

The First Two Pages: “English 398: Fiction Workshop”

By Art Taylor

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“English 398: Fiction Workshop” has a fairly elaborate structure, experimental even, so as I was first drafting the story, I felt higher stakes about how the opening pages needed to work—specifically with regard to this question: How do I present the architecture for that elaborate structure in a way that the reader will not only see the scaffolding clearly but also feel invited into the plot supported by it, connected to the characters inhabiting it—story and structure somehow seamlessly integrated?

Before getting to the story proper, I decided to provide a preview of the structure with an lengthy subtitle: “Notes from Class & A Partial Draft By Brittany Wallace, Plus Feedback, Conference & More.” Those “notes from class” actually provide the overall framework to the whole story—headers that announce new sections with the kinds of advice and guidance common to creative writing courses: show, don't tell; use sensory detail; various tips on escalating conflict. A draft from one of the workshop's students is the bulk of the first half of the story—italicized in the text to set it off—along with her own notes about other characters and potential plots twists. Another section features peers from workshop commenting on that draft, followed by a required conference with the professor—a

significant turn there, one that required some additional signaling. I'll leave the “& More” for readers to discover.

But if the subtitle clues readers in (I hope!) to how the structure works, the story needed to be compelling in terms of character and plot too, as I've said, and that's where I tried to gear the opening pages toward drawing the reader ahead in a different way.

The first two manuscript pages of “English 398: Fiction Workshop” include two full sections of the story, plus part of a third section. I'll look at the first two together and then that partial third in a moment.

Exposition should be kept to a minimum.

Alistair Pearson is a professor of English—associate professor technically, not sure why he hasn't gone further up the ranks. He's in his mid-40s, slogging through most days, feels like he's on the verge of a mid-life crisis. He's taught composition, intro lit, and creative writing at the same college for nearly 20 years; the hours are long, a professor's pay sucks, and those students... well, let's just say he's reached the point of feeling desperate for one of them to really care, to show some genuine enthusiasm, some true passion. A class should mean more than three credits closer to graduation, that's the kind of thing he says. While work has dragged him down, his home life doesn't offer any comfort because—

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Remember: Show, don't tell.

Remember: Sharp prose as much as sharp plotting.

Professor Pearson types the last of the grades into the spreadsheet, a long slog through a stack of essays, now bleeding with red ink. Moving the mouse, he notices the age spots on the backs of his hands—feels some small tightness in his knuckles. Imaginary? He's too young for arthritis. (Isn't he?)

Maybe carpal tunnel syndrome? Day after day at the keyboard, week after week, semester after semester—and how many years now?

A paperweight sits on the shelf. Fifteen years of service, and a couple more years since, gathering dust atop that stack of manila folders.

He closes the spreadsheet, switches to email, sees his wife's name in the inbox, an exclamation point by it. Urgent as always. Something undone, done wrong. Some new outrage, and an apology needed. No, demanded. And what does he get in return? (How long since they've slept together? That's the question. Day after day again, week after week, and— another glimpse at those age spots.)

He succumbs to temptation, switches the window on his computer one more time. RateMyProfessor.com—a weakness, he knows, this desire to see the three chili peppers there.

Hot, Hot, Hot, he thinks with a flush of heat himself: pride, embarrassment, self-consciousness? Some combination of the three maybe.

Better than the nagging wife.

That old Buster Poindexter song whispers through his head—and then another bit of self-consciousness. Hot Hot Hot is a reference his students are too young to get.

To some degree, these two sections serve the same purpose—to introduce one of the main characters (or... well, you'll see) and his internal conflicts: about his job, his wife, his age, his life. While I likely could've accomplished that without the exposition in the first section, I wanted to include both exposition and dramatization so that I could have that reminder—placed as an interruption—about showing versus telling, helping to reinforce quickly and clearly the way that those headers will provide a structural framework. Additionally, I attempted a small shift in style between the first section and the second (the latter more polished, at least I aimed for that), trying to reinforce some of the shifts in voice that will continue through the entire story.

But beyond introducing the character, these opening sections also lay the framework for the central conflicts—again, that job, that wife, his awareness of his age, and his attitudes toward his life at this point. His thoughts about his students are also key—especially that desire for one of them to show some enthusiasm and some passion. As I tell my own students, a character who *wants* something lays the foundation for good drama ahead.

Other elements/motifs that will come back later in the story include: that paperweight and those manila envelopes and then the “kinds of things” that the professor says, his own words echoing, coming back to plague him a little.

Once that stage is set....

An inciting moment is necessary to get a plot in motion.

Toward the end of his office hours comes a knock at the door. Brianna from his creative writing class peers in, asks if he’s busy. Lithe, colt-like, she takes her seat, carrying herself with a casual grace. When she crosses her legs, her plaid skirt sneaks up her thigh.

“I’m sorry to stop by,” she says, “but...I’m having trouble with endings.”

Professor Pearson nods—sagely, he thinks. “Most writers will tell you that endings are the hardest part. A blank page is one problem, getting started. But at least then all the directions are open. The story might go anywhere. But an ending.... Did you know Hemingway wrote 47 different endings to A Farewell to Arms? You’re balancing various strands of a story by that point, working against a reader’s predictions and expectations, trying to make sure your resolution is—”

“Both surprising and inevitable.” Brianna’s smile has widened. “I know, Professor. I do pay attention in class.” She bites at her lower lip, her lipstick siren red against her alabaster skin—chewing on some hesitation. “But that wasn’t what I meant.”

I mentioned above that having a character want something can prove key to a story's conflict—and as this section begins to prove, obtaining the object of your desire (“I do pay attention in class”) doesn't necessarily mean an end to conflicts. I've laid several hints in that direction, some of them playing purposefully into clichés and stereotypes: the student's plaid skirt sneaking up her thigh, the siren red lipstick, and then her chewing lightly on her lip. Trouble ahead, clearly, even if that professor is still holding forth in his (cluelessly) professorial mode.

As for her line “That wasn't what I meant”... well, as I mentioned, the excerpt here is only part of that third section of the story, so maybe her correction will lead readers to turn the page and find out what she *did* mean about having trouble with endings? And really, that focus on endings provides another central motif for the story: what needs ending, how such endings might be achieved, where this story itself might inevitably be headed, and whether it will still manage to hold a surprise or two before everything's done.

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Art Taylor is the author of *On the Road with Del & Louise: A Novel in Stories*, winner of the Agatha Award for Best First Novel. He has won three additional Agatha Awards, an Anthony Award, two Macavity Awards, and three consecutive Derringer Awards for his short fiction, and his work has appeared in *Best American Mystery Stories*. He also edited *Murder Under the Oaks: Bouchercon Anthology 2015*, winner of the Anthony Award for Best Anthology or Collection. He is an associate professor of English at George Mason University, and he contributes frequently to the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Independent Review of Books*, and *Mystery Scene Magazine*.