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THE FIVE MODES

OME YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS WHAT YOU WOULD CALL A beginning writer, I was reading *Rabbit, Run* by John Updike for the second or third time, solely for pleasure, when I had one of those small moments of epiphany. It was like looking behind the curtains at the theater, seeing how the illusion of reality is produced. Everything suddenly seemed clear, just from the way the words *looked* on Updike's typeset page. Here were long strings of dialogue. Next came a thick block of prose consisting of description of a neighborhood. Next came a few paragraphs of action, of Rabbit driving his car. One could see, clearly, the organization, the method, the tools. The mysteries of the creative process seemed, all at once, less mystifying. This is what fiction is made of: a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

What I had seen so clearly on the page of *Rabbit, Run* were examples of the five narrative modes: dialogue, state of mind, action, description, and exposition. These are a writer's tools, and it seems to me that in teaching creative writing to beginners the first order of business should be to get students to recognize and practice these modes, just like a basketball player should practice the fundamentals of that game: dribbling, passing, shooting, and so on.

I sometimes challenge my students to find a snippet of writing that does not fall within one of the narrative modes. They try, try, try. What about *this,* they'll ask, but no—it's no exception. There are no exceptions. You have only those five modes of expression, and often you can be a great writer without even using all five. Cormac McCarthy, for instance, rarely if ever drops into state of mind. Joy Williams, in her early books, didn't much fancy traditional dialogue.

Of the five narrative modes, four—dialogue, state of mind, action, description—relate to *showing* (dramatizing, in scene), while the fifth mode, exposition, relates to *telling* (summary, not in scene), and this ratio seems about right to me. About 80 percent of a piece of fiction should be scene-based. "Dramatization," Frank Conroy used to teach in his workshops, "is a writer's strongest posture."

Now, of course there are exceptions. Many great works of literature are largely expositional, such as Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past.* Some novels, like *Vox* by Nicholson Baker and *JR* by William Gaddis, are made up *entirely* of dialogue. But, as any good coach would tell his or her players, work on the fundamentals first, and once you get that down, the fancy stuff can follow.

So the exercises I concoct for students of creative writing are generally quite simple, focusing on the five modes. Practicing the five modes individually may not be very sexy, but it gets the point across. These are your tools. Put them together, one block of prose at a time.

THE EXERCISES

Dialogue

Write a couple of pages composed entirely of dialogue between two characters. The conversation should involve a conflict of some sort—that is, an argument or a discussion of a dilemma.

State of Mind

Write a couple of pages composed entirely of a character's thoughts, elucidating the mental state of a character before he or she does something pivotal, like getting married, or shooting a penalty kick, or robbing a convenience store, or stepping off a bridge, or getting shot in the head.

Action

Write an action scene. Your character or characters should be in physical motion of some sort (walking, running, driving, etc.) and engaged in some sort of conflict, such as in flight from an adversary, or in a sporting competition, or at a casino, or in physical combat, or dancing.

Description

Write a description of a person you know very well: father, mother, sister, brother, spouse, or friend. Try to make the reader see him or her not through generic physical descriptions (à la a police sketch, "medium height, brown eyes") but rather through the idiosyncratic details that make up a person—say, his or her manner of standing or walking.

Next, write a paragraph description of what a certain character packs in his or her bag before going someplace for some purpose, without telling us where he or she is going. From what the character packs in his or her bag, the reader should have a pretty good idea of (1) where the character is going, (2) what he or she will do there, and (3) what sort of person he or she is.

Then write a description of a structure—a house, restaurant, office, barn, or toolshed—from the point of view of (1) a character

who has never been inside this place and (2) a different character very well acquainted with the same place.

Exposition

Write a couple of pages of exposition about the place where you grew up, from your point of view, including your impressions of the place. This can be a suburban neighborhood, a town, or a city block, for instance.

Then write a couple of pages of exposition about some job you have had and the particular process involved in that job—the tasks and responsibilities of a summer camp counselor, chef, insurance investigator, basketball coach, taxi driver, or ski instructor, for example. "Process," as Frank Conroy used to say, "is always interesting."