



“But How Do You Write It?”: Teaching Flash Fiction in the Short Story Workshop

Emily Capettini
Indiana State University

ABSTRACT

This presentation uses pedagogical theory and history of the flash fiction form to examine how teaching flash fiction in a workshop can revitalize students’ approaches to or views of drafting fiction of all forms.

Flash fiction has gained popularity in recent years, resulting in more presses, journals, and anthologies specializing in this very short form. But how does one teach flash fiction in the workshop, when many students are unfamiliar with—and at times, intimidated by—the form? Often, my students ask, “but how do you write it?” My answer is the more approachable question: “how can you tell a story in the space provided?” When we ask students to practice the flash fiction form, such practice requires students to reconsider the definitions of story and plot, examine how space and word count affect the narrative that can be told, utilize what Pia Z. Ehrhardt calls “the load-bearing sentence” in fiction, and collaborate on finding thematic or aesthetic connections across drafts. Such considerations lead to a more purposeful and self-aware practice of fiction. This presentation will include a sample exercise as well as a workshop practice I use in teaching flash fiction.

For the exercise, students draft a 2-page story, cut it in half once, then cut it in half again, rewriting as necessary to keep a version of their narrative. At the end of this exercise, students describe what their story started as and what it became. In one class, a student observed she hadn’t really known what she was writing about until after she had cut down the story and discovered one of these load-bearing sentences.

Because flash fiction is typically submitted and published in sets, students submit 2-3 flash fiction drafts along with a one-page reflection for workshop. In the reflection, students explain recurring characters, ideas, images, or themes they see in their works. Readers are invited to collaborate during workshop, adding connections they might also see in the works. This focus on connections encourages students to think of their work as linked from the first drafting stages. Drafts become building blocks, providing students with a clearer method of exploring ideas or their interests in flash fiction and, more broadly, longer forms of fiction.

“But How Do You Write It?”: