

EXERCISES FROM JOHN GARDNER'S THE ART OF FICTION

The point of these technical exercises is this: Most apprentice writers underestimate the difficulty of becoming artists; they do not understand or believe that great writers are usually those who, like concert pianists, know many ways of doing everything they do. Knowledge is not a substitute for genius; but genius supported by vast technique makes a literary master. Especially just now, when competition for publication is probably greater than ever before, it is helpful for a writer to know technique. The writer who has worked hard at these exercises will see, whenever he writes a story or novel, that he has various choices available at every point in his fiction, and he will be in a better position to choose the best -- or invent something new.

1. Write the paragraph that would appear in a piece of fiction just before the discovery of a body. You might perhaps describe the character's approach to the body he will find, or the location, or both. The purpose of the exercise is to develop the technique of at once attracting the reader toward the paragraph to follow, making him want to skip ahead, and holding him on this paragraph by virtue of its interest. Without the ability to write such foreplay paragraphs, one can never achieve real suspense.

2 . Describe a landscape as seen by an old woman whose disgusting and detestable old husband has just died. Do not mention the husband or death.

3. Describe a landscape as seen by a bird. Do not mention the bird.

4. Describe a building as seen by a man whose son has just been killed in a war. Do not mention the son, war, death, or the old man doing the seeing. Then describe the same building, in the same weather and at the same time of day, as seen by a happy lover. Do not mention love or the loved one.

5. Write the opening of a novel using the authorial-omniscient voice, making the authorial omniscience clear by going into the thoughts of one or more characters after establishing the voice. As subject, use either a trip or the arrival of a stranger (some disruption of order -- the usual novel beginning).

6. Write a dialogue in which each of the two characters has a secret. Do not reveal the secret but make the reader intuit it. For example, the dialogue might be between a husband, who has lost his job and hasn't worked up the courage to tell his wife, and his wife, who has a lover in the bedroom. Purpose: to give two characters individual ways of speaking, and to make dialogue crackle with feelings not directly expressed. Remember that in dialogue, as a general rule, every pause must somehow be shown, either by narration (for example, "she paused") or by some gesture or other break that shows the pause. And remember that gesture is a part of all real dialogue. Sometimes, for instance, we look away instead of answering.

7. Write a two-page character sketch using objects, landscape, weather, etc. , to intensify the reader's sense of what the character is like. Use no similes ("She was like. . ."). Purpose: to create a convincing character by using more than intellect, engaging both the conscious and unconscious mind.

8. Write a two page dramatic fragment (part of a story) using objects, landscape, weather, etc., to intensify two characters, as well as the relationship between them. Purpose: the same as in exercise 7, but now making the same scenic background, etc., serve more than one purpose. In a diner, for instance, one character may tend to look at certain objects inside the diner, the other may look at a different set of objects or may look out the window.

9. Write, without irony, a character's moving defense of himself (herself).