I. Introduction – Observations on Story-Telling

- "Write what you *know*." —Mark Twain
- "I write to *discover* what I know." —Flannery O'Connor
- "Novels are for *readers*, and writing them means the crafty, patient, selfless construction of *effects*. I think of my novels as being something like *fairground rides*: my job is to strap the reader into their car at the start of chapter one, then trundle and whizz them through scenes and surprises, on a carefully planned route, and at a finely engineered pace." —Sarah Waters
- "My belief is that art should *not* be *comforting*; for comfort, we have mass entertainment and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, *expand our sympathies* in directions we may not anticipate and may not even wish." —Joyce Carol Oates

We humans are story-tellers, and story-telling is an art form that has existed perhaps as long as human beings have existed. From the most ancient epics to the most recent novels, writers use the raw material of their lived personal experiences, combine it with imagination and hard work, and create an amazing result: characters who come to life in our imaginations as we read words on a page.

As Joyce Carol Oates suggests above, perhaps a great story can "expand our sympathies" enough to aid in the mysterious process that makes us <u>better human beings</u>. Yes, reading an excellent story can <u>make us grow</u> as human beings. In a great story, we follow characters through vivid experiences that challenge and even change them. By the end of such a story, we not only feel <u>entertained</u>, but <u>moved</u> by what we've *experienced* and what we've *learned*, by the *characters* we've gotten to know, the *conflicts* they have faced, and the *growth* that has transformed them.

II. The Assignment – Write an Original Short Story

For this assignment, **compose an original short story of 1,000 to 2,000 words** with these traits:

1. **Give your protagonist (or main character) <u>*some* of your own interesting and important personality traits.</u>** In order to make your story believable, <u>use some of what you know to create your main character</u>. Give your main character at least *some* of the experience, knowledge, skills, thoughts, feelings, hopes, goals, hobbies, passions, beliefs, or even uncertainties <u>that you possess</u>.

2. **Meet all the "Grading Criteria" listed on the following page.**

3. **Communicate a <u>theme</u> about <u>an issue of importance</u>—such as relationships, growing-up, morality, injustice, human nature, survival, friendship, or love.** Remember <u>not</u> to treat human beings as objects in your story; depictions like that can encourage readers to see people as objects, which is a harmful delusion to have about others. Notice this advice for aspiring writers from novelist Sarah Waters:

> "Respect your characters, even the minor ones. In art, as in life, everyone is the hero of their own particular story; it is worth thinking about what your minor characters' stories are, even though they may intersect only slightly with your protagonist's."

III. Grading Criteria

An "A" story will demonstrate these traits:

Focus & Organization

1. Focus on a **protagonist** and on this person's **central conflict** (whether *internal*, *external*, or *both*).

2. Use **effective pacing** to keep the reader <u>engaged</u>, to make <u>smooth shifts</u> in time and place, and to focus on <u>key events and interactions</u> (while summarizing or skimming the *less important* events).

3. Use a **consistent point of view** to present characters and events effectively.

Development & Elaboration

4. Narrate a **coherent sequence of events** that <u>develops</u> the protagonist's central conflict.

5. Use **precise words, sensory details,** and **dialogue** (and possibly ***interior monologue***) to <u>vividly bring to life</u> the *characters*, the *key events*, and the *settings*.

6. End the story with an **effective conclusion** that <u>resolves the story's central conflict believably</u>.

7. <u>Communicate a **theme**</u> about **an issue of importance**, such as relationships, growing-up, morality, injustice, human nature, survival, friendship, self-knowledge, compassion, or love. (Please <u>don't</u> treat any characters like objects.)
   A story's **theme** can be brought to life through <u>any combination of these techniques</u>:

   - **A Significant Statement** — A line of dialogue spoken by a character or an observation made by the narrator can communicate theme clearly.
   - **Protagonist's Traits, Learning, and Growth** – The main character's <u>thoughts and actions</u> should reveal his or her important <u>traits</u>. Theme can emerge from the protagonist's <u>key traits</u> and the <u>conflicts</u> he or she faces. It can also emerge from what the main character <u>learns</u> or how the main character <u>grows</u> or <u>changes</u>.
   - **Conflict and Plot -** A story revolves around a main *conflict* that is central to its theme. Which main <u>conflict</u> does the protagonist face, and how is the conflict <u>resolved</u>? Is the conflict's resolution portrayed *positively or negatively*?
   - **Title** - The title may reflect a story's *subject or significant idea*. It may refer to a <u>significant detail or symbol</u> in the story, it may express <u>multiple meanings</u>, and it may also <u>emphasize key ideas</u> in the story.
   - **Setting** - Setting can convey theme because of *what it <u>means</u> to the characters and readers*. How does the setting <u>affect</u> the characters and the plot? Might the setting also <u>represent a conflict or idea</u> that is related to theme?
   - **Foil Characters** – To communicate theme, writers often <u>use a minor character as a foil</u> to emphasize the significant traits of a main character.
   - **Motif and Symbolism** – A **motif** is a <u>pattern</u> created in a story by <u>the repetition of an image, word, action, or idea</u> that points to some sort of meaning. A **symbol** is an <u>image, word, object, action</u>, or anything else in a story that not only plays a literal role in the story, but that also <u>suggests a larger idea or meaning</u>.
   - **Irony** – Irony is <u>an intentional discrepancy</u> between *appearance and reality*, between *expectation and outcome*, or between what the author *seems* to be saying and what the author actually *is* saying. When an author uses irony, there is something significant that <u>readers</u> *should recognize and understand* but that one or more <u>characters</u> *fail to recognize and understand*.
   - **Allusion** – An allusion is a <u>reference</u> to a story, poem, song, book, or myth that suggests a key idea or theme.

Language & Mechanics

8. Include **precise words** and phrases, **specific details**, and **sensory language**.

9. Use **quotation marks**, **paragraph-breaks**, and **punctuation** correctly, as well as correct grammar, mechanics, and spelling.

# IV. Prewriting Step 2 – Story Board

Which interesting <u>events</u> might happen in your story's plot?

Name:

Place one event in each of the boxes below.

Note: Use only as many boxes as you need. You might <u>not</u> need all the boxes, OR you might need to <u>add</u> boxes.

- Then decide which events are <u>especially</u> **important**—events that you'll want to <u>bring to life with</u> **sensory detail and dialogue**—and which events are <u>less important</u> and can be <u>skimmed or summarized</u>.
- Also decide if you are going to narrate events in a <u>chronological order,</u> or if you want to use <u>flashback</u> or some other <u>nonlinear narration</u>. (Only use nonlinear narration if you can <u>pull off the transitions in time</u> effectively.)
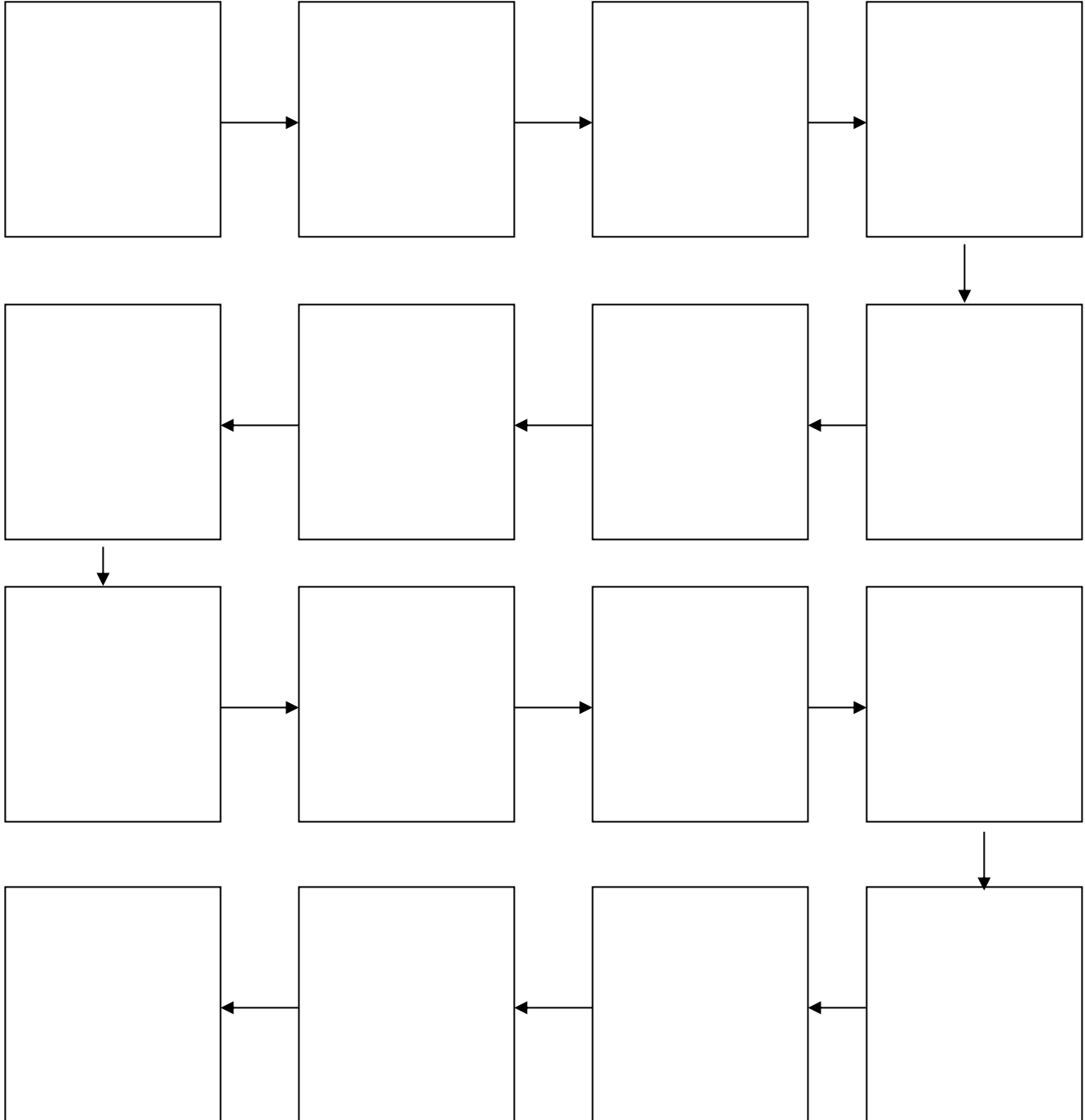
Which events above will you want to "bring to life" for the reader with sensory details? <u>Choose three key events</u> from your story, and <u>complete a "Sensory Chart" for *each* event</u> on the other side of this page. →

V. Narrative Point of View & How to Begin

A. Narrative Point of View – Choose one of the two narrative options below.

1. **First Person narrator** – a narrator who is also a character and participant in the action. Such a character refers to himself or herself as "I" and is usually (but not always) the protagonist of story. His or her attitude and understanding of characters and events shapes the reader's perception of the story being told.

   Note: One variety of first-person narrator is the **innocent or naïve narrator**—a narrator who fails to understand all the implications of the story he or she tells. Often a child or a childlike adult, an innocent or naïve narrator might be used by an author who wants to generate irony, sympathy, or pity by creating a gap between what the narrator thinks and what the reader knows and understands.

2. **Third-person narrator** – a narrator who is a nonparticipant in the story. In a third-person narrative, the characters are referred to as "he," "she," or "they."

   Note: A third-person narrators can be **omniscient** (or all-knowing), **limited omniscient** (the narrator knows only the perceptions of a single character), or **dramatic or objective** (the narrator reports only dialogue and action with no access to what happens in characters' minds).

B. Beginning Your Story

Your story may begin in two ways: (1) with what is known as **exposition**, OR (2) "**in medias res**," which means in the midst of a significant event. Notice the example of each type of beginning below.

1. **Exposition** – the opening portion of a narrative in which the setting is established, the protagonist is introduced, and the author discloses any other necessary background information to allow the reader to understand and relate to the events that are to follow.
   Example of Exposition:
   > *The long June twilight faded into night. Dublin lay enveloped in darkness, but for the dim light of the moon, that shone through fleecy clouds, casting a pale light as of approaching dawn over the streets and dark waters of the Liffey. Around the beleaguered Four Corners the heavy guns roared. Here and there through the city, machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms. Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war.*
   > <div align="right">(from "The Sniper" by Liam O'Flaherty)</div>

2. **In medias res** – A Latin phrase meaning "in the midst of things" for a story that begins midway in the events it depicts (usually at an exciting or significant moment) before explaining the context or preceding actions. With such a beginning, the exposition needs to be filled in gradually as the story proceeds, either through dialogue, flashbacks, or description of past events.
   Example of *in medias res*:
   > *"Just lend me ten bucks, John," Jessica begged. "Come on!"*
   > *"I'm sure the shirt is very cute and pink and perfect, sis, but I don't have any money. Now move—I gotta mow the lawn."*
   > *"In this heat?" she asked, fanning herself with manicured nails.*
   > *"You know, Mom and Dad pay me ten bucks to mow the lawn," John said.*
   > *"Oh! So you can lend me the money after you finish?"*
   > *He snorted. "Yeah, right. I'll let you mow the lawn, though."*
   > *"No way! That mower's heavy!" Jessica said, her eyes wide.*
   > *"What's that I hear? Oh, it's the sound of a thousand cute tops crying!"*
   > *"Shut up and show me how this thing works," she snapped. They went to the garage, and John pulled out the mower for her.*
   > <div align="right">(from the student example "Tough Enough" by Sara Yovovich)</div>

VI. Drafting Your Short Story – The Importance of "Showing"

"Don't *tell* me the moon is shining; *show* me the glint of light on broken glass."
—Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) – famous Russian writer of short stories

When narrating a story, every writer needs to know how to *use and balance* these two opposite skills:

1) "Tell" (or *"speed up"*) – get to *the point*; state ideas and events *plainly*, *without descriptive details*

2) "Show" (or *"slow down"*) – *bring the experience to life* for the reader; use *sensory details* and *dialogue* to convey a vivid picture of events, characters, and settings

> There are times in every story when "showing" details and dialogue are necessary in order to make the desired impact on your reader. Effective **pacing** is the proper balancing of "telling" and "showing" in a story; it is what enables a writer to keep the reader *engaged*, to make *smooth shifts* in time and place, and to focus the reader's *attention* only on the important events and interactions.

Telling vs. Showing – Ways to Make an Impact with Sensory Details and Dialogue

"Show" a **Setting**	
The house looked old.	The two-story house slouched in a yard choked with weeds, its paint faded and flaking, the lace curtains in its windows yellowed with age.
"Show" a Character's Appearance	
The woman was dressed professionally.	She wore an ash-gray Armani pants suit paired with a blue linen blouse, and a red silk tie knotted at her throat.
"Show" a Character's Emotional State	
Bob was scared.	Bob's face was the color of ash, his eyes were opened wide, and his breathing came in ragged gasps.
"Show" a Character's Personality through Dialogue	
Danny was arrogant and selfish.	"Great pitching out there, Danny," his mom said when Danny got in the car. Smiling, she patted his shoulder. "How does your arm feel?" He brushed her hand away. "It's fine." He grinned. "You should have seen Tommy's face when Coach put me in for him." "I did see his face." She paused. "He seemed … really disappointed. I guess he wanted to finish the game himself." "Yeah, right, *finish* the game. Too bad Coach even let him *start*." Danny's mom winced at his words. "We'd be in the playoffs if he knew how to pitch. Hey, can we go to In N Out?"
"Show" a Character's Personality through Action	
Jessica felt afraid of the lawn mower, but she focused her attention and learned that she is strong enough to handle the machine with confidence.	She took a deep breath and nudged the mower forward a few inches. It made a hideous *crrrunch* as it chewed up twigs and spat out the fragments. She shrieked, thinking of how "cute" she would look with missing toes. The mower kept roaring, and she realized that she didn't know how to turn it off. "John!" she shouted, but there was no way he could hear her. She nudged the evil machine forward and watched the grass spew out the side. It was kind of cool. Terrifying, but cool. She kept pushing all the way to the other side of the lawn. The mower was heavy, but she was strong enough. Turning around was another issue. Still, she was tough, even if she liked pink. She pushed down on the handle, and the mower tilted up. Her tense muscles relaxed, and she let out a loud sigh. No longer muffled by the grass, the mower's chainsaw roar increased to jackhammer level. Slowly, she turned, and then she pushed forward to mow the next strip of grass. The shaggy grass fell as she mowed. By the time she got to the end of the lawn, she had perfected the turning technique so that it was one fluid motion. No longer afraid of the mower, she moved her sweaty face closer to examine the controls. She found the switch and cut the engine.

VII. Prewriting Step 3 – Sensory Charts or "Mental Snapshots" for Key Events

"Don't *tell* me the moon is shining; *show* me the glint of light on broken glass." – Anton Chekhov

For each key event in your narrative that you want to "bring to life" in detail**, call to mind as many sensory details as you can imagine about it.** Then fill in the chart to make a "mental-snapshot" of it.

1st Event or Scene	
Sights	
Sounds	
Sensations of Touch	
Smells & Tastes	

2nd Event or Scene	
Sights	
Sounds	
Sensations of Touch	
Smells & Tastes	

3rd Event or Scene	
Sights	
Sounds	
Sensations of Touch	
Smells & Tastes	