



Prompters to Life

presents

Telling Your Story:

**A Seminar for English Students and Students of
Writing**

Telling Your Story

This is a seminar in five parts, however, the first session can function in a standalone capacity as an introduction to the craft and value of the personal narrative. The overall goal for the seminar is for each student to choose an event in his or her life and write about it in a memoir style. These pieces of writing would later be compiled and published for the class as an anthology of stories. The sessions are as follows:

Session #1: The Power of Story

In session 1, the idea of personal story is introduced. Here we tell story together, focusing on the idea that the ability to allow the reader/hearer to feel emotions throughout the narrative is essential to good storytelling. The two key teaching points of this session are: first, our personal stories are important because they encourage us to investigate the circumstances of our own lives and reflect on them; and second, our individual stories are important because together they make up the stories of our communities, whether they be communities of family, neighbourhood, country, culture, or religion.

Writing Exercise #1: Your Name

- a) Students are asked to write a short piece about their name (first, last, whatever). They are encouraged to talk about what they like or do not like.
- b) Pieces are collected and then distributed randomly to other students in the class. The recipients are to write a short response describing what they can discern about the writer simply from the story.
- c) Stories are given back to the original authors and a short discussion about interpretation and misinterpretation is led: “what was right, what was wrong, what led to the responses.”

Writing Exercise #2: Remembering Your Life

- a) We discuss the writer and the editor in our heads: the writer is spontaneous and creative, the editor wants to get everything right.
- b) The students are asked to take out a blank sheet, turn off their editor, and write down as many notes about their life from birth to age 10 (about gr. 5) as they can.
- c) The focus here is on getting as many point form items on the page in 10 minutes as they can without stopping to consider accuracy.

Interlude: The students will be asked to read part 1 of the book *What I Learned from Cancer* as an example of personal reflective story. A different memoir can be substituted, of course.

Session #2: The Essence of Story

In session 2, we review the basics of writing and talk about some of the theory of stories.
But first ...

Writing Exercise #1: Remembering Your Life

- a) Review the “rules” about unedited writing.
- b) The students are asked to continue where they left off last class. They may not change anything they did last class but simply carry on where they left off. The period from 10 to the present is now fair game.
- c) The focus here is on getting as many point form items on the page in 10 minutes as they can.

The tools of a writer (the things you learned in English class):

- 1) Vocabulary
- 2) Grammar
- 3) English style

Two tips: stay away from the passive voice and do not use adverbs unless you really really need to, and then, try to stay away from them anyway.

The elements of story:

- 1) Essential elements: hero, situation, problem, resolution
- 2) Hero/anti-hero
- 3) Resolutions: tragedy and comedy
- 4) Perspective: 1st person, 2nd person, 3rd person limited, 3rd person omniscient
- 5) Point of view: how change in point of view changes the essential character of the story even when the narrative remains essentially the same

Writing Exercise #2: Point of View in Three Little Pigs

- a) We discuss the Three Little Pigs story and look at a change in feel when perspective changes.
- b) We discuss the Three Little Pigs and how it would be different if told from different points of view: mother, farmer, 3rd pig.
- c) The students are asked to retell the Three Little Pigs from the point of view of the wolf, making the wolf the sympathetic character. The story is limited to the introduction to the end of the encounter with the first pig (to make the exercise manageable).
- d) Students are asked to discuss how they turned the wolf into a sympathetic character.

Writing Exercise #3: Quick Story Ideas

- a) Students are asked to get out a new sheet of paper.
- b) Students are asked to divide their sheet into 4 quadrants. In each they are to write the headings: hero, situation, villain with enough room under each to write something
- c) Take 4 points from their story brainstorming and create story ideas from each, writing the information in successive quadrants. Eg, a student wrote down "Trip to Disneyland" as a brainstorming point. This would translate to: hero=me, situation=backseat of car, problem=my annoying brother.
- d) The idea is that students can take a simple point about life and turn it into the start of an interesting story (hence the problem to be worked through).

Writing Exercise #4: Remembering Your Life

- a) Review the "rules" about unedited writing.
- b) The students are asked to continue where they left off at the beginning of the class.
- c) The focus here is on getting as many point form items on the page in 10 minutes as they can.

Interlude: If the students are reading a memoir they should continue to do so with an eye to the ideas of hero, situation, problem that they come across.

For Next Class: The students must come to the next class with a specific story that they want to tell as their final project.

Session #3: The Outline

In session 3, we begin to construct the narrative. We discuss three essential parts of the creation of the story: idea, outline, narrative. The students already have their story idea based on the exercises from the previous class; this class will guide them through the creation of the outline. Note: I take a fairly formulaic approach to outline creation but explain that professional writers may modify the approach or abandon it altogether based on their style and approach.

Writing Exercise: Creating the Outline

- a) Creating Scope: Students are given 2 white cards on which they write “A” and “B” in the top corner. The “A” card is the start of the story—the “once upon a time”—and the “B” card is the end—the “happily ever after.” These two cards form the scope of the story which will be created between these two end points.
- b) Creating the high points: Students are given 5 yellow cards (to start) and are asked to begin to create the high points of the story. Each card will have no more than a short phrase on it and will become part of the essential skeleton of the story. Additional cards will be given if needed.
- c) Recording the random: Students are given 5 pink cards. These are used to record “random” thoughts as the rest of the outline is created. These are the ideas that come to mind as the formal pieces are put together and represent ideas that do not fit but which may be important later.
- d) Transitions: Students are given 5 green cards and asked to create transitions to connect the yellow cards together.
- e) People/Places/Things/Events: Students are given 5 blue cards and asked to record important people/places/things/events connected to the story. These can be researched and “fleshed out” in order to provide asides and transitions in the story.

Interlude: The teacher will help the students with crafting their story, using the outline as a basis.

For Next Class: Students must come with some portion of their first draft complete. In order to talk about story enhancement the students must have a story to work from.

Session #4: 10 Tools for Adding Variety

In session 4, we look at a list of tools and techniques for adding variety to the story. Tools will be discussed and then students will be asked to create alternatives to pieces of their narratives to see how these tools can be applied to their stories.

Tool 1: Use sentence fragments or short sentences to give the feeling of moving the narrative along.

Tool 2: Use long sentences to give the feeling of meandering.

Tool 3: Use backstory (about people, places, events that you are familiar with) to create breaks in the story and transitions.

Writing Exercise #1: Personal Recollections as Backstory

Students choose a person, place, or event from their story (something which is not the central focus of the story) about which they can recall something from the past, and write a paragraph or two as backstory.

Tool 4: Repeat words or phrases to draw attention to important ideas and to drive a point home.

Tool 5: Use monologue or internal dialogue to put me into the head of the protagonist.

Tool 6: Use dialogue to engage the reader and draw him or her into the scene.

Writing Exercise #2: Dialogue

Students find a descriptive or narrative section in the story which they can replace with dialogue. The focus is allow the reader to listen in on the characters interacting about what is going on rather than to explain or describe the action.

Tool 7: Enhance the reader's experience with description of sights, sounds, tastes, smells, etc.

Tool 8: Help the reader to feel; do not tell him what to feel.

Tool 9: Use humour to lighten the narrative or provide breaks in a serious story.

Tool 10: Use connected anecdotes to draw the reader into the story.

Writing Exercise #3: Facts as Backstory

Find a person, place, or thing in your narrative, and write a historical or informative introduction to it.

Interlude: Students will determine which of the tools can be incorporated into their final draft.

For Next Class: A polished portion of their final draft needs to be complete for the next class as everyone will be asked to read for 2-3 minutes (based on the length of the class and the number of students). Reading should be presented as mandatory with, of course, exceptions on a case by case basis.

Session #5: Reading

In session 5 we celebrate stories and read.

We discuss reading as a connected skill in the telling of story with a mind towards the important idea of sharing stories with our communities.

Writing Exercise: Reading as an Extension of Writing

Each student will be asked to choose a 2-3 minute selection from his or her story and to read aloud to the rest of the class.

The session will end with hearty celebration of all of the stories created during the workshop.

About the Presenter

Dennis Maione keeps bumping up against cancer. Diagnosed with colorectal tumour as a young, newly-wed student, he thought his subsequent victory would set him up for a straight run at life. A decade later, however, he found out he had a genetic anomaly. Fifteen years after his first diagnosis, the entrepreneur and father of three faced a recurrence of colon cancer, and the second round exacted a higher toll from him than the first. In November of 2017 marked his second 10-year cancer-free anniversary.

Dennis has wrestled a strong enemy with grace, wit, and humour. His first book, *What I Learned from Cancer* (2014, Prompters to Life), chronicles cancer, genetics, and medicine, but mostly hope. Insights into the soul of a cancer survivor abound throughout the narrative, reflective essays, and conversations with a doctor. You'll meet the community around Dennis, including many physicians—good and bad—and heroes in the unlikeliest of places.

Dennis wrote the one-man play *Three Things: Stories About Life* in 2016 with a 5 show run performed in the summer of that year.

His current writing project, *Finding Wholeness*, is the end to the cancer series.

Dennis Maione is an author, speaker, teacher, and actor living in Winnipeg. He has a B.Sc. in Computer Science and two Master's degrees in pastoral theology. When not writing, Dennis delivers seminars for high school students and speaks to groups about finding hope and wholeness in the midst of chronic disease and critical life circumstance. Dennis is a board member of the Manitoba Writers Guild (MWG) and is a member of The Writers' Union of Canada. These days he can also be found on Friday nights managing Station 8 Café, a purveyor of fine coffee and grilled cheese at 325 Talbot avenue.

Dennis Maione
Author and Speaker
204.297.9841
dennis@prompterstolife.com
<http://dennismaione.com>



Price Matrix

One of the keys to the success of this workshop in a variety of schools, with different grades, and with different outcome expectations is flexibility. In the spirit of flexibility, the following price matrix has been drawn up. Because, in all facets of this workshop, I strive to be flexible, this matrix is only a starting point.

Standard Workshop: 5 x 1-hour sessions = **\$400 + GST**

Additional classes of students running concurrently with the first but on the same day = **add \$100 + GST**

Additional classes of students running concurrently with the first but on a different day of the week = **add \$200 + GST**

Additional non-classroom hours, eg., student tutoring, review of written work = **\$75/hr**

Additional workshop days added to the standard 5 days = **\$75/day**

Class set of books (20 or more) = **\$15 per hardcover copy** of *What I Learned from Cancer*.

If your classroom is not in Winnipeg, an additional travel surcharge will be negotiated = **\$variable**

If your school would like to arrange for this workshop—in a condensed and accelerated form—to be presented to your ELA teachers so that they can teach it themselves that can be arranged. Contact Dennis Maione for availability and pricing.