

Short Story Writing Exercise #1

Inspired by James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"

You may write in ANY genre. The focus is on craft and experimentation with story structure.

Step 1. Imagine a character in your mind who lives in two worlds – either metaphysically like Neo in *The Matrix*, or in his own mind like Walter Mitty, or in time through memories of a past that actually happened.

Step 2. Write a sentence that describes this person, his/her problem, and how s/he deals with it or ignores it. For example, "a middle-aged man with a nagging wife he can't shake, who feels powerless in his own life, so he escapes this humdrum, impotent-ness by imagining himself as the hero of a series of action stories."

Step 3. Graph your character's real and imaginary worlds, dreams etc. Use arrows to show **plot order** and how they all connect. See how in "Mitty" Thurber finds ways to show movement from one reality to another by using ellipsis points ... and by having noise or his wife yell at him to jar him back to reality. Or in *The Matrix* how they have a system of travel via phone and a visual style that is totally different so the reader knows which reality they're in. Find one for your story and put it in/on the arrows. If you don't want to graph, use columns. Point form. Have at **least 3 scenes** for each reality.

Step 4. Freewrite by hand as much as class time allows (15-20 minutes) to start the story. ***Please read below for what you must include / do in this exercise, and what to avoid.***

Step 5. **Type and extend** the draft to a min. of 400 words, alternating worlds at least twice. ***Keep in mind the constraints listed below.***

Your exercise MUST have:

- A device such as a flashback-type system to structure the story AND a cue to signal the change in realities like the ...
- At least 2 settings juxtaposed to create tension or exaggerate an aspect of the character or the conflict
- 3rd person omniscient narrator

A few things to keep in mind as you do this exercise:

DO	DO NOT
Keep the focus on ONE main character.	Write too much. (Keep it tight).
Limit the timeframe of your piece like Thurber – one afternoon etc – to keep the reader grounded in what is the actual reality	Describe every detail. (Tell the reader only what they need to know).
Include everyday symbolism (such as the gloves)	Let plot or 'and then this happens' to drive the story
Experiment with characterization: use a combination of dialogue, other character's opinions (including the narrator's), the character's own thoughts (via the narrator), and/or description of her/his actions, looks, dress, interests, etc.	Wrap the story up in a neat little bow. (Resist the urge to have a happy ending. Trust the reader to do the work.)

These exercises count towards the process grade of your final short story. Missed checkpoints can be made up, but ultimately, you'll lose marks on the final product if these exercises are skipped.