

Instant Short Story Teacher's Guide

by Mark Binder

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If you have any questions, comments or suggestions

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The Instant Short Story —

How do people (students and others) write?

Frequently they suffer and struggle.

This workshop will give your students access to their instant imagination in a way they never thought was possible.

By the end of the session, they will have written (or at least started) a first draft of a short story.

Biography

Mark Binder is a writer and a storyteller. He is the author of “The Brothers Schlemiel,” “The Everything Bedtime Story Book,” and more than 100 other published stories.

Workshop goals: By the end of the session, every one in the room will have learned the basic principles of the Instant Short Story and finished (or at least gotten a good start on) a new short story.

Workshop Format:

The first part of the workshop will be spent explaining the process to the students and answering questions.

The next part will be spent writing. Participants who get stuck will be encouraged to raise their hands and ask for help.

The final minutes will be spent reading the works students have written.

Important Note: This workshop **must** be held in a room with desks -- they don't need to be fixed, but it is a **writing** workshop. No empty spaces, please! All students will need paper and pens or pencils. Computers (laptops preferred) can work.

More Detailed Description

Suffering

Too often writers (students) suffer and struggle with the first draft of their work. They stare at an empty page (or screen) and their mind becomes as blank as the paper. All the brilliant ideas, all the glimmers of inspiration fly out the window. Or else they try to get it exactly and perfectly write the first time -- every sentence, every word, every letter must be dead-on.

An Alternative

The writer sits down with a pen, pencil, or keyboard and begins... Words flow effortlessly. Images are born and fulfilled. The story grows, it breathes, it comes to fruition, and it ends brilliantly.

Impossible!

Not at all.

For more than 20 years, Mark Binder has been writing using this method, and he's written, sold, and told hundreds of stories. Every week since January of 2000, he has taken his laptop to a coffee shop, and an hour or two later, the first draft of the next installment of his serialized novel *The Brothers Schlemiel* is done. Does it require revision? Absolutely. But is it an excellent beginning? Most definitely.

How does it work?

You can start with an idea, an opening sentence, or nothing at all.

As you go, don't censor yourself. Just get it all down. In the old days, they called this part "automatic writing."

Your story will putter along, and you'll begin introducing elements — bears, chairs, girls with golden hair and so on. Or they may be more complex — lovers, mysterious strangers, odd habits with cigarettes....

The Instant Short Story works on the basis of *reincorporation* -- every element you include in your story is reincorporated, rewoven, into the fabric of the story. Your story develops with new elements, it grows as these are reincorporated, and it finishes when everything has been accounted for.

Can you give an example?

Take a quick look at Goldilocks and the three bears. The story is a perfect example of adding elements and then reincorporating them. You have the title, then the bears making porridge and leaving. Reincorporate Goldilocks (from the title) and the porridge. Then we introduce the chairs and the beds.

Reincorporate the bears, the porridge, the chairs, the beds and Goldilocks!
Done.

It sounds too simple

Yes, it does.

The three most difficult aspects to creating stories with this method are

- 1) Allowing the mind to create the initial and ongoing elements without censorship.
As people write, most people's brains are short-circuited by a number of thoughts including, "That's dumb... I can't make a story about a giant peach... That's weird... I can't write a story about a wizard father and daughter trapped on an island... I already did that... I can't write another story about a kid growing up..." and so on. Self-censorship often stops stories from having the interesting and intriguing elements that keep the piece alive. The best practice is to write everything down -- silly, stupid, great or awful, and sort it out later.
- 2) Reincorporating the events
The same conversations come up as you reincorporate -- I can't do that, no, that's too obvious, I don't want to. Do it anyway.
- 3) Reincorporate everything and then stop. Some stories go beyond this point and get boring.

Obviously, developing stories using this method does take practice. Not every story is a gem, but over time (and with 20 years experience, I can say that you do get better) you'll be able to hit your mark. (Heh.)

Some other tips:

- 1) If the story is boring, throw it out and start over
- 2) If you're having trouble reincorporating elements -- then add new ones. The story may be too short.
- 3) Don't hurry.
- 4) Resist the impulse to rewrite during the first draft. That's why it's the first draft. Other drafts will improve the story. The goal is to get a first draft done. Then you can evaluate and correct.
- 5) If you do come up with a brilliant idea write it down and allow the story to go that way even if it's not in alignment with what's come before. These are **your** stories. Don't let the rules get in the way.
- 6) Reading stories aloud is a good way to learn what works and what doesn't -- what's interesting and what's boring.

Pre-and Post-Workshop Questions and exercises for Students

These can be asked either before or after the workshop -- use them to help develop the enthusiasm the workshop creates. Invent more and invent your own!

- What would you like to write about? What kinds of books do you enjoy?
- Who are your favorite authors? Why?
- Find 10 words you enjoy the sound of and look them up in the dictionary?
- Make up 12 silly names for characters. Describe these characters.
- What is the worst place (setting) you can imagine? What does it look like? Smell like? Sound like?
- Describe the way an ugly sound feels in your stomach...
- List 10 things that can make an unhappy girl (or boy) smile.
- Write and then read aloud one paragraph (at least) a day.
- Tip on writing a long story or novel: write one page a day. At the end of 365 days -- a year -- you'll have 365 pages!

History

This method is based on the work of Keith Johnstone, the author of *Impro - Improvisation and the Theater*. Johnstone was the head of the Royal Court (London) playwrighting program, and is the inventor of TheatreSports, a full-contact improvisational theater form.

In 1983, Mark Binder was in London at the Nottinghill Gate Theater, where he met a Texan named, Tex. (Honest.) Tex recommended *Impro*, a book by Keith Johnstone, a playwright and founder of one of the first improvisational groups. It's an excellent book. The first chapter alone is worth the price of admission.

Bibliography

Johnstone, Keith, *Impro for Storytellers*, Faber and Faber, 1999.

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Note: *Impro* contains some of the best chapters on creative teaching I've ever seen.

Binder, Mark, *The Everything Bedtime Story Book*, Adams Media Corporation, 1999

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