

F L A S H

F I C T I O N

In a Flash

Keeping Students Focused and Writing with Flash Fiction

J. D. M A D E R

Photo illustration by Susan Karwoska and Josh Neufeld.

FOR SIX YEARS, I was lucky enough to teach writing to at-risk, low-income youth in San Francisco. I worked at two Catholic schools, but for a non-profit named **ACHIEVE**. I was a shadow. I designed my own curriculum. I was able to work with students in small groups, not a typical classroom. We spent a lot of time discussing life and literature, and I didn't assign much homework. I chose the materials we read, and I was not tied to any kind of timeline. I was the ghost in the machine. It was amazing.

The students I worked with were all between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, but many of them had rough home lives and their educational foundation was shaky at best. Some of the seniors I worked with read at a second-grade level. They did not like to write. Trying to convince them that they could enjoy reading was almost impossible, and it usually took a few months. Trying to convince them that they could be great writers was hard, too. For about four days.

Students came into my writing workshop having read few, if any, books that were not comprised mainly of pictures. At the time, I was working on a novel,

J.D. Mader is a novelist and writer of short stories. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife and two daughters. He frequently publishes flash fiction pieces on his blog at jdmader.com. Mader has been blessed to work with some very special students who improved his own writing and inspired him, and continue to inspire him, on a daily basis.

though I thought of myself primarily as a short story guy. I love short-form fiction, and part of the reason is that I have seen it work miracles.

My students took to writing quickly. They had a lot to say, and they had pure, natural voices, uninfluenced by other writers. They were not imitating, they were creating. When I was sixteen, I tried to write like Kerouac (and failed). My students had no preconceived notions of what "good writing" should be, and though this lack of familiarity with books was problematic in other contexts, in this forum it worked to their advantage. It was beautiful.

The exercise we did most often, and the catalyst for my expanding love of short fiction, was something we called "circle writing." It is not a new concept but my tweak was to place strict limits on the time my students spent writing. We sat around a circular table. I provided a writing prompt and we wrote for five minutes. That's it—just five minutes. Then we read our "flash fiction" stories aloud. The first week of class, there was a lot of "DAMN! You wrote that just now?!" By the second week, I practically had to rip the pencils from their hands as they poured snapshots onto graphite-smudged scraps of paper.

Flash fiction allowed my students to write something that would be finished when they put down their pencils. There was no revision. No outlines. They wrote fiercely, and then we talked about what they

had created. Most teenagers find writing projects that take weeks to complete very stressful, and this is especially true for struggling writers. The beauty of this exercise is that students left my workshop every day with a few stories that were “done.” Inspiration and closure, all in one class period.

The prompts were simple and intentionally broad, except when they weren’t. Sometimes we wrote about “a happy memory.” Sometimes we wrote about a color. Sometimes we wrote from the perspective of the pencil. Sometimes we wrote from the perspective of an old woman whose wheelchair squeak was driving her slowly insane. Pretty soon, the kids were providing prompts. We wrote flash pieces, raps, poetry; we wrote in the first-, second-, and third-person. We wrote about whatever had inspired us or struck our fancy.

Sometimes the writing was funny, sometimes it was angry, sometimes it was heartbreaking, but it got better. Every class, the writing got better. I started thinking about flash fiction through a new lens as I watched these bits of prose blossom in front of me. There was an energy to it. It was a force, and it kept us “in the moment.” The moment varied, but the energy didn’t. The beauty of flash fiction is that it can have an immediacy and resonance not found in longer works.

Another source of inspiration was short-form fiction from established writers. One of my favorite books to introduce was *Drown* by Junot Díaz. Most of my students had no idea that there were writers out there who had shared experiences similar to theirs, who knew their world. We read Díaz’ stories and deconstructed them. We’d read “How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie)” — a story

that never fails to blow me away, and we’d talk about how the second person worked and why. And then we’d write our own short pieces in the second person. Sometimes teachers would come to ask me how my students knew how to write in the second person—I blamed it on Díaz.

Reading short fiction not only helped improve my students’ writing, it enhanced my students’ reading comprehension as well. The form allowed me to integrate the idea of visualizing the story into my lessons, incorporating what I’d learned when I was fresh out of college and working with learning-challenged children at a private reading remediation clinic. Basically, the idea is that comprehension hinges largely on the student’s ability to accurately match what they “see” with what the text actually says. Flash fiction pieces are perfect for this. Instead of sending students home with a long story to read and then discuss the next day when they might not remember the protagonist’s name, we could cover several flash pieces and really break them down all during one class period.

Flash fiction writing exercises are a great fit for the classroom, especially the high school classroom, where they foster brief bursts of focus that are tailor-made for the teenage brain. My students balked at writing a ten-thousand-word story, but they leapt at the chance to write a five-hundred-word story. They enjoyed the challenge of writing a two-hundred-word story. With a flash piece, their attention did not have time to wander. These exercises can also be used successfully with a wide range of students, from those who have trouble focusing and/or struggle with reading and writing, to those who are already gifted writers.

Most teenagers find writing projects that take weeks to complete very stressful, and this is especially true for struggling writers. The beauty of this exercise is that students left my workshop every day with a few stories that were “done.” Inspiration and closure, all in one class period.

It has become part of our culture to process things in small, bite-sized pieces. This is not to say that students shouldn't read novels. I am merely suggesting that sometimes handing students a sheet of paper to read for homework gets better results than handing them *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Exposing students to short fiction accomplished something I'm not sure I would believe had I not witnessed it for six years. Flash fiction took students who were petrified of the written word and put the power back into their hands. It gave them a vent for their hopes, fears, and dreams. It gave them immediate access to the stories fluttering inside their minds. It helped them to become solid writers, and it turned them into engaged readers along the way. There were challenges, certainly, but we met them head on and adapted the process as necessary to ensure that every student succeeded. I was lucky—I witnessed it firsthand, but I have folders full of wrinkled, chicken-scratch stories to prove it. 📧

Exposing students to short fiction accomplished something I'm not sure I would believe had I not witnessed it for six years. Flash fiction took students who were petrified of the written word and put the power back into their hands.