A GUIDE FOR ASPIRING WRITERS

The Writer's Staircase

0 Habits

1 The page

2 A character who wants something

3 Conflict and the scene

4 Who tells it, and when

5 Inner life: want and need

6 Keeping the reader reading

7 Structure of the whole

8 Two stories, two logics



QUIZZES AND EXERCISES · ILLUSTRATION: JERO

How to use this guide

This guide merges the notes in your Theory folder, the class notes and readings of two courses (*Breve teoría del cuento* and *Cajón de herramientas*) and four books (Martínez, De Santis, Palahniuk and Highsmith) into nine levels. Each level assumes the one before it: you can't judge a scene before you know what a character wants, and you can't build a secret logic before you can build a scene.

Most of the notes come from two different traditions. One is **screenwriting and the commercial novel**: goals, obstacles, arcs, payoffs. The other is **the short story**, especially the Río de la Plata tradition of Quiroga, Borges, Cortázar and Heker: compression, interiority, the two logics. They often agree. Where they don't, you'll find a lamp.

Guillermo Martínez's first thesis explains why the lamps exist: every general claim about writing fiction has a perfectly legitimate counterexample, which doesn't stop you from working with criteria that are firm and flexible at once.

Each level ends with a short quiz and a writing exercise taken from Pablo De Santis's *Abecé de consignas*. The quiz answers, with a line of explanation each, are in the key at the back.

> 💡 A lamp marks a place where the sources disagree. It says which side is meant for screenplays (and long-form plotting), which for short stories, and how to choose.

SCREENPLAY · SHORT STORY · NOVEL · EVERY FORM

The staircase

0 **Habits** — *Before any technique*

1 **The page** — *The sentence and the detail*

2 **A character who wants something** — *Goal, motivation, specificity*

3 **Conflict and the scene** — *Goal + obstacle, one time, one place*

4 **Who tells it, and when** — *Narrator, time and world*

5 **Inner life: want and need** — *The engine underneath the plot*

6 **Keeping the reader reading** — *Tension, questions, promises*

7 **Structure of the whole** — *From the short story to the long forms*

8 **Two stories, two logics** — *What a short story holds*

LEVEL 0

0

Habits

Before any technique

Every source in the folder agrees on these points, and none of them is about craft. They describe how writers work.

Read a lot, write a lot

- **Stephen King calls it the Great Commandment.** There is no shortcut; Murakami and Zinsser say the same. Reading is the training, writing is the practice.
- **Believe in a master as in God himself** (Quiroga's *Decálogo*, I): Poe, Maupassant, Kipling, Chekhov. Resist imitation as long as you can, but imitate if the influence is too strong; developing a personality takes long patience (III).
- **Chekhov and *The Elements of Style* are the shared references.** Chekhov is the master most cited for the short story (Quiroga's *Decálogo* puts him first); Strunk & White is the manual everyone quotes.
- **Originality is trained by reading** (Martínez, third thesis). Total originality may be impossible, but an attitude of originality isn't: know what has already been done, or overdone, in your line, and look for what is different in your text against it.
- **All writing rewrites other writing.** Barthes, Bakhtin and Kristeva describe every text as a mosaic of other texts. Charly García's version: steal from one and you're mediocre, steal from everyone and you're a genius. Reading is where your material comes from.

Writing is rewriting

- **Zinsser: the essence of writing is rewriting.** Saunders calls the process "intuition plus iteration": your voice appears in the revisions.
- **Write with the door closed, revise with it open** (King). The first draft is private; the revision is for the reader.
- **Work in layers** (Groover). Make separate passes for separate jobs, for example one late pass only to check that each scene lands emotionally.
- **Three ages of a text** (De Santis). Imagining is childhood: anything goes. Writing is adolescence: the world gets rules. Revising is adulthood, "with all its neuroses". Let the text

rest, read it aloud, and remember the reader always arrives new: you know your characters by their footsteps because you invented the sound.

- **Keep a file of cuts.** Cutting is easier when nothing is really lost. Heker keeps an archive of cut fragments; the outline guide recommends the same.

Desire and discipline

- **Heker's two working hypotheses:** don't write without the urge, and the urge to write comes from writing. They look contradictory; together they mean you don't wait for inspiration, you go and find it on the page.
- **Writer's block is information** (Shaelin). When the draft resists, something in the story's logic is usually broken. Don't force words forward; step back and find where the logic went wrong.
- **Don't write under the sway of emotion** (Quiroga, IX). Let it die, then call it back. If you can relive it exactly as it was, you're halfway there.
- **The habit of art** (O'Connor, after Maritain). Your whole personality writes, conscious and unconscious. Control that isn't fully conscious comes from a habit built over years: a way of looking at the world.
- **Collect germs** (Highsmith). Almost anything can hold one: a respectable man slipping a pear into his pocket, rain washing fingerprints off a glass. Some germs only grow when a second idea joins them.
- **A little every day, without hope or despair.** Carver quotes Isak Dinesen's rule and makes it his own.

Plan or discover: the short story debate

- **The planners.** Poe builds the story like a clock: choose the effect first, plan with the ending in view, and make every part serve it. Quiroga: don't write a word without knowing where you're going, and take your characters by the hand to the end without looking elsewhere. García Márquez: a story is poured like concrete, all at once. Chekhov's gun: nothing that isn't needed.
- **The discoverers.** For O'Connor, writing is discovery: she didn't know the Bible salesman would steal the wooden leg until ten or twelve lines before it happened, and then saw that it was inevitable. Form is organic; it grows from the material. Felisberto Hernández waits for "a plant" to grow in a corner of himself and helps it become what it was meant to be. Carver starts from one sentence ("He was vacuuming when the phone rang") and goes a line at a time, as in a poem.
- **What both sides share** (*Breve teoría del cuento*, class 2): control is never total, and never absent. Writing means recognizing a central idea or tension and feeding it, and the meaning is woven into the story, not added afterwards.

Three ways to judge a text

- **Originality, execution, writing** (Martínez, second thesis). Fail in any one of the three and the text fails as a whole. All three can be discussed, practised and learned.
- **Execution is the toolbox**: point of view, register, spotting clichés, how information is dosed, dialogue, how characters enter. Learned well, it becomes invisible and leaves room for your own voice.
- **Writing is a fight against cliché** (fifth thesis): against set phrases and the clichés of "the literary", and for a language within the language, with your own choices and refusals of words, even when you write street speech.

Tools, including AI

- **AI is a tool, not a replacement** (*Cajón de herramientas*, class 4). It produces statistical patterns without understanding; your experience and voice are what it can't supply.
- **Four ways writers use it** (Elizabeth Ann West): gardeners brainstorm with it, weavers mix its text with theirs, bakers refine several generated versions, architects structure stories with precise instructions.
- **Rules of use:** start small, be specific, always edit the output, keep your own voice, be open about using it, and set clear limits. An editor's prompt that only diagnoses (like your *Prompt para edición*) keeps the writing yours.

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Plan first, or discover as you go?

SHORT STORY: THE PLANNERS

Poe plans from the ending and the effect; Quiroga wants the ending known before the first line; García Márquez pours the whole story at once. Heker's interview adds that the cuento is more "armado" from the start than the novel.

SHORT STORY: THE DISCOVERERS

O'Connor discovers the meaning while writing; Felisberto lets the story grow like a plant and distrusts the "foreign" intentions his conscious mind suggests; Carver follows a single sentence to see where it goes.

NOVEL ADVICE, BOTH SIDES

Sanderson outlines by plot cycles, payoff first. Shaelin defends discovery writing: a general direction is enough, and discovery is a tool, not an identity.

How to choose: *This isn't a screenplay-versus-story split: great short story writers stand on both sides. Find out which kind of writer you are for each story. If you plan, plan the effect and the ending. If you discover, revise until every element serves what you found.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *Los Mandamientos de la Virtud Literaria · Cánones y Maestros · Liliana Heker · How to write a book without outlining it · How to keep your readers reading · How to Write a Short Story with an Outline ·*

Breve teoría del cuento, classes 2 and 3 · Filosofía de la composición (Poe) · El arte del cuento (O'Connor) · Escribir un cuento (Carver) · Explicación falsa de mis cuentos (Felisberto Hernández) · Decálogo del perfecto cuentista (Quiroga) · Cajón de herramientas, class 4 · Once tesis (Martínez) · Contar un secreto (De Santis) · Suspense (Highsmith)

CHECK YOURSELF
Level 0 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 What does Heker mean by "las ganas de escribir vienen escribiendo"?

a) Only write when you feel inspired
b) The desire to write is produced by the act of writing
c) Writing is a duty, desire is irrelevant
d) Ideas come from reading, not writing

2 In King's formula, when should the door be open?

a) While drafting
b) While reading
c) While revising
d) Never

3 According to Shaelin, what is writer's block usually telling you?

a) You need a break from writing
b) Something in the story's logic is broken
c) You should switch to outlining
d) The idea isn't original

4 Which source is cited most often as the master of the short story?

a) Stephen King
b) William Zinsser
c) Anton Chekhov
d) Brandon Sanderson

5 What does Quiroga advise about emotion?

a) Write while you feel it most strongly
b) Let it die, then call it back and relive it
c) Avoid emotional subjects
d) Describe it with adjectives

6 Martínez's three criteria for judging a text are:

a) Plot, character, theme
b) Originality, execution, writing
c) Beginning, middle, end
d) Voice, tone, style

7 **Felisberto Hernández compares the birth of a story to:**

a) A clock being assembled
b) Concrete being poured
c) A plant growing in a corner of himself
d) A photograph being taken

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Diario

For one month, keep a notebook of overheard conversations, stories people tell you and things that catch your attention, not of what you did. Once a week, follow John Berendt's advice: take one incident and write it as a short vignette with a beginning, a middle and an end, with dialogue and colour. Mark the entries that could be a Highsmith-style germ.

LEVEL 1

1

The page

The sentence and the detail

The smallest unit of craft is the sentence, and the smallest unit of meaning is the concrete detail. Two rules dominate here: show the reader the evidence, and cut what does no work.

Showing and telling

- **Showing dramatizes; telling summarizes** (K. M. Weiland). Neither is wrong. Every story blends both; a story told only in scenes would be unreadably long.
- **Give the reader 2 + 2, not 4** (Andrew Stanton). Readers like to work things out. If you hand them the conclusion, you take away the pleasure of discovering it.
- **Ban the thought verbs** (Palahniuk). Instead of "she knew," "he felt," "she realized," give the evidence that would make the reader know it.
- **Concrete beats abstract.** Don't write that he is clever; show the key he made from dental floss and a spatula.
- **Put emotion in the body and in action**, and let voice and subtext carry what isn't said.
- **The blended technique:** tell briefly, then prove it at once with a concrete image (Burnett's Mary: "disagreeable," then the thin face, the yellow skin, the sour expression).

Economy

- **Omit needless words** (Strunk & White, rule 17). King repeats it; Zinsser's version is "simplify, simplify."
- **"The secret of being boring is to say everything."** The line is attributed to Chekhov by some sources and to Wilde by others; all agree that fiction concentrates experience rather than recording it.
- **Don't use adjectives without need** (Quiroga, VII). A weak noun can't be saved by colourful adjectives; find the precise noun and it will have colour of its own. "Desde el río soplaba el viento frío": for that exact circumstance there are no other words (VI).

- **Mix three textures** (Palahniuk): description ("a man walks into a bar"), instruction ("walk into a bar") and exclamation ("Ouch, he sighed"). Most prose is only description; mixing the three sounds like people talking.
- **No tricks** (Carver). At the first sign of a gimmick he closes the book. Plain, precise language can give ordinary things (a chair, a fork, a stone, an earring) an immense power.

Description

- **Description is not decoration** (*Cajón de herramientas*, class 2). It builds a sensory experience, an atmosphere, and the narrator's state of mind.
- **Describe with verbs, not adjectives.** Walsh never calls Mauricio Irigorri rebellious in "Fotos": he "touched the teacher's backside, dodged the slap and collected the bets at recess."
- **Find the significant detail**: one object, gesture or action that condenses a person, a scene or a conflict.
- **Someone is always looking.** What gets described, and how, tells you about the observer: what they know, how they feel, what they would notice and what they would miss.
- **Tense is description too.** The imperfect ("le tocaba") describes a habit; the preterite ("le tocó") narrates one event.
- **Routine and instant** (De Santis). Fiction has two basic ways of telling time: what happens again and again, and what happens once. The violinist who mimed in an orchestra for twenty years until the day his bow touched a string, and he was fired.
- **Use all five senses**, but select. Vary the rhythm: short for action, longer for contemplation, and avoid "X was Y" and "there was an X" patterns.
- **Fiction works through the senses** (O'Connor). Henry James called vague detail "weak specification"; Ford Madox Ford said you can't bring a newspaper seller into a story unless the reader can see him. Every detail must still work toward the story's purpose.
- **Make the concrete work a double shift** (O'Connor). In "Good Country People" the wooden leg is first of all a wooden leg; as the story goes on it gathers meaning until, when it is stolen, it carries part of the girl's personality. A detail becomes symbolic through the work it does, not because the writer labels it.
- **Get the small things right** (Palahniuk). Stained-glass makers put miracles in the highest windows and their most careful work at eye level: believe the sandals and the folds of the robe, and you believe the manna. Break down one crucial gesture so well that the reader copies it without noticing.
- **Local speech carries a society** (O'Connor). An idiom like "a mule older than Birmingham" holds a place and its history; characters who talk like a TV studio have no society behind them.

> 💡 **WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS**

Is telling allowed?

SCREENPLAY ADVICE

The Go Draft makes dialogue the last resort: use action, props, subtext and body language first, because the camera can only show. In a script, "show, don't tell" is close to absolute.

PROSE AND SHORT STORY ADVICE

On the page, telling is a tool. Shaelin notes that adult literary fiction can be mostly narrative summary, and that exposition and backstory, written with purpose and specific detail, are vital. The blended technique tells and shows in the same breath.

How to choose: *In prose, tell what the reader needs to move through quickly, and show what you want the reader to feel.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *How to Show, Not Tell · Los Mandamientos de la Virtud Literaria · HOW TO WRITE A SCENE · How to Attack a Screenplay Scene · Cajón de herramientas, class 2 · El arte del cuento (O'Connor) · Escribir un cuento (Carver) · Decálogo del perfecto cuentista (Quiroga) · Plantéate esto (Palahniuk) · Contar un secreto (De Santis) · Suspense (Highsmith) · Once tesis (Martínez)*

CHECK YOURSELF

Level 1 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 What does Stanton's "2 + 2" rule ask the writer to do?

a) Use two details per sentence
b) Give the parts and let the reader reach the conclusion
c) Repeat each important idea twice
d) Balance scenes and summary equally

2 Which of these is a "thought verb" to watch out for?

a) Ran
b) Realized
c) Whispered
d) Shattered

3 The blended technique means:

a) Alternating scenes and summaries
b) Telling a trait and immediately proving it with a concrete detail
c) Mixing first and third person
d) Blending dialogue with action tags

4 In which medium is "show, don't tell" closest to an absolute rule?

a) Literary short fiction
b) Memoir
c) Screenplay
d) Adult literary novels

5 **In O'Connor's "Good Country People", the wooden leg:**

a) Is only a symbol
b) Is a literal leg that gathers meaning until its theft reveals the girl's deepest affliction
c) Is irrelevant to the story
d) Is explained in the first paragraph

6 **What is the point of Palahniuk's stained-glass windows?**

a) Use colourful language
b) If readers believe the small details at eye level, they'll believe the miracle
c) Describe from above
d) Put the climax at the top of the page

7 **How does Walsh show Mauricio Irigorri's character in "Fotos"?**

a) With a list of adjectives
b) Through his habitual actions
c) Through his inner monologue
d) Through other characters' opinions

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Rutina e instante

Write a true experience, lived or heard, in which one instant breaks a routine. Tell the routine in the imperfect and the instant in the preterite. Describe with verbs, not adjectives, and choose one significant detail.

LEVEL 2

2

A character who wants something

Goal, motivation, specificity

A story starts when someone wants something. This level is about making that want visible and making the person who wants it particular rather than generic.

The goal

- **Make the goal visible and trackable.** The reader should be able to tell whether the character is getting closer to it or further away.
- **The three-question test:** Is the goal visible? Are the stakes immediate and personal? Does pursuing it force the character to change or sacrifice something? If they could win unchanged, the goal is too weak.
- **Goals activate passive characters**, and quiet, character-driven stories need them too.
- **Motivation explains the goal.** Maslow's pyramid is a useful menu: survival, safety, belonging (the most common), esteem, self-actualization.

The particular person

- **Start from a core belief**: the unspoken rule the character lives by. It produces their backstory, their actions and their personality.
- **Introduce every character three ways:** have them say something, do something, and show their problem. Leave hair and eye colour for later.
- **Contradictions make people real.** They create a small mystery and keep the character away from stereotype.
- **One mannerism is enough**, if it's tied to backstory and psychology. An odd habit works best with an unusual reason behind it.
- **The three-time character:** haunted by the past (short on information, long on angst), wrestling in the present (an external and an internal problem), wary of the future (Keegan's *Small Things Like These*).
- **Sanderson's sliding scales:** proactivity, relatability, capability. Turn one down and you need the others up; a character low on all three is hard to follow.

- **If you can't hear a character's voice**, they're underdeveloped (Chitlik). Go back to who they are.

Ten dimensions of a character

- **The checklist** (*Cajón de herramientas*, class 3): subjectivity, contradictions, a body, biography, history, politics, material conditions, language, resistances, needs and desires.
- **History and politics are part of the person.** Fogwill's Quiquito in *Los pichiciegos* is built from the Malvinas war he lives through, not only from his psychology.
- **Familiar plus unique.** Avoid the stereotype by joining recognizable traits to one that surprises (Carver's "Cathedral").
- **Character and action make each other** (O'Connor): characters are shown through action, and the action is controlled by the characters.
- **Few traits, but decisive, and already in motion** (Martínez, seventh thesis, after Borges). Don't present characters from outside before the story starts; place them in a scene where their acts, speech and thinking reveal them.
- **Avoid conceptual closure** (Martínez): saying what a character is like and then showing them act exactly that way, so the action adds nothing.
- **Characters exist for the events, and events for the characters** (Borges, quoted by Martínez). The old division between character stories and plot stories breaks down in practice.
- **Start from a person, not a plot** (O'Connor). Most weak stories pick an action and then choose someone to carry it out. Start from a real personality and something will happen; you don't need to know what.

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Must the protagonist want something visible?

SCREENPLAY ADVICE

The goal notes and Chitlik insist on an external, visible goal established by the end of act one; Sanderson ranks proactivity first. A protagonist without one feels like nothing is happening.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

Architecture of Desire shows how much of the Latin American short story gives up the proactive protagonist: Rulfo's and Ribeyro's characters are trapped by environment, poverty or fate. Their want is often small, blocked from the start, or simply endured.

How to choose: *A short story can have a protagonist with almost no agency, but then something else has to carry the reader: tension, a situation, or a secret logic closing in.*

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Who's in charge: you or your characters?

SHORT STORY: O'CONNOR, FELISBERTO

O'Connor let her characters lead her to the theft of the wooden leg. Felisberto lets the story grow on its own and distrusts the intentions he tries to impose.

NOVEL AND SHORT STORY: HIGHSMITH, MARTÍNEZ

Highsmith: a recalcitrant character may push the plot somewhere better, but it isn't always good; "after all, you're the boss." Martínez's *Dodecálogo* warns against the romantic cliché of disobedient characters: all fiction is artifice.

How to choose: *When a character pulls away from the plan, stop and look, as Highsmith says, for several days if needed. Keep the change if it makes a better story, not because the character "wanted" it.*

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Start from the problem, or from the person?

SCREENPLAY AND SERIES ADVICE

Erik Bork: 95% of his notes on scripts are about the concept, and every concept comes down to a central problem. Get the problem right before outlining.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

O'Connor: start from a real personality. A writer who thinks of an action first and then picks a character to perform it usually gets no personality at all.

How to choose: *In a short story, the problem is usually what this particular person can't avoid. If you start from the problem, test it by asking whether it could happen to anyone; if so, the character isn't doing any work yet.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *The Importance of the Central Character Goal · What is Character Motivation? · Building characters · 8 Steps to Creating Character Mannerisms · 9 character building techniques · Characters (Sanderson) · Write Better Conflict · Cajón de herramientas, class 3 · El arte del cuento (O'Connor) · The Seven Elements of a Viable Story Idea (Bork) · Once tesis (Martínez) · Suspense (Highsmith)*

CHECK YOURSELF

Level 2 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 **Which question is part of the three-question goal test?**

a) Is the goal original?
b) Does pursuing it force the character to change or sacrifice something?
c) Does the goal appear on page one?
d) Is the goal likable?

2 **When you introduce a new character, the advice is to:**

a) Describe their appearance first
b) Give their backstory in a paragraph
c) Have them say something, do something and show their problem
d) Hold them back until chapter two

3 **What makes a mannerism work, according to the notes?**

a) Having several of them
b) Making it funny
c) Connecting it to backstory and psychology
d) Repeating it in every scene

4 **Sanderson's three sliding scales are:**

a) Wit, warmth, wisdom
b) Proactivity, relatability, capability
c) Want, need, wound
d) Flaw, restriction, limitation

5 **What does Martínez call "conceptual closure"?**

a) An ending that closes every thread
b) Stating a character's trait and then showing them act exactly that way
c) A character who never changes
d) A narrator who explains the theme

6 **Which of these is on the course's list of ten dimensions of a character?**

a) Likability
b) Politics
c) Star sign
d) Catchphrase

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Epitafios

Read a few poems from Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, where the dead of a small-town cemetery tell their own lives. Write one character's life as an epitaph, in prose or verse, in the first person. Use few traits, but decisive ones, and include one contradiction.

LEVEL 3

3

Conflict and the scene

Goal + obstacle, one time, one place

A goal plus an obstacle produces conflict. Conflict in one time and place, with something changing by the end, is a scene. This is where most of the folder's practical advice lives.

What conflict is

- **Conflict is a goal blocked by a force**, not just something bad happening (Brock). Barriers can be a person, nature, an object or a relationship; if there isn't one, invent it (Chitlik).
- **Escalate.** Obstacles must get harder; save the biggest for the end, or the rest of the story runs downhill.
- **The coincidence rule:** if a coincidence makes things easier for the character, cut it; if it makes things harder, keep it.
- **Write your character into a corner** and only then look for the way out.

What a scene is

- **Scene versus summary.** A scene dramatizes in real time; summary compresses time and zooms out.
- **A scene is bigger than a beat and smaller than a chapter**: one event, in one time and place, where characters negotiate over something that matters, and something changes (Shaelin).
- **Its six building blocks:** dialogue, action and description (showing); narration of inner life, exposition and backstory (telling). There is no right ratio; it depends on what the scene is for.
- **Choreography and bodies.** The reader should know where everyone is, and characters should have bodies, not float as talking heads.

Building and testing a scene

- **Decide the "what" before the "how"** (The Go Draft). Name the single unit of emotional information the scene delivers, then find the most vivid, least literal way to deliver it.

- **Enter late, leave early.** Skip the arrivals and greetings; leave as soon as the shift has happened.
- **Objective, obstacle, turn.** The character enters in one emotional state and leaves in a different one. Brock calls it the emotional delta: in at confidence, out at despair.
- **The chain test** (Brock). If you can remove the scene and the plot chain still holds, it doesn't move the plot. Then it must at least reveal character (Chitlik), or be cut, or its information should move into another scene.
- **Scene and sequel** (Swain). Scene: goal, conflict, disaster. Sequel: reaction, dilemma, decision, which sets the next goal.
- **"Yes, but" / "No, and."** Inside a scene, every attempt either succeeds with a cost or fails and makes things worse. Plain yes or plain no flattens it.
- **Disguise information as natural and necessary** (Martínez, eighth thesis). Anything the reader can't be assumed to know, or must have in mind for later, should be absorbed in the flow of the story, not delivered as a lesson.
- **Thicken the plot** (Highsmith) with complications for the hero, or for the enemies, that arrive as unexpected events.
- **Exposition as a weapon.** Never let characters recite facts; put the information inside a confrontation where someone uses it.

Dialogue

- **Three jobs** (*Cajón de herramientas*, class 3): it sets the rhythm (each character has their own pace), it describes (social, regional and cultural origin show in how people talk), and it moves the story forward.
- **What isn't said moves the story.** In Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" the couple talk about "a very simple operation" that is never named.
- **Dialogue for tension, narration for context.** Use dialogue for confrontations, revelations and the dynamics between people; use narration for settings, background and summary.
- **Avoid tennis-match dialogue** (Palahniuk): lines bouncing back and forth with nothing else in the scene.
- **Common mistakes:** stiff or forced lines, adverbs piled on the speech tags, lines that do nothing for plot or character, and everyone sounding the same. Listen to real conversations and read your dialogue aloud.

> 💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS
>
> **Does every scene need conflict?**
>
> SCREENPLAY ADVICE
>
> Chitlik: if a scene has no conflict, it isn't a scene; if it neither moves the story nor reveals

character, cut it. The Go Draft adds that each scene must advance the story's spine.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

Shaelin's *7 Short Story Tips* says short fiction moves downward into the character rather than forward through plot: each scene can dig a layer deeper instead of advancing a goal.

How to choose: *In a short story, a scene may stand still in the plot, but it has to go deeper, or move the secret logic forward. If it does neither, the chain test still applies.*

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Can dialogue carry the plot?

SHORT STORY COURSE

Cajón de herramientas lists moving the story forward as one of dialogue's three jobs, with "Hills Like White Elephants" as the model.

PROSE ADVICE: PALAHNIUK

Don't use dialogue to advance the plot. A lieutenant running in to announce that the Martians are destroying New York cheats the reader: any plot point worth including deserves a scene.

How to choose: *They don't contradict each other. Hemingway's couple never report an event; the tension of what they won't say is the event. What Palahniuk bans is dialogue that announces something that should have been shown.*

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Dialogue: last resort or main engine?

SCREENPLAY ADVICE

The Go Draft: use dialogue only when visuals, props, subtext and body language can't do the job.

PROSE ADVICE (NOVEL AND SHORT STORY)

Shaelin, writing about prose: use dialogue, not reflection, to move the story. On the page, the alternative to dialogue is usually a character thinking, which is slower. The *Cajón de herramientas* course agrees: dialogue for tension and revelation, narration for context.

How to choose: *The rule changes because the alternative changes. On screen, the alternative is an image; on the page, it is often reflection.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *Write Better Conflict · HOW TO WRITE A SCENE · How to Attack a Screenplay Scene · Screenplay Scene Structure · How to Fix a Bad Scene · Crafting Narrative Drive · 7 Short Story Tips · TENSION, STAKES, & AMBIGUITY · Cajón de herramientas, class 3 · Once tesis (Martínez) · Plantéate esto (Palahniuk) · Suspense (Highsmith)*

CHECK YOURSELF
Level 3 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 **According to Brock, "something bad happens" is not conflict unless:**

a) It happens to the protagonist
b) There is a goal and a force blocking it
c) It happens in dialogue
d) It is surprising

2 **Chitlik's coincidence rule says to keep a coincidence when it:**

a) Saves time
b) Makes things harder for the character
c) Is foreshadowed
d) Happens early

3 **In Swain's model, the sequel is made of:**

a) Goal, conflict, disaster
b) Reaction, dilemma, decision
c) Setup, response, attack
d) Promise, progress, payoff

4 **"Enter late, leave early" means:**

a) Start the story in medias res only
b) Cut arrivals and wrap-ups; start just before the shift, leave just after it
c) Introduce characters late in the story
d) End every chapter on a cliffhanger

5 **In "Hills Like White Elephants", the dialogue moves the story forward by:**

a) Explaining the couple's backstory
b) Circling an operation that is never named
c) Describing the landscape in detail
d) Giving each character a regional accent

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Juego

Build a story around a game: chess, cards, dice, a board game. The game gives you a goal and an obstacle for free. Write one scene, enter late and leave early, and make every move a "yes, but" or a "no, and".

LEVEL 4

4

Who tells it, and when

Narrator, time and world

Before you can think about inner arcs and endings, you have to decide who is telling the story, in what order, and inside what world. These choices set the rhythm, the register and how close the reader gets.

The narrator

- **The author is not the narrator** (*Cajón de herramientas*, class 1). Borges was born in Buenos Aires in 1899; the voice in his stories is a construction, even when it shares his name. The narrator is one more tool.
- **First person** gives intimacy and subjectivity: "Bastará decir que soy Juan Pablo Castel, el pintor que mató a María Iribarne…" (Sabato, *El túnel*).
- **Second person** gives immediacy and pulls the reader in: "Caminas, esta vez con asco, hacia ese arcón…" (Fuentes, *Aura*). Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" is a whole life told as instructions to "you".
- **Third person** ranges from omniscient to limited.
- **Free indirect style** is the most used today: third person, but from inside one character's point of view. "Nomás llegó, fue a la cocina a ver si estaba el mono. Estaba y eso la tranquilizó" (Heker, "La fiesta ajena"). You stay close to the character without being limited to their vocabulary.
- **Big voice and small voice** (Palahniuk). The small voice is the camera: it reports actions, smells and sounds in real time. The big voice is the voice-over: it reflects and tells what the facts mean. Moving between them is a choice, not an accident.
- **The choice decides** the rhythm, how formal the language is, what the reader perceives, and the tone.

Order and time

- **Story order and telling order** (De Santis, *fábula y trama*). Even simple stories rarely tell events in the order they happened; deciding that order is one of the first decisions.

- **The classic shape** goes back to Aristotle: beginning, middle and end (planteamiento, nudo, desenlace). Most alternatives are built against it.
- **Alternatives:** in medias res, non-linear order, fragments, frame stories, circular structure. Piglia's *La ciudad ausente* combines several.
- **Time tools:** analepsis (flashback), prolepsis (small glimpses of the future, which Schweblin uses in *Distancia de rescate* to build tension), subjective time that stretches and shrinks (Pauls, *El pasado*), cyclical time.
- **With several timelines, the dramatic question changes.** It may not be answered at the end; it can repeat and transform across the timelines.
- **Broken time can mean something**: questioning official histories or exploring collective memory, as much Latin American fiction does.

Building a world

- **Every setting is built** (*Cajón de herramientas*, class 2), even a real city: you show a version filtered by your characters and your plot.
- **Internal coherence.** Keep your world's rules consistent; keep a record of them if you need to.
- **The iceberg again:** know much more about the world than you show; it seeps into the writing.
- **Familiar plus strange.** Philip K. Dick keeps San Francisco but makes living animals rare status symbols; Le Guin's Gethen has a climate and a gender system that shape everything.
- **Show the world through routine.** An ordinary day, the way people talk, the slang they use.
- **Traps:** information dumps, inconsistencies, stereotypes, and perfect worlds with no conflict in them.



WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Must events come in order?

SCREENPLAY AND NOVEL ADVICE

The scene notes and Groover's question map assume a forward chain: goal, obstacle, consequence, and a big question answered at the end.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

The *Cajón de herramientas* course shows fragmented, circular and multi-timeline stories where the dramatic question repeats instead of resolving.

How to choose: *You can scramble the order, but not the causes. The reader must still be able to rebuild why each thing happened (Level 8).*

WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

How much world does a story need?

NOVEL AND GENRE ADVICE

Worldbuilding in its full sense means designing social systems, power, history, myth and the laws of nature or magic, as Le Guin does for a whole planet.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

Compression rules the short story: one setting, a short span of time, history implied (Level 7). Economy of detail is also the first principle in the course notes.

How to choose: *Build as much world as you like in your notes, and put on the page only the part the conflict touches.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *Cajón de herramientas, classes 1 and 2 · Cómo convertirse en escritora (Lorrie Moore) · How to keep your readers reading · Plantéate esto (Palahniuk) · Contar un secreto (De Santis)*

CHECK YOURSELF

Level 4 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 What is free indirect style?

a) A first-person diary
b) Third person told from inside one character's point of view
c) An omniscient narrator who comments on everything
d) Dialogue without speech tags

2 According to the course, the narrator is:

a) Always the author
b) The author when the story is in first person
c) A construction inside the text, different from the author
d) The main character

3 A prolepsis is:

a) A flashback
b) A glimpse of the future
c) A repeated event
d) A story inside a story

4 Which book is cited as an example of second-person narration?

a) *El túnel*
b) *Aura*
c) *La fiesta ajena*
d) *El pasado*

5 **The best way to show a fictional world, according to the notes, is:**

a) A long opening description
b) A glossary
c) Characters' routines and everyday life
d) A map

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Monólogo

Ask someone to tell you an anecdote from their life while you record it or take notes. Turn it into a monologue: delete your questions and keep only their voice, respecting it as much as you can. Then retell the same anecdote in free indirect third person and compare what each version can do.

LEVEL 5

5

Inner life: want and need

The engine underneath the plot

This is the idea repeated most often in the folder. The want is what the character chases; the need is what they're missing. The want drives the plot, the need drives the theme.

Want and need

- **The want is external and conscious**: a finish line the character knows about (Rocky wants to win the fight). It makes them proactive and creates the external conflict.
- **The need is internal and usually unconscious**, or actively rejected: a flaw, a wound, a misbelief about the world (Woody needs to learn to share).
- **The need often blocks the want.** Woody's selfishness is exactly what keeps him from being Andy's favourite again.
- **Imbalance has a cost.** Want without need gives action that doesn't move anyone (*Transformers*). Need without want gives a reactive protagonist and a plot where nothing seems to happen (*Manchester by the Sea*).
- **Public goal, private goal.** What the character says they're doing, and the itch underneath. Their actions are strategies for the private one.

Wounds and stakes

- **Core wound → compensations** (Russell). The wound produces secret habits and defences. When stuck, ask what embarrassing thing the character does to cope.
- **Confession creates sympathy.** We don't bond with perfect people; we bond with an exposed flaw.
- **Desire against fear** (*Arquitectura del Personaje*). Depth comes from the friction between what they want and the fear or misbelief that stops them. Choice under pressure reveals who they are.
- **Flaw, restriction, limitation** (Sanderson). A flaw is overcome, a restriction is self-imposed, a limitation is worked around.

- **Emotional stakes are the why** (Shaelin). Three setups: *reason* (I need the external goal because of an emotional one), *risk* (pursuing it endangers something else), *sacrifice* (the two goals contradict each other).
- **Sympathetic criminals** (Highsmith). A criminal hero should be at least reasonably sympathetic, or fascinating in his depravity; *Strangers on a Train* balances Bruno's evil with Guy's goodness.
- **Tragedy is not stakes.** Piling on death and loss produces melodrama unless the loss is specific and tied to the character's motives.

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Must the character transform?

SCREENPLAY ADVICE

The want/need notes and Russell's rites-of-passage hero describe a full arc from A to Z: the character pursues the want, discovers the need, changes, and that change wins the climax.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

Architecture of Desire describes the short story as built from the inside out around a single revealing moment, an epiphany rather than an arc. Shaelin: the climax is usually a small decision that shows who the character has become. In much Latin American fiction, the character doesn't get to change at all.

SHORT STORY STRUCTURE

Highsmith: in a novel the hero usually changes drastically; a short suspense story can be one scene lasting five minutes. *How to Structure a Short Story*: a novel tracks a transformation; a short story tracks a decision under pressure. The story question is "will the protagonist choose A or B?", not "will they heal?"

SHORT STORY COURSE

Cajón de herramientas (class 3) calls change from point A to point B crucial, and shows how small it can be: in Nicolás Verni's "La Libertad", Martín gets up to buy cigarettes and, as soon as the door closes, he starts running.

How to choose: *In a short story, something must move, but it can be tiny (one gesture, as in Verni's two lines) or a revelation (to the character, or only to the reader) rather than a full transformation.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *Want vs. Need · Character: Want vs. Need · El Motor Narrativo · Arquitectura del Personaje · Peter Russell BMOC · EMOTIONAL STAKES · Characters (Sanderson) · Architecture of Desire · Cajón de herramientas, class 3 · Suspense (Highsmith)*

CHECK YOURSELF
Level 5 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 Which statement is correct?

a) The want drives theme; the need drives plot
b) The want drives plot; the need drives theme
c) Both drive plot
d) Only the need matters in fiction

2 A story with a clear need but no want risks:

a) Melodrama
b) A reactive protagonist and a plot where nothing happens
c) Too many subplots
d) An unlikable hero

3 In Shaelin's three setups, "sacrifice" means:

a) The character dies
b) The external and emotional goals contradict each other
c) The character risks exposure
d) Backstory explains the goal

4 In Verni's "La Libertad", how big is Martín's change?

a) A whole life arc over decades
b) One gesture: he starts running after closing the door
c) None; he stays the same
d) A change revealed only in an epilogue

5 Why doesn't piling tragedy on a character create stakes?

a) Readers dislike sad stories
b) Loss only matters when it is specific and tied to the character's motives
c) Tragedy belongs only in the climax
d) It slows the pacing

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Genio de la lámpara

Write a story about wishes and the means of getting them, in the line of Aladdin, Stevenson's *The Bottle Imp* or Balzac's *La piel de zapa*, where a piece of skin shrinks with every wish. The wish is the want; decide what the character needs that the wish hides, and what the wish costs.

LEVEL 6

6

Keeping the reader reading

Tension, questions, promises

Once there are characters in conflict, the question is why anyone would keep turning pages. The folder's answer: give the reader enough information to fear and hope, open questions on purpose, and keep the promises you make.

Tension

- **Tension comes from information, not from withholding it** (Shaelin). If readers don't know what's happening or why it matters, they don't feel tension, they feel confused.
- **Its five building blocks:** meaningful potential outcomes; stakes (tangible and emotional together); urgency and timers; an occasion (a party, a meeting) that forces confrontation; and inevitability, tracks laid so the reader sees the collision coming.
- **Three scales:** micro (line by line: subtext, pauses, hostility), narrative (the main conflict), thematic (ideas in conflict).
- **Page-level tools** (Russell): ticking clocks, good news / bad news alternation, stakes that rise with every exchange.
- **What's your clock, and where's your gun?** (Palahniuk). The clock limits the story and forces it to end: a pregnancy, the four engines of a plane failing one by one, Scarlett O'Hara's waist. The gun is the threat the reader knows is waiting.
- **Two axes** (Palahniuk, after Tom Spanbauer). The horizontal axis is the chain of plot events; the vertical axis is the rising emotional, physical or psychological tension. Limit the elements (the "horses" you leave with are the ones you arrive with) so they can gather tension.
- **Recycle objects** (Palahniuk). Bring the same object back again and again; each time it returns with new meaning and marks a change in the characters, as O'Connor's wooden leg does.
- **Suspense by denial.** Raise a subject and refuse to explore it: "The first rule of Fight Club is: you do not talk about Fight Club." Don't state your thesis; readers want gradual discovery.
- **Every story with a beginning, a middle and an end has suspense** (Highsmith); a suspense story simply has more.

- **Menace** (Carver). The feeling that something is about to happen. He starts writing when a story "threatens" him, and keeps that threat in the text.
- **Tension from the first words** (Cortázar). A story written without tension from its opening lines or scenes is a bad story.
- **Don't protect your characters.**

Questions and promises

- **Make a question map** (Groover). Write down which questions each page raises and decide where each one is answered: some on the next page, some at the end. Leave a question open only on purpose.
- **Relatable beats likable.** A main character doesn't need to be nice, but the reader has to recognize something human in them.
- **Promises, progress, payoffs** (Sanderson). The opening promises a tone, a genre, a plot and a character; the middle must show progress on each; the end must pay each off. In *Star Wars*, Han's return, Luke's turned-off computer and the little ship beating the big one pay off three different promises.
- **All story is change, or the threat of change** (*6 storytelling hacks*).

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Clarity, or a secret?

ADVICE FOR EVERY FORM

Shaelin: withholding information creates a frustration gap; ambiguity belongs around meaning, choices and emotion, not around basic facts. Her tip: share information, not meaning.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

The *Doctor* notes build the cuento on a secret logic that is only revealed at the end.

How to choose: *They don't contradict each other. The secret logic isn't withheld information: its pieces are on the page all along, in plain sight, and only their meaning changes at the end. That is exactly "share information, not meaning."*

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Answer every question?

NOVEL ADVICE

Groover: answer almost every question you raise; leaving one open by accident frustrates readers.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

Short stories often end on an open meaning: what the ending means can stay unsettled even

when what happened is clear.

How to choose: *Leave meaning open if you want to, but answer the factual questions.*

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Write for the audience, or for the characters?

SCREENPLAY AND COMMERCIAL ADVICE

Bork: we are paid to make audiences feel what they came for; a viable idea must be entertaining. Groover: readers must be hooked from the preview pages or they won't buy the book.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

Palahniuk: forget about being liked; tastes change, and a book that lodges in someone's memory finds its readers in time. Quiroga (X): don't think of your friends or the impression your story will make; tell it as if it mattered only to the small world of your characters. O'Connor: the only reader you can know is yourself.

How to choose: *Write the draft for the characters' world. Use the reader-focused tools (question map, stakes, tension) when you revise, as a check on whether that world reaches anyone outside it.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *TENSION, STAKES, & AMBIGUITY · How to keep your readers reading · Crafting Narrative Drive · Promises, Progress, and Payoffs · Brandon Sanderson's Lecture #4 · 6 storytelling hacks · Peter Russell BMOC · Escribir un cuento (Carver) · Algunos aspectos del cuento (Cortázar) · Decálogo del perfecto cuentista (Quiroga) · The Seven Elements of a Viable Story Idea (Bork) · Plantéate esto (Palahniuk) · Suspense (Highsmith)*

CHECK YOURSELF

Level 6 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 **According to Shaelin, withholding basic information from the reader mostly creates:**

a) Suspense
b) Mystery
c) Confusion
d) Irony

2 **Which of these is one of the five building blocks of tension?**

a) An occasion that forces confrontation
b) A likable protagonist
c) A twist ending
d) First-person narration

3 **In Palahniuk's terms, a story's "clock" is:**

a) The time of day it is set
b) Anything that limits the story and forces it to end
c) The narrator's pace
d) A flashback

4 **What does Carver mean by a story's "menace"?**

a) A violent antagonist
b) The feeling that something is about to happen
c) A cliffhanger at the end
d) A dark tone

5 **What is a question map?**

a) A list of interview questions for characters
b) A record of which questions each page raises and where each is answered
c) A chart of plot points by percentage
d) A list of themes

6 **Why doesn't the secret logic of a short story break the "share information" rule?**

a) Short stories are exempt from it
b) Its pieces are in plain sight; only their meaning is revealed late
c) It is always explained in the first paragraph
d) Readers prefer confusion in short fiction

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Caja

Imagine a story in which something is shut inside a box, chest or trunk, and weave the story around that hidden object. Draw a question map before you start: what the reader knows on each page and when each question is answered. Bring the box back more than once, each time with a new meaning.

LEVEL 7

7

Structure of the whole

From the short story to the long forms

Only now does structure make sense: a shape that holds characters, scenes and tension together. The short story comes first because it's your form; the long-form models follow as a reference shelf.

The short story

- **Photograph, not film** (Cortázar). The novel accumulates like a film; the story cuts out one fragment so precisely that it opens onto a much larger reality. A novel wins on points, a story by knockout.
- **Read in one sitting** (Poe). If a text needs two sessions, the world gets in between and the unity of effect is lost.
- **State the concept early.** A short story has no back cover; the reader needs the situation right away (Ling Ma's "My 100 ex-boyfriends live with me").
- **A beginner's frame: the five-paragraph essay.** Introduction as inciting incident, body as escalation, conclusion as climax. Use it to start, then break it.
- **Corner the character** physically or emotionally, so they have to face what they've been avoiding.
- **Compress.** One central conflict, one main setting, a short span of time, no subplots and no flashback scenes; history is implied.
- **Make themes tangible**: a repeated physical action (a character who keeps washing) instead of an explanation.
- **The present as a lens on the past.** The short story catches a character in a narrow window that lights up everything that led there.
- **Ten decisions to make** (*Breve teoría del cuento*, class 4): point of view, tone and style, order in time, how realistic, the visible and hidden story, characterization, atmosphere, ending (open or closed, surprising or confirming), length, and genre conventions to follow or break.

- **One decision under pressure.** A short story follows one meaningful choice and the events that lead to it. Phrase it as "by the end, will the protagonist choose A or B?": safety or risk, truth or comfort, staying or leaving.
- **The first three lines matter almost as much as the last three** (Quiroga, V).
- **The beginning is more than half of the whole** (Aristotle, in Martínez's sixth thesis). Point of view, tone, register and the first characters are decided there, and so is narrative authority: originality, execution and writing should already show.
- **Establish your authority and you can do anything** (Palahniuk, after Spanbauer). Action has authority of its own: clear physical verbs pull the reader along; a speech full of precise expert detail convinces; the small things right make the impossible inevitable.
- **A short story can be tiny** (Highsmith): its germ can be as slight as rain wiping fingerprints off a glass; it can be one scene lasting five minutes.
- **A seven-beat shape:** set the container (0–15%), inciting incident (15–30%), escalation (30–50%), midpoint shift (50%), confrontation (60–70%), the choice (70–85%), aftermath (85–100%). End at the final decision, not after it, and consider mirroring the opening (order to disruption, isolation to connection) so the story closes on itself.

How the short story has changed

- **From mouth to page.** Oral tales, then *The Thousand and One Nights* and the *Decameron*; Poe's unity of effect founds the modern short story.
- **Three shapes** (*Breve teoría del cuento*, class 4). Classic: chronological, omniscient narrator, an ending with an epiphany. Modern: broken time, unreliable narrators, irony, open endings. Postmodern: fragments, parody, self-reference, multiple endings.
- **The Latin American line.** Borges, then the Boom (Cortázar's fantastic in the everyday, García Márquez), then Piglia and Bolaño, and now Mariana Enriquez and Samanta Schweblin.
- **The nouvelle, a third form** (De Santis). Between story and novel, defined by what it isn't. It often has a frame (someone tells a story someone else told them), an atmosphere of mystery and melancholy, and an ending more like a farewell than a slammed door, with its secret left intact. *Bartleby*, *The Metamorphosis*, Onetti's *Los adioses*.
- **"Minor" genres have earned respect.** Horror, science fiction and crime (King, Le Guin, Enriquez) give tools for collective fears.

The long forms (reference shelf)

- **Is the idea viable?** Erik Bork, writing for film and TV, reduces it to the central problem, with seven tests that spell PROBLEM: punishing, relatable, original, believable, life-altering, entertaining, meaningful.
- **MICE** (Milieu, Inquiry, Character, Event). Each thread opens and closes in a specific way: entering and leaving a place, a question asked and answered, an identity shifting and settling, a status quo broken and restored. Nest them and close them in reverse order of opening; endings that end again and again are usually closed out of order.

- **Four quarters:** setup, response, attack, resolution. Russell's BMOC puts the turns at pages 30, 60, 90 and 110 of a script.
- **Nine classic models:** plot pyramid, tragic pyramid, hero's journey, plot embryo, tragic plot embryo, seven-point structure, Aristotle's *Poetics*, the snowflake method, Save the Cat.

💡 WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Beat sheets and page numbers

SCREENPLAY AND NOVEL ADVICE

BMOC (pages 30/60/90/110), the four quarters, Save the Cat and the hero's journey are built for features and novels: long, goal-driven stories with room for subplots and several reversals.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

The short story rules ban subplots, side characters and flashback scenes, and favour depth over forward motion. The seven-beat shape is a scaffold, not a contract. Cortázar's photograph is the opposite of a beat sheet: one fragment chosen and cut.

How to choose: *For a short story, take the long-form models as vocabulary (inciting incident, midpoint, climax), not as a schedule.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *7 Short Story Tips · How to Structure a Short Story · How to Write a Short Story with an Outline · The Seven Elements of a Viable Story Idea · The MICE quotient · Using Story Structure to Build a Novel Quarter by Quarter · Peter Russell BMOC · 9 Story Structures · Filosofía de la composición (Poe) · Algunos aspectos del cuento (Cortázar) · Breve teoría del cuento, classes 1 and 4 · Once tesis (Martínez) · Plantéate esto (Palahniuk) · Contar un secreto (De Santis) · Suspense (Highsmith)*

CHECK YOURSELF

Level 7 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 **Which is one of the rules for staying within a short story's length?**

a) Use at least two subplots
b) No flashback scenes; imply the history
c) Open with backstory
d) Change setting in every scene

2 **According to *How to Structure a Short Story*, what does a short story track?**

a) A full transformation
b) A decision under pressure
c) A whole life
d) Several subplots

3 **Where should a short story end, according to the seven-beat model?**

a) Well after the climax, with an epilogue
b) At the final decision, not beyond it
c) At the midpoint
d) When all subplots are resolved

4 **In MICE, a milieu story begins and ends when:**

a) A question is asked and answered
b) The character enters and leaves a place
c) The status quo is broken and restored
d) The character's identity shifts and settles

5 **For Martínez, what is decided in a story's beginning above all?**

a) The ending
b) Narrative authority
c) The word count
d) The title

6 **In Cortázar's boxing image, how does a short story win?**

a) On points
b) By knockout
c) By disqualification
d) In the last round

7 **Which model is written mainly for screenplays?**

a) The seven-beat short story
b) The five-paragraph frame
c) BMOC (pages 30/60/90/110)
d) The two logics

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Argumentos

Pick one of Hawthorne's story ideas from his notebooks, for example "A man possesses the most perfect object a mortal could wish for; trying to improve it, he ruins it," or "An old mirror. Someone finds a way to make all the images it once reflected come back to the surface." Write a short story from it: one container, one decision (A or B), first three lines that already point to the end, and stop at the choice.

LEVEL 8

8

Two stories, two logics

What a short story holds

This is the capstone, and it comes from the Spanish-language tradition. It explains why a short story can feel like an anecdote with a twist, and what makes one land instead: a hidden story under the visible one, and an ending that feels inevitable, not just surprising.

Two stories and the iceberg

- **Every story tells two stories** (Piglia, *Tesis sobre el cuento*). Chekhov's note: "A man in Monte Carlo goes to the casino, wins a million, goes home, kills himself." The gambling story is in the foreground; the suicide story is built in secret.
- **The art is to encode story 2 in the gaps of story 1.** Each story has its own causality, so the same events belong to two logics at once, and the key elements do double duty. In Borges's "La muerte y la brújula", a shopkeeper's cheap edition of a Hasidic history looks like an ironic coincidence in story 1 and is essential to story 2. What is superfluous in one story is basic in the other.
- **The hidden story is a story, not a hidden meaning.** It doesn't depend on interpretation; it is told in an enigmatic way. The technical problem of the short story is how to tell one story while telling another.
- **Classic and modern versions.** In Poe and Quiroga, surprise comes when the end of the secret story surfaces. From Chekhov, Mansfield and Joyce onward, the tension between the two is never resolved: the modern story tells two stories as if they were one. Kafka inverts it, telling the secret story plainly and making the visible one obscure.
- **The iceberg** (Hemingway). Only a small part shows; the essential stays below the surface, implied. In "Big Two-Hearted River" the war is never mentioned, and the story reads like a fishing trip. Piglia's Hemingway would describe the casino in precise detail and never say the man will kill himself, but write as if the reader already knew.
- **The art of ellipsis** (Piglia on Walsh). In "Fotos" and "Cartas", the politics and the social differences are never stated; the reader follows the clues. "The most important thing in a story is what isn't told."

- **Deferred juxtaposition** (Joyce, quoted by Piglia): a word or fact you barely notice reverberates ten pages later. This is how the hidden story is planted.
- **Where stories come from** (Benjamin). The peasant tells the stories of home and makes the familiar strange; the sailor brings stories from far away and makes the strange familiar. Piglia's update: the investigation of a crime, and the journey.

Anecdote and cuento

- **An anecdote is actions with a surprising ending** ("no sabés lo que me pasó ayer"). It works best when the ending also reframes everything before it; in that, it resembles a short story.
- **A short story is a system of two logics** (Guillermo Martínez, *El cuento como sistema lógico*). He prefers this to Piglia's two stories because often there is no full second story, only a different light on the same facts. A surface logic, tied to common sense, which the reader accepts at the start; and a secret logic that gains ground through the story and, at the end, reframes every element.
- **The ending as displacement** (Martínez, eleventh thesis). The ending must gather, reframe or light differently everything read. It needn't be a surprise (Heker's rabbit pulled from a hat), but a turn not fully expected that imposes itself as necessary: Borges's "necessity and wonder of the solution". The first germ of a story often already contains that twist.
- **Built for its ending** (De Santis): since Poe, the modern story is an artefact built for its end; the ending is "the secret of the architecture". In a novel, by contrast, the ending can simply be the action dying away.
- **The effect is fatal, not surprising.** The ending should feel inexorable and necessary. There is surprise, but it is in discovering the secret logic, under which the surface details mean something else.
- **Where the second logic lives.** In the details (objects, people and their traits, how actions are done) and in the structure (the narrator, the point of view, the genre of the text).
- **The diagnosis:** stories that feel like anecdotes usually have a secret logic that is unclear, incomplete, or missing.

Causality and believability

- **Causality, not chronology** (Forster, Saunders). "The queen died and then the king died" is a sequence; "the king died of grief" is a story.
- **Work backwards** (Kitchen). Start from the ending and ask what had to cause it, and what caused that.
- **Inexorability** (Marina Arias). A story means something when its ending makes the reader think: "of course, nothing else could have happened."
- **Plant early.** Anything that resolves the ending (a skill, an object, a trait) must appear well before it; the notes suggest at least three scenes earlier.
- **Believability is internal coherence**, not real-world truth (Nabokov on Gogol). The world can be impossible, as long as it is consistent while the reading lasts.

- **The fantastic needs no magic object** (Martínez, tenth thesis). It can be a hypothesis more convincing than any realistic explanation, an atmosphere of strangeness, an altered mind, a pile of coincidences or a change of point of view. Prepare signals beforehand, and if reality is broken, break it only once.
- **The reading pact** (*Breve teoría del cuento*, class 1). The reader agrees that what's told didn't happen, and judges it by whether it is believable (verosímil), not by whether it is true (verídico). Saer: fiction doesn't give up reality, only verification.

Significance

- **A story is a way of saying something that can't be said any other way** (O'Connor). Its meaning is embodied in the story and experienced, not stated in the abstract.
- **A story is a complete dramatic action** (O'Connor), and a good one has no less meaning than a novel.
- **Significance** (Cortázar). An ordinary episode, as in Chekhov or Katherine Mansfield, radiates far beyond itself. It doesn't come from the theme alone, but from the intensity and tension of how the theme is treated.
- **Original and familiar at once** (Marina Arias). A significant story is unusual and recognizable, and opens a particular case onto something universal.

Generating and testing two logics

- **Three ways in** (*Idear lógicas*). From a *scene*: take a strict protocol and make its rule literal. From a *theme*: let the metaphor become physical. From an *image*: give an ordinary object a hidden law.
- **The template.** *The façade*: the protagonist attempts an ordinary action using an object or a technical skill. *The virus*: unknown to them, that object follows an inverted law or a literal metaphor. *The collision*: if they reach their surface goal, they suffer the fatal consequence.
- **Study the models** in *Ejemplo de lógica secreta*: "The Monkey's Paw," "Lamb to the Slaughter," "El almohadón de plumas," "Las ruinas circulares," "Axolotl," and others. For each, name the surface logic and the secret one.
- **The edit.** The *Prompt para edición* asks an editor to flag where the surface logic feels forced and where the ending reads as a cheap surprise instead of an inevitable consequence.



WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Payoff or fatality?

SCREENPLAY AND NOVEL ADVICE

Sanderson's "stand-up and cheer" payoff and Russell's climax reward the hero: the want and the need come together, and the plan succeeds.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

In the two-logics model the ending is a fatality: the secret logic closes over the character, often

because of their surface goal. The pleasure is recognition, not triumph.

How to choose: *Both endings are paid-off promises. The difference is which promise: the screenplay pays off the character's plan, the short story pays off the story's logic.*



WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Where does the meaning come from?

SCREENPLAY ADVICE

Architecture of Desire: a screenplay is designed from the outside in, with goals, obstacles and a causal chain driven by desire.

SHORT STORY ADVICE

A short story is designed from the inside out, around a closed situation or a crisis and a single revealing moment. In the Latin American tradition, the trap (social, metaphysical, physical) often replaces the protagonist's plan.

How to choose: *Levels 2 to 5 give you a protagonist's plan; Level 8 gives you the trap. Many of the strongest stories in your examples use both: a clear surface goal that the secret logic turns into the means of the character's undoing.*



WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Suggest, or leave out?

SHORT STORY: HEMINGWAY, PIGLIA ON WALSH

The most important thing is never told; the hidden story is built from the unsaid, from implication and allusion.

SHORT STORY: O'CONNOR

Beginners think suggesting means omitting, and that leaving things out is subtlety. Nothing can be found in a text that wasn't put there in some way. Brevity must not be shallowness; nothing essential to the main experience can be cut.

How to choose: *Piglia settles it: the secret story is told, only encrypted, in details that work in both stories. If a reader can't find any trace of what you left out, it isn't an iceberg, it's a gap.*



WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Two stories, or one logic seen twice?

SHORT STORY: PIGLIA

Every story tells two stories, and the secret one is a full story told in the gaps of the visible one: the suicide behind the casino win.

SHORT STORY: MARTÍNEZ

Often there is no complete second story, only a different light on the same events. Two causal systems, or rather one logic split in two.

How to choose: *Use Piglia's model when something is really happening out of sight: a crime, a trap, a plan. Use Martínez's when the events stay the same and only their meaning flips at the end.*



WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

A logic, or no logic at all?

SHORT STORY: MARTÍNEZ AND POE

The story is a logical system: a surface logic, a secret one, and causal links that make the ending necessary. Poe plans the whole mechanism back from the ending.

SHORT STORY: FELISBERTO HERNÁNDEZ

"My stories have no logical structures." He waits for the story to grow on its own and distrusts the intentions his conscious mind tries to impose.

How to choose: *Read Felisberto to the end: the plant "won't know its own laws, though it has them deeply." The logic can be discovered instead of designed, but a story that works has one.*



WHERE THE ADVICE SPLITS

Twist or no tricks?

SHORT STORY: CARVER, HIGHSMITH

Carver: "At the first sign of a trick or a gimmick, I close the book." Highsmith calls it the personal school against the school of tricks: tricks are clever ideas anyone can invent and have nothing to do with literature; good short stories are made from the writer's emotions.

SHORT STORY: THE SECRET-LOGIC MODELS

"The Monkey's Paw", "Lamb to the Slaughter" and "El almohadón de plumas" turn on a final revelation, and the course's list of short story traits includes an ending that surprises or recontextualizes.

How to choose: *They reject the same thing: an ending that makes the reader feel cheated. Martínez asks for an unexpected turn that becomes necessary, not a rabbit from a hat. If the ending reframes what was already on the page, it isn't a trick.*

FROM YOUR FOLDER *Doctor, mis cuentos son una porquería · Doctor, mis cuentos son inverosímiles · Lógica y Verosimilitud en la Arquitectura del Relato · Idear lógicas · Ejemplo de lógica secreta · Architecture of Desire · Prompt para edición · Breve teoría del cuento, classes 1, 3 and 4 · Tesis sobre el cuento (Piglia) · Once tesis (Martínez) · Contar un secreto (De Santis) · Suspense (Highsmith) · Piglia sobre los cuentos de Walsh · El arte del cuento (O'Connor) · Algunos aspectos del cuento (Cortázar) · Explicación falsa de mis cuentos (Felisberto Hernández) · Escribir un cuento (Carver)*

CHECK YOURSELF
Level 8 quiz — answers in the key at the back

1 According to Piglia, every short story:

a) Has a twist ending
b) Tells two stories, one visible and one hidden
c) Must be read in one sitting
d) Is narrated in first person

2 In Piglia's reading of "La muerte y la brújula", the shopkeeper's book:

a) Is a red herring with no function
b) Looks like a coincidence in the visible story but is essential to the secret one
c) Is a symbol of faith
d) Reveals the murderer on the first page

3 What does O'Connor say about suggesting and omitting?

a) They are the same thing
b) Suggesting is not omitting; nothing is in a text that wasn't put there
c) Always omit the ending
d) Omission is the soul of brevity

4 According to Martínez, a fantastic story should:

a) Multiply wonders
b) Break reality only once, after preparing signals
c) Always include a magic object
d) Explain the supernatural at the end

5 Martínez's ideal ending is:

a) A total surprise
b) A turn not fully expected that imposes itself as necessary
c) An open question
d) An epilogue tying every thread

6 Saer says fiction gives up:

a) Reality
b) Verification
c) Meaning
d) Characters

7 **What turns an anecdote into a short story, in this model?**

a) A longer length
b) A secret logic that reframes every element by the end
c) A happier ending
d) More dialogue

8 **The ending of a well-built cuento should feel above all:**

a) Shocking
b) Ambiguous
c) Inexorable and necessary
d) Uplifting

9 **In Forster's example, which sentence is a story rather than a sequence?**

a) The queen died and then the king died
b) The king died, then the queen
c) The queen died and then the king died of grief
d) The king and queen died

10 **In the *Idear lógicas* template, "the virus" is:**

a) The antagonist
b) The hidden law the ordinary object secretly follows
c) The fatal ending
d) A plot twist in the middle

WRITE EXERCISE FROM DE SANTIS, ABECÉ DE CONSIGNAS

Fantástico

Write a short fantastic story that starts from a real situation and arrives at the supernatural. Choose one classic theme: an impossible object, time travel without a machine, a human turning into an animal, a body part with a life of its own, nature acquiring a will. Break reality only once, plant the signals early, and use the façade, virus and collision template to give it two logics.

Answer key

0 Habits

1 b **The desire to write is produced by the act of writing.** Her two hypotheses work together: don't write without desire, but desire is what writing produces.

2 c **While revising.** Draft privately (door closed); revise for the reader (door open).

3 b **Something in the story's logic is broken.** Block is feedback from the draft: find where the logic diverged instead of forcing words.

4 c **Anton Chekhov.** Saunders, Quiroga, King, Piglia, Zinsser and Rozenmacher all point to Chekhov.

5 b **Let it die, then call it back and relive it.** Decálogo IX: if you can relive it exactly as it was, you're halfway there.

6 b **Originality, execution, writing.** A text that fails in any one of them fails as a whole.

7 c **A plant growing in a corner of himself.** The clock is Poe's image, the concrete García Márquez's, the photograph Cortázar's.

1 The page

1 b **Give the parts and let the reader reach the conclusion.** Readers are problem solvers; implied meaning engages them, over-explaining doesn't.

2 b **Realized.** Verbs like realized, knew and felt report a conclusion instead of showing the evidence.

3 b **Telling a trait and immediately proving it with a concrete detail.** Burnett tells us Mary is disagreeable, then shows her face and expression.

4 c **Screenplay.** A camera can only show; prose can tell when telling serves the story.

5 b **Is a literal leg that gathers meaning until its theft reveals the girl's deepest affliction.** It works on the literal level and in depth: the concrete working a double shift.

6 b **If readers believe the small details at eye level, they'll believe the miracle.** Authority comes from getting the small things right; Fincher said the same about the twist in *Fight Club*.

7 b **Through his habitual actions.** He touches, dodges and collects bets: the verbs do the work adjectives would do.

2 A character who wants something

1 b **Does pursuing it force the character to change or sacrifice something.** If the character can win unchanged, the goal lacks strength.

2 c **Have them say something, do something and show their problem.** Speech, action and problem reveal character fastest.

3 c **Connecting it to backstory and psychology.** One mannerism is enough if it comes from who the character is.

4 b **Proactivity, relatability, capability.** Flaw, restriction and limitation are a separate Sanderson tool.

5 b **Stating a character's trait and then showing them act exactly that way.** The action then adds nothing to what was already said.

6 b **Politics.** History and politics sit beside subjectivity, the body and desire; Fogwill's Quiquito is the example.

3 Conflict and the scene

1 b **There is a goal and a force blocking it.** Conflict needs a goal and an antagonistic force against it.

2 b **Makes things harder for the character.** Coincidences that help the character feel like cheating; ones that hurt them add conflict.

3 b **Reaction, dilemma, decision.** The sequel processes the disaster and ends with a decision that starts the next scene.

4 b **Cut arrivals and wrap-ups; start just before the shift, leave just after it.** The scene exists for one emotional change; everything around it is filler.

5 b **Circling an operation that is never named.** The reader understands what the characters refuse to say.

4 Who tells it, and when

1 b **Third person told from inside one character's point of view.** It stays close to the character without being limited to their vocabulary.

2 c **A construction inside the text, different from the author.** Except in autobiography, author and narrator are different figures, even with the same name.

3 b **A glimpse of the future.** Schweblin uses small prolepses in *Distancia de rescate* to build tension.

4 b **Aura.** "Caminas, esta vez con asco…": Fuentes addresses the reader as "you".

5 c **Characters' routines and everyday life.** Show, don't tell applies to worlds too: an ordinary day reveals the essence.

5 Inner life: want and need

1 b **The want drives plot; the need drives theme.** The external want creates the action; the internal need gives it meaning.

2 b **A reactive protagonist and a plot where nothing happens.** The notes use *Manchester by the Sea* as the example.

3 b **The external and emotional goals contradict each other.** Achieving one goal destroys the other, as with Joel choosing between humanity and Ellie.

4 b **One gesture: he starts running after closing the door.** The course uses it to show that the move from A to B can fit in two sentences.

5 b **Loss only matters when it is specific and tied to the character's motives.** Ungrounded tragedy reads as melodrama and produces apathy.

6 Keeping the reader reading

1 c **Confusion.** Readers can only feel tension when they understand what could go wrong.

2 a **An occasion that forces confrontation.** The others are outcomes, stakes, urgency and inevitability.

3 b **Anything that limits the story and forces it to end.** A pregnancy, failing engines, a growing waistline: the clock tells the reader the story will end.

4 b **The feeling that something is about to happen.** It is the threat he feels when a story starts, and the tension he keeps in it.

5 b **A record of which questions each page raises and where each is answered.** It lets you open and close questions deliberately.

6 b **Its pieces are in plain sight; only their meaning is revealed late.** The facts are there; the logic that connects them is what changes.

7 Structure of the whole

1 b **No flashback scenes; imply the history.** One conflict, one setting, no subplots or flashbacks, end at the decision.

2 b **A decision under pressure.** A novel tracks a transformation; a short story tracks one meaningful choice.

3 b **At the final decision, not beyond it.** The aftermath is short; the story ends at the choice.

4 b **The character enters and leaves a place.** Gulliver's Travels is the example.

5 b **Narrative authority.** The beginning is "more than half of the whole", and it is where the reader decides to trust the narrator.

6 b **By knockout.** The novel accumulates points; the story has to knock the reader out.

7 c **BMOC (pages 30/60/90/110).** Russell maps it to the pages of a feature script.

8 Two stories, two logics

1 b **Tells two stories, one visible and one hidden.** The hidden story surfaces gradually and gives the visible one its meaning.

2 b **Looks like a coincidence in the visible story but is essential to the secret one.** What is superfluous in one story is basic in the other.

3 b **Suggesting is not omitting; nothing is in a text that wasn't put there.** She warns beginners that leaving things out isn't subtlety.

4 b **Break reality only once, after preparing signals.** Following Borges: avoid multiplying marvels.

5 b **A turn not fully expected that imposes itself as necessary.** Borges's "necessity and wonder of the solution".

6 b **Verification.** Fiction asks to be believed as fiction; it treats the real world but can't be checked against it.

7 b **A secret logic that reframes every element by the end.** The ending should reframe, not just surprise.

8 c **Inexorable and necessary.** Martínez: fatal, inexorable, necessary, and not merely surprising.

9 c **The queen died and then the king died of grief.** "Of grief" adds causality.

10 b **The hidden law the ordinary object secretly follows.** Façade, virus, collision: the virus is the secret rule.

Two notes were left out because they are about building an audience rather than writing fiction: Master Human Nature For Success *and* Writing: The Modern Leverage Skill. Watch these videos about scene and writing *contains only an image. The digital literature parts of the courses (hypertext, transmedia projects, the history of the author as a figure) are left for further reading; only their advice on AI as a tool is included, in Level 0.*