

## Writing a Short Narrative

### Image Text Character

This is a multipart-part exercise in which you create your own short narrative. In the first part, you develop a character's voice based on a photo; in the second, you move outside that character and create a narrative with objects. And a third element is that you must find a quotation to use as an epigraph.

The effect of the exercise is to create a narrative whose two main parts are like a diptych – and they are framed or yoked by the image, by the epigraph, and by the title.

Here is the tl;dr point form:

- Choose an image from those at the end of this document.
- Character 1: Write a page or so in the **first-person** voice of one of the figures in the chosen image.
- Character 2: Write another few pages in the **third person**, describing 8 photos and things Character 2 keeps in a cigar box. NOTE: Character 2 is a different character than character 1
- Find a quotation to use as an epigraph for the story.
- Title the story.
- Pay attention to: Who speaks? To Whom? At what distance?
- Assemble the parts – title, image, quotation, Character 1 part, character 2 part.

**Character 1: Voice exercise. Choose one of the images that I have posted on Mosaic. First Person**  
An example I have used is George Tooker's painting "Subway":



Credit: *Subway*.1950. George Tooker. Collection: Whitney Museum of American Art.  
<http://whitney.org/Collection/GeorgeTooker>

Choose one of the figures in the image. Now imagine that the figure you are looking at has borrowed, found, or stolen something. You can interpret this as widely or as narrowly as possible, the way in which they acquire the object what purpose they have with it, etc. Perhaps “borrowing” means stealing. Perhaps it means finding. With these constraints in mind, write a very short piece (a paragraph, a page, maybe two pages maximum) using the voice of the figure in the picture. Think of it as a monologue, a running commentary in the person’s head, perhaps a story that person is telling to someone. Allow the character to have a voice. And make the thing a concrete item – not an abstraction.

**Character 2: Micronarrative. This exercise is called The Cigar Box. Third Person**

Pivoting from this character, do this:

Now imagine Character 2 as the person who loaned, lost, or had something stolen – the other half of the transaction. So if the Voice character borrowed something, tell this story, from the perspective of the lender.

But **this section must be told by a narrator** (a witness, and omniscient narrator, a camera – you choose; but make it third-person). Describe this sequence of events:

Character 2 returns to his or her home. Imagine they return and go to where they keep a box of keepsakes – this is often close to where the person sleeps.

In a paragraph or two, describe in detail:

- the approach to the home;
- the doorway or entry that must be passed through to enter;
- and the place where the character has the box.

Be specific with the concrete details that relate to the senses. Notice how much a doorway can tell us about the character who lives there. Is the doorway on an elaborately decorated mansion, or a simple cabin? Is the door open? Are there locks? Is there a tricycle on the sidewalk? Dying geraniums in a pot? And the area where the box is cached too. Is it in a messy bedroom? A pristine bedroom with linens that match the wallpaper? A dusty attic? Hidden behind books? In a place of pride? Avoid any thoughts or feelings the character may have. Avoid abstractions.

When you’re done your paragraphs the character is just about to handle the box, write a paragraph or two about the box:

- Describe the box. Maybe an old cigar box, a jewellery box, a shoe box.
- Describe where it is kept.
- Describe the hands as they work with the box. (Like a how-to)

The character lifts the lid. Inside there should be 8 items, some of which are photos. Now, **in a sentence or two for each**, describe each item. One or two items get more attention. Describe these in greater detail. Try to keep your focus on the item, rather than “filtering” everything through memory or inner monologue. (Note: while the box itself might be dusty, the items inside will not be, unless the box has holes in it.)

There is one missing item: that item is the one borrowed, stolen, or found.

Don’t put the pictures and items away at the end – leave the story once the last photo or item (the missing one) is described. Don’t “complete” the narrative – let the items tell the story. Just leave it – no emphatic sentence to end it. No dramatic action. No flourish to sum up with a “thesis statement.” No sighing. No tears. Allow the reader room to find the story.

**Epigraph:** Now, find an epigraph – a quote from another text that will come in one of three places in the narrative: After the title but before the image; after the image but before the Voice part; between the Voice and Cigar Box parts. The source of the quote has to be made clear. Don't just grab something from Goodreads or BrainyQuote or Wikiquotes. It can be a verse from a song, a nursery rhyme, a line from a film. But dig for it – in your memory, in things you care about.

(I recently read a tweet by a university librarian who talked about two kinds of research they see learners doing – digging or latching. When learners are engaged with the process of research, creativity, and learning, they dig deeply to discover knowledge that supports their ideas. When learners are merely checking off assignment requirements, they do shallow research, using google to latch on to the first thing that comes along. Be a digger.)

When you're done, you should have a story anywhere from two to five pages in length.

No Fan Fiction. No cosplay scenarios. No magical creatures. If you are writing in genres, please avoid all clichés and worn-out tropes; there must be a rationale for the genre elements. No story may have senseless violence; violence must have a rationale – it must be earned. No plot point can turn of the (violent) death, disappearance, or victimization of women. In your storytelling careers, if you so choose, you will have plenty of opportunity to work with dramatic flourish, kinetic action, splatter, combat, etc. In this course you can learn that an inside voice can be effective too.

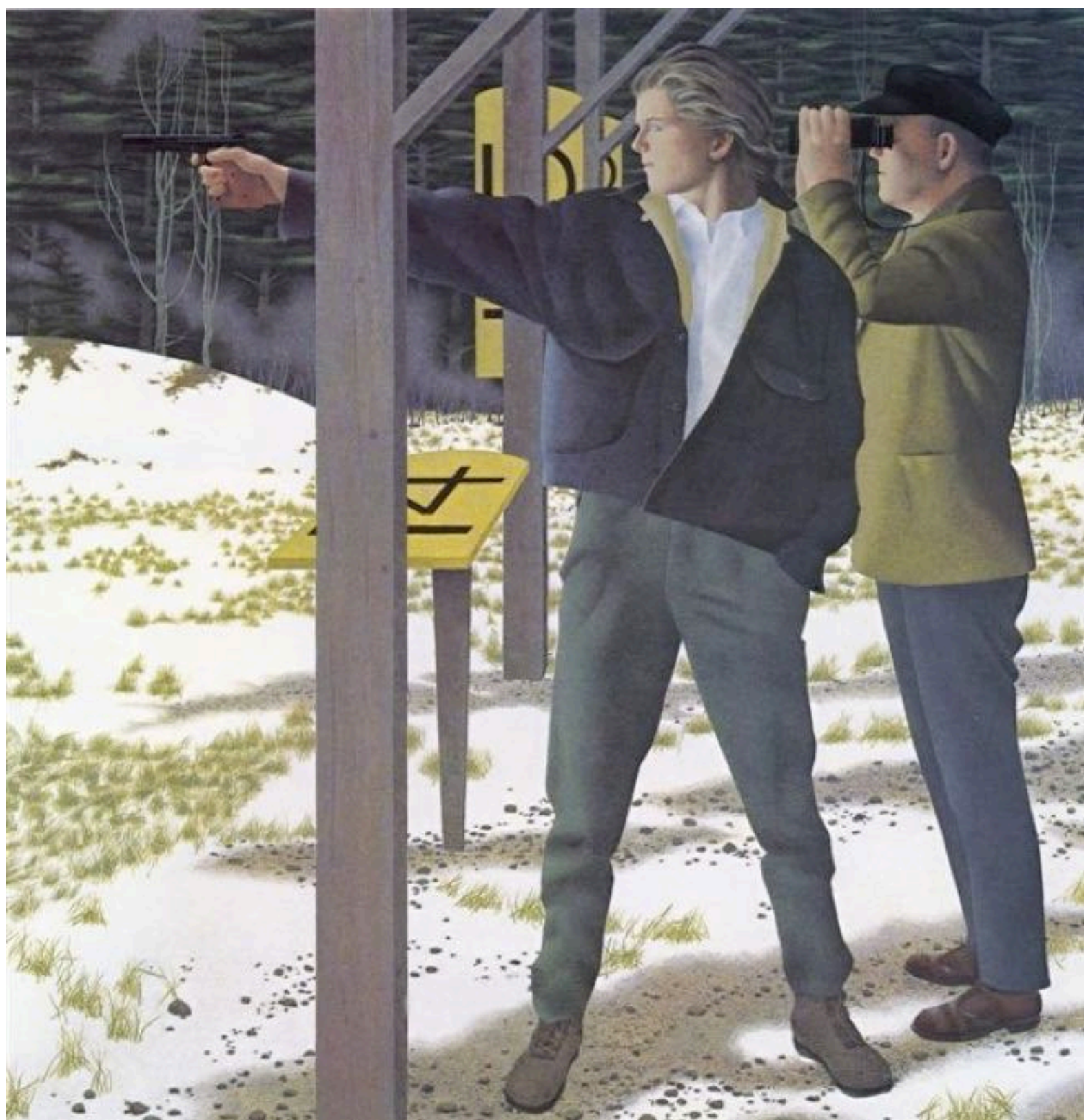
**Format:**

See example.





















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Riel prays while Gabriel fights. Big Bear goes to Help  
Poundmaker the peace maker, Strives to ease the  
TRAGEDY















- Anonymous. *Baby in Pram*. c. 1953. Photograph. Private collection.
- George Tooker. *Subway*. 1950. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
- Colville, Alex. *Target Practice*. Lithograph. *ArtCountryCanada.com*.
- Frank, Robert. *Car* 1958. Photograph. *The Americans*. By Robert Frank; Introduction by Jack Kerouac, 1958, Gottingen: Steidl, 2008.
- Manet, Édouard. *Olympia*. 1863. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, *Musée d'Orsay*.
- Niro, Shelley. *The Rebel*. 1991. Hand-tinted photograph. "Shelley Niro Wins \$50K Scotiabank Photography Award," Canadian Art, 9 May 2017, *canadianart.ca*.
- Lange, Dorothea. *Entire enrollment of Lincoln Bench School. Teacher in center. Near Ontario, Oregon, Malheur County*. 1939. Photograph. Library of Congress. *Library of Congress: Prints and Photographs Catalogue*.
- Cassatt, Mary. *The Boating Party*. 1893-94. Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, *National Gallery of Art*.
- Poitras, Jane-Ash. *The Spirit Lives*. 2010. Mixed media on canvas. Canada House Gallery, *canadahouse.com*.
- Arnold, Lloyd. *Martha Gellhorn*. Photograph. *Travels with Myself and Another: A Memoir*. By Martha Gellhorn, Tarcher / Penguin Putnam, 2001. Cover.
- Tshabangu, Nkosana Dominic. *Hard Work, Little Reward*. 1993. Collage on paper. *Virtual Museum of Contemporary African Art*.
- Hiroshige, Utagawa and Utagawa Kunisada. *Night Garden*. 1853. Woodblock print. Chazen Museum of Art, U Wisconsin–Madison.
- Wall, Jeff. *Mimic*. 1982. Photograph. Tate Modern, London, *Tate Gallery: Jeff Wall*, *tate.org.uk*.