GRAPHIC NOVELS, Natalie Moore on JOURNALISM, and Bayo Ojikutu on FICTION.

This lesson plan and comprehensive bibliography were developed by Bayo Ojikutu, SIT's Master Teacher, Greg Wright, from Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, and CHF staff based on Mr. Ojikutu's presentation at the 2009 Summer Institute for Teachers.