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## 10 Tips for Teaching Short Stories: Part 1

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### **Author of *A World of Fiction* series**

Teachers often hesitate to use literature in the classroom. That's a pity since short stories are perfect for teaching language and critical thinking skills. Good stories engage both teachers and students. Best of all, they can be used to enrich all language skills in imaginative and unexpected ways. The ten tips below are designed to help teachers create and implement an exciting, relevant short-story course.

#### **1. *Enthusiasm is contagious.***

When you believe in literature as a meaningful and fun way to build language skills, you can persuade even skeptical students to take it seriously. I've had students begin the semester thinking literature might be an inefficient use of their time, but in 40 years of teaching I've almost never seen one who felt that way after a few weeks of class.

#### **2. *Encourage personal discovery.***

Literature isn't just about close reading and careful inference. Over the years, my students have related in intense and unexpected ways to the characters, themes, and conflicts presented in short stories. They have laughed, cried, and opened their hearts. Reading and discussing stories in English can free students to reveal parts of themselves that they were reluctant to explore when operating in their native language.

#### **3. *Think carefully about your material.***

Choosing stories can be difficult and time-consuming. It's not enough to love a story; it needs to have the right length, layering, and subject matter. Stories that initially appeal to me often don't have enough complexity for intensive analysis and discussion. I might read as many as 50-100 stories before finding one that I'm excited to use in class. When I wrote the first edition of *A World of Fiction* twenty years ago, I hoped that a collection of teachable, richly-layered stories and exercises would be helpful to teachers wanting to bring literature into the ESL classroom. In [A World of Fiction 1](#) and [A World of Fiction 2](#), the goal has been to offer stories with the variety to engage students' diverse interests and the depth to stimulate meaningful critical analysis.

#### **4. *Read each story more than once.***

Good short stories are sometimes deceptively simple. A quick reading may give the impression that a story is about one thing, but after a second or third reading it becomes clear that something entirely different is taking place beneath the surface. I read each new story between three to five times before teaching it, and I tell my students that it is crucial for them to read a story twice: the first time for plot and vocabulary, the second time for themes and style. [A World of Fiction 1 and 2](#) are both explicitly designed with this two-reading system in mind.

#### **5. *Embrace opportunities for cross-cultural discussion.***

In a multicultural classroom, students invariably enjoy learning about the cultures and perspectives of their classmates. But even in a homogeneous class, there is always an opportunity to compare and contrast a common cultural perspective with the one expressed in the story. I don't shy away from controversial subjects: almost any topic can be approached in a sensitive and nonjudgmental way. As a teacher, what's important is to create a tolerant environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves.

#### **6. *Conduct a debate on a central theme.***

Every story has themes that can be converted into a topic for debate. Debates can be conducted in pairs, small groups, or as an entire class. Students enjoy the give and take of defending or rebutting a position. Debating is a natural opportunity to practice oral skills, and it is a good way to draw out the shy students in a class.

#### **7. *Enhance critical thinking skills through literary analysis.***

As students systematically work their way through a story's plot, themes, and style, they naturally hone their critical thinking skills. Literary analysis requires students to make inferences, to compare and contrast, and to put themselves in the position of characters who face complex situations and tough choices.

#### **8. *Make vocabulary stick.***

New vocabulary is retained better when it is learned and practiced in a memorable context. Students often tell me how much they appreciate learning vocabulary in this organic way.

### 9. *Demonstrate the authentic use of grammar.*

Stories show how particular rules of grammar are applied (or broken) by experienced writers. For example, a story set in the past will tend to offer many natural opportunities for clarifying the different uses of the simple past, the past progressive, and the past perfect. Students are intrigued to see grammar brought alive in this way. When writers break the rules, it can be helpful to point out their signature use of language and to explore the reasons for their stylistic choices.

### 10. *Assign writing activities that stretch students' limits.*

Stories offer a jumping-off point for expository and creative writing. For example, I might ask students to write a formal essay in which they consider the pros and cons of a topic; write journal entries about their reactions to a story; conduct interviews about issues raised in the story; use a story's imagery as a model for observation and description; or contrast one story with another. I am often delighted and genuinely impressed by the sophistication of their responses.

**Note:** In next month's newsletter, my coauthor Daniel Berman and I will present excerpts from [A World of Fiction 1 and 2](#). We will look at how these excerpts offer opportunities to apply the ten tips above. Responses to this and the next article are most welcome. I can be reached at the following email address: [swmarcus@inreach.com](mailto:swmarcus@inreach.com)

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