



# **Introduction to fiction writing**

Course workbook

This workbook contains all the exercises and handouts from the Introduction to Writing Fiction online course. They are collected here for your reference, but also available directly within the course at the relevant points.

If you prefer writing by hand, you can print out the workbook and complete the exercises directly in the spaces provided.

Look to the course videos and topics for guidance as to when and how you should complete each exercise.

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# Class 1: Creating characters

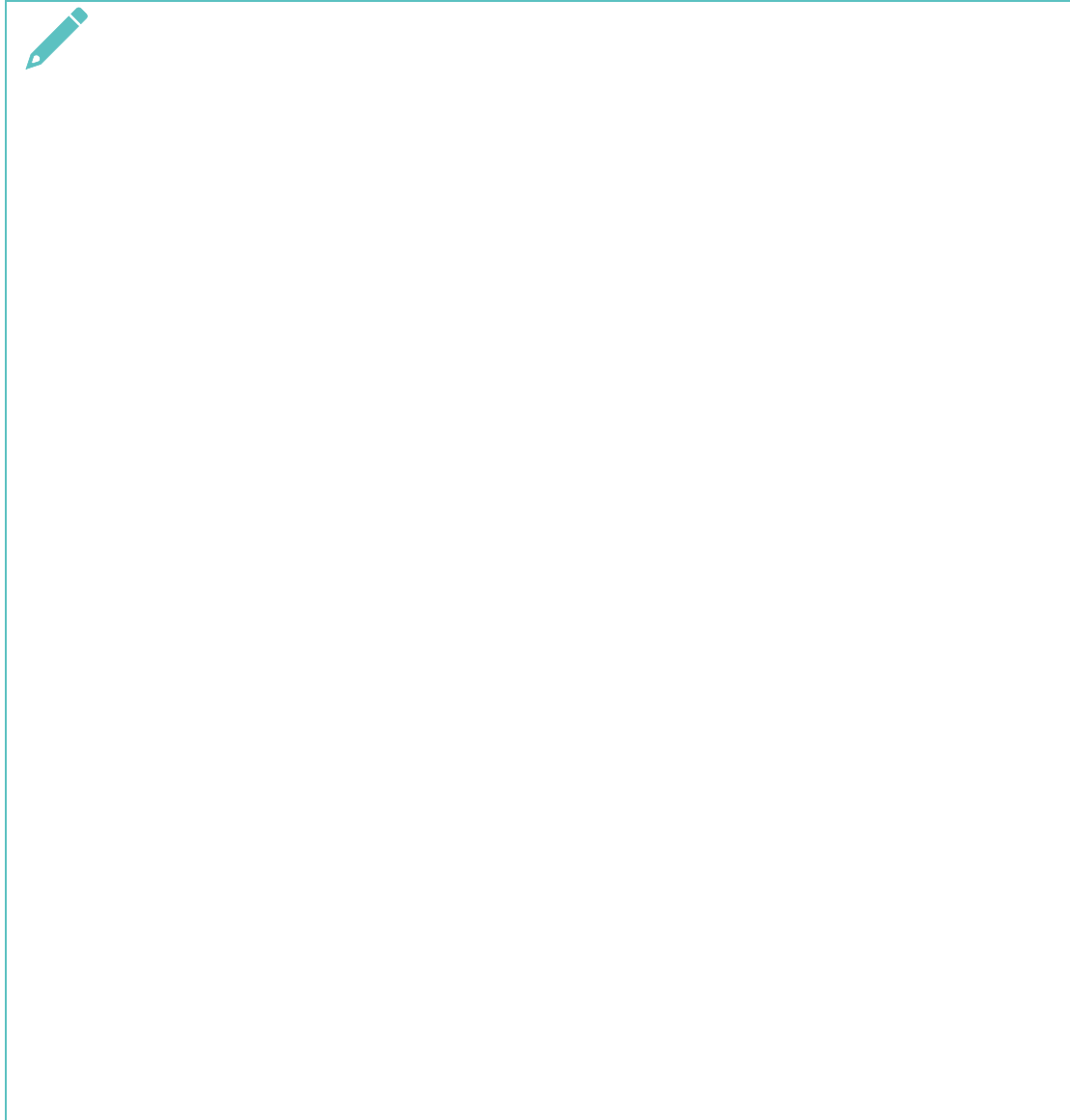
## Contents

- Creating a connection between your character and your reader
- Finding inspiration for characters
- Creating characters
- Goals and motivations
- What drives your character
- Describing characters



### Exercise 1: Creating a character

Choose three random items from the list. Imagine that these items were in your character's pocket. Write about this person: who are they, where have they come from, why do they have these things in their pocket?



## **Exercise 2: Character questionnaire**

Take twenty minutes to work through the character questionnaire below. If you already have a character you know fairly well, focus on any questions you haven't thought about before. If you are creating a new character, aim to complete the whole questionnaire, with one minute per question.

1. What is the character's name?  
(first, middle, and surname, plus any nicknames)

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2. What is the character's date of birth, and current age?

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3. What is the character's gender identity?

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4. What does the character look like?  
(e.g. height, weight, build, hair colour and style, skin and eye colour, birthmarks or other distinguishing features)

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5. What kind of clothes does the character wear?

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6. Where is the character from? Where else has the character lived, and where do they live now?

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7. List the character's family members.  
(parents, siblings, partner, children, pets)

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8. What kind of relationships does the character have with their family members?

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9. Who is the character's best friend and why?

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10. What kind of education has the character had?

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11. What jobs has the character had, and what is their current occupation?  
Does the character enjoy it?

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12. What are the character's hobbies?

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13. What is the character's best personality trait / greatest strength?

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14. What is the character's worst personality trait / worst fault?

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15. What is the character's greatest ambition in life?

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16. What is the character's greatest fear?

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17. What is the character's greatest regret?

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18. What is the character proud of?

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19. What is the character ashamed of?

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20. What is the character's biggest secret?

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### Exercise 3: Goals and motivations

Write down your main character's goal and motivation. Think about any other key characters' goals and motivations you could write down, too.

Character	Goal	Motivation



#### Exercise 4: Driving forces

Think about what drives your character, and write down what it is that they most desire in life. Can you identify other key characters' driving forces, too?

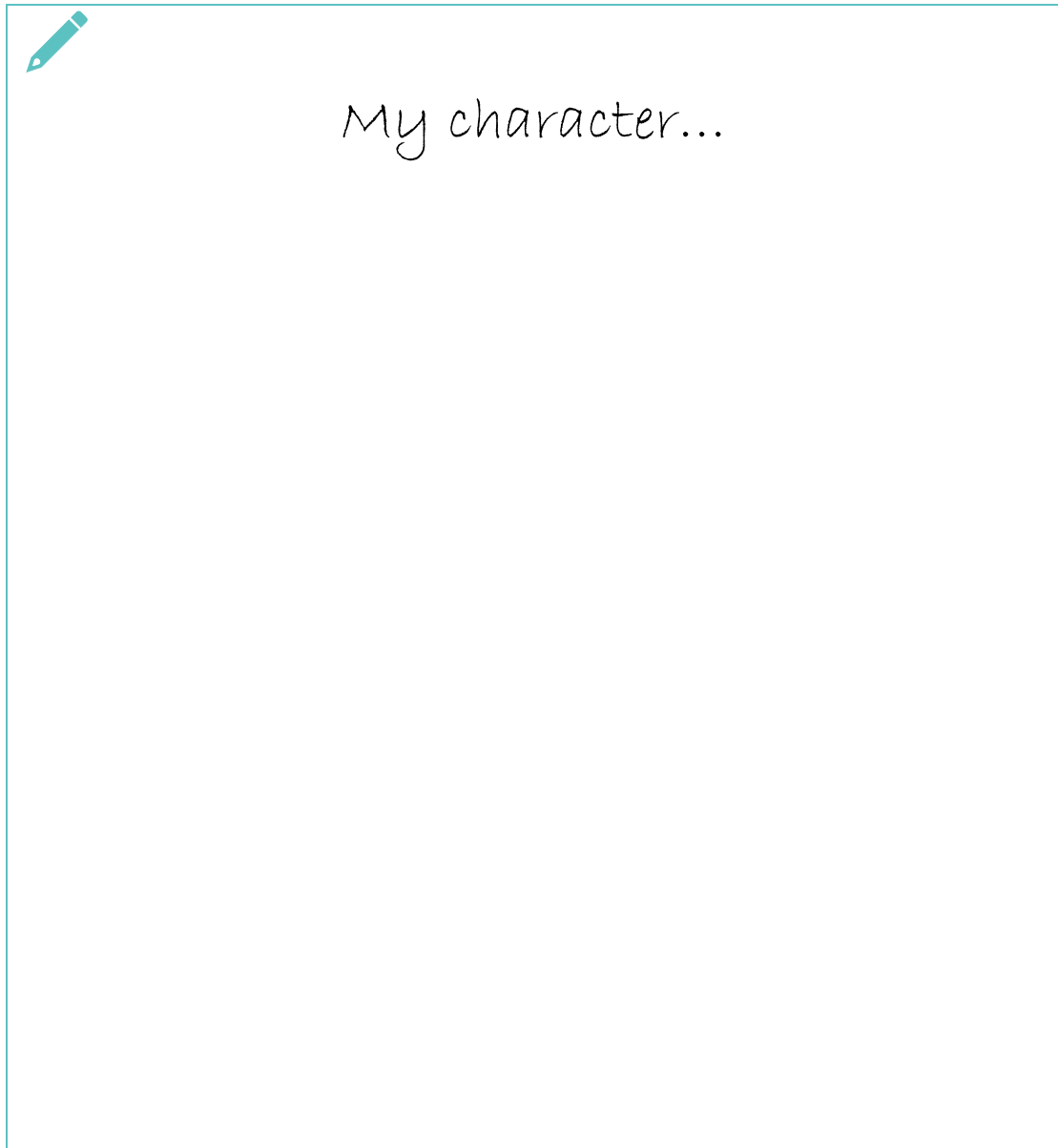
Desire to...	Character(s)
Be powerful	
Be successful	
Be important	
Be in control	
Be comfortable	
Be perfect	
Be loved	



### Exercise 5: Describing your character

Write a paragraph to describe your character, building in:

1. Visual description
2. Action
3. Interaction
4. Thoughts



My character...



# Class 2: Plot structures

## Contents

- What is a plot?
- Goals and motivations
- Nine plot types
- The three-act plot
- Snowflake method
- Structuring your story
- Character arc



## Exercise 1: Goals and motivations

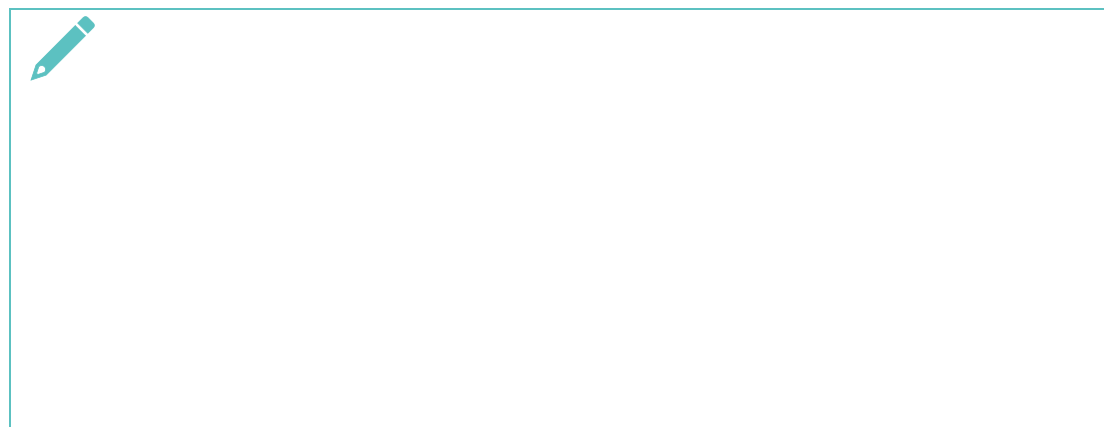
Refer back to the 'goals and motivations' worksheet from class 1, and make sure you're clear on the goals and motivations of your key characters.



## Exercise 2: Nine plot types

Have a think about which plot type you are writing / would like to write. How is your story going to end?

Plot type	Summary	Examples
Tragedy	Character appears to have everything they could want, then loses it all	
Comedy	Character faces problems, resolves them and has a happy ending	
Quest	Character goes on a journey to accomplish an important goal	
Defeating the enemy	Character defeats an evil force that threatens what's important to them	
Coming of age	Character goes through experiences that help them grow as a person	
Rags to riches	Character has a stroke of good luck and has to come to terms with their fortune	
Stranger comes to town	The arrival of an outsider disrupts a community and transforms it for the better	
Mystery	Character attempts to find out the truth about an unexplained event	
Modern realism	Character goes about their life – novel examines real life	



### Exercise 3: The three-act plot

Sketch out the beginning, middle and end of your story.

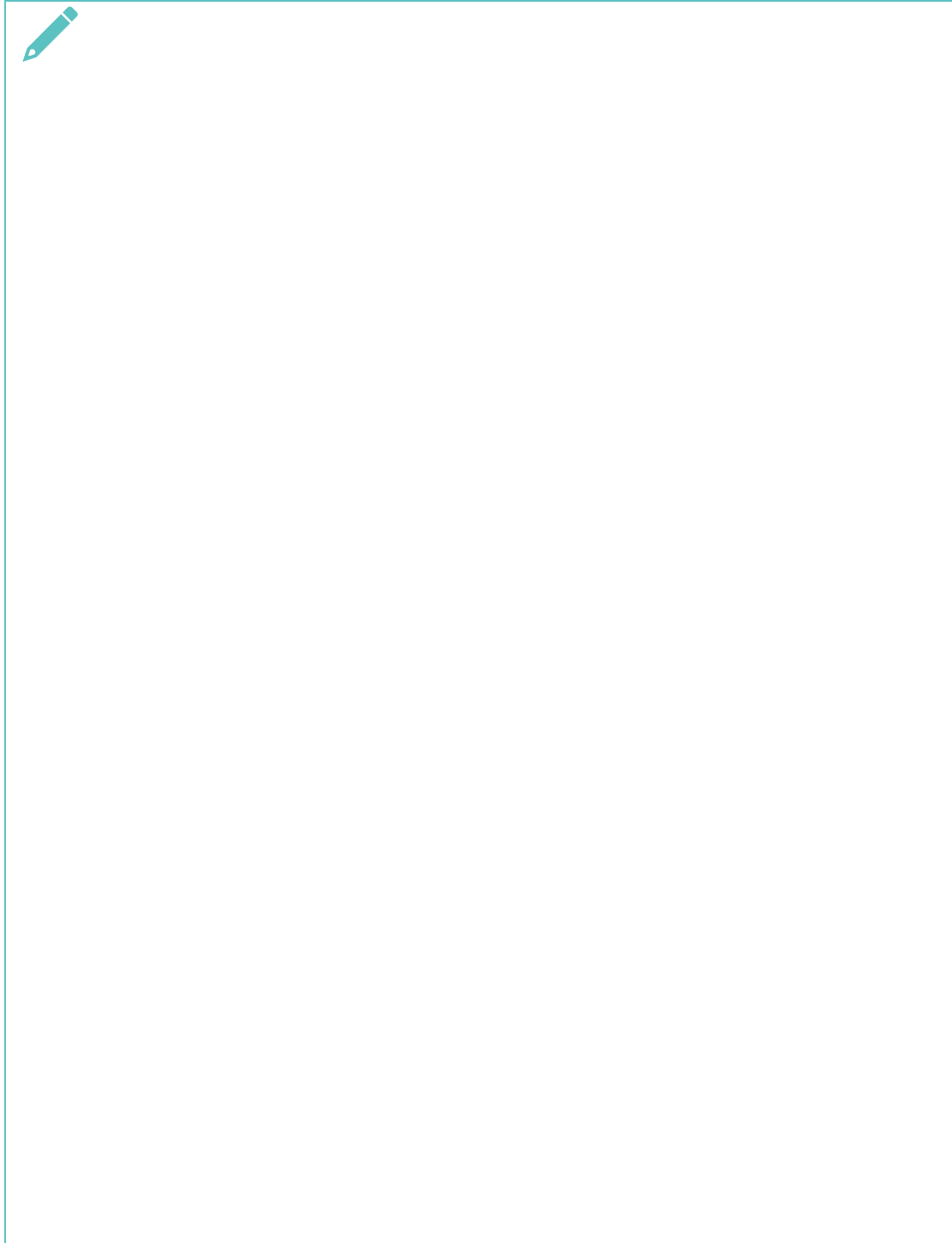
Act 1	Beginning	Complication/problem
Act 2	Middle	Attempts to resolve
Act 3	End	Resolution: Success/failure

What happens to your character?	
Beginning	
Middle	
End	



#### Exercise 4: The snowflake method

Try out the snowflake method to start turning your plot into an outline.

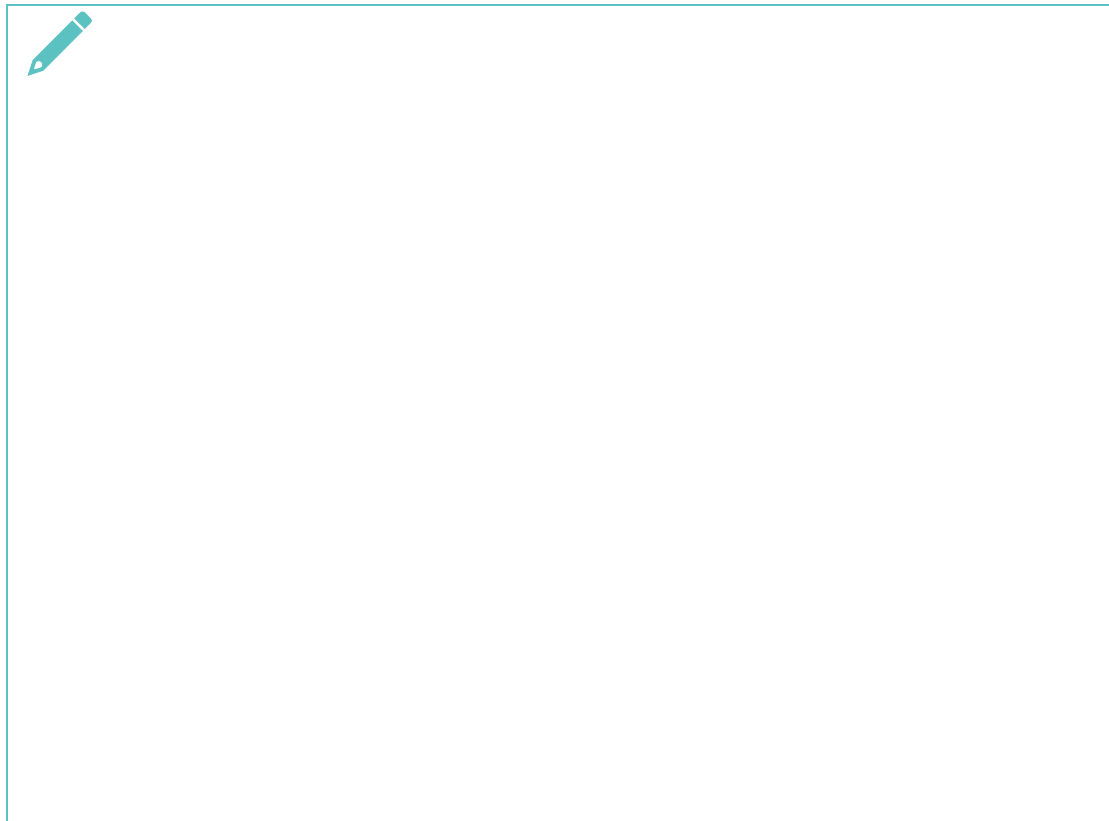


A large empty rectangular box with a teal border, intended for writing. A teal pencil icon is in the top-left corner.



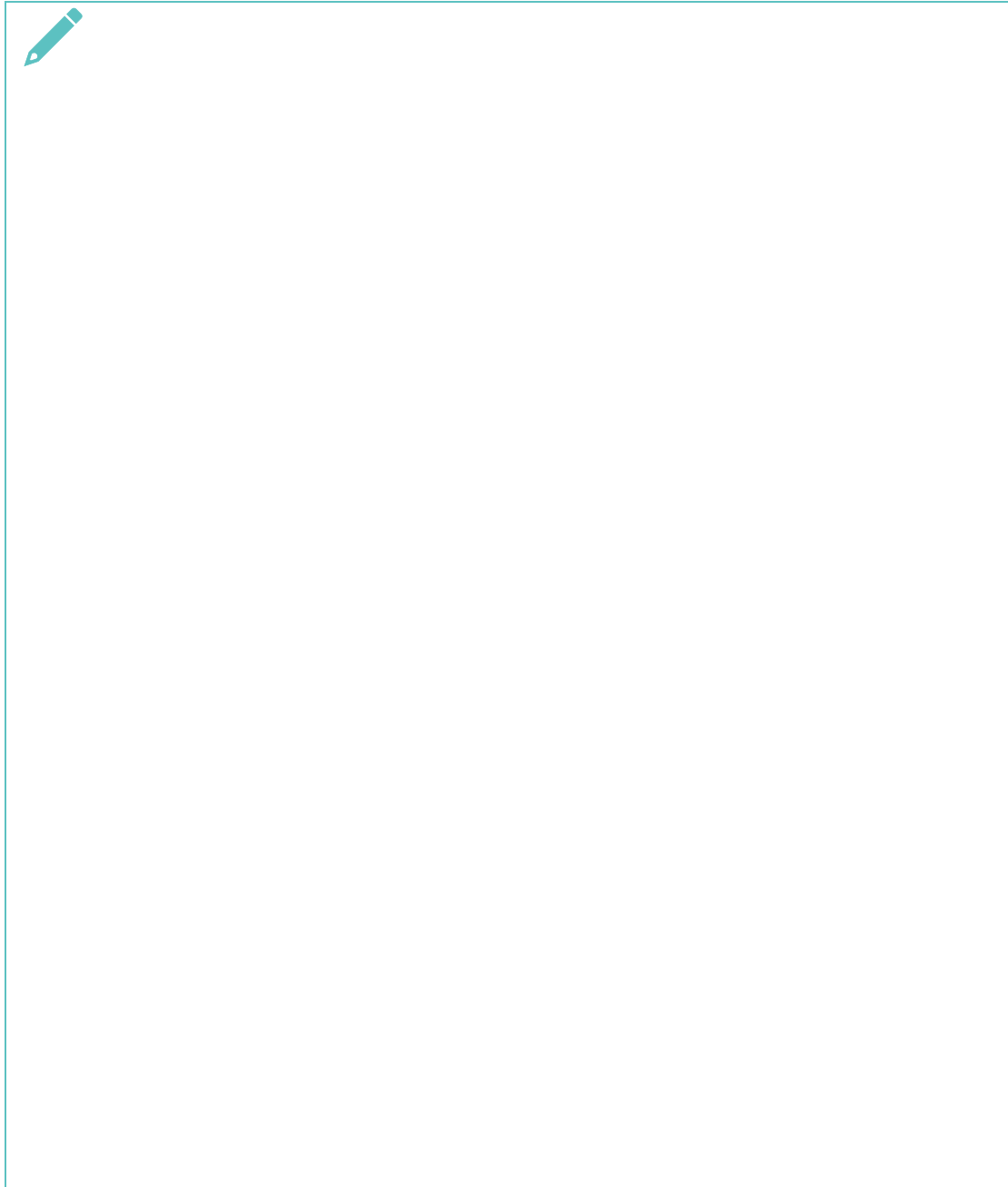
### Exercise 5: Character arc

Sketch out your main character's character arc. What kind of person are they at the start of the story, and what kind of person have they become by the end? Which events are going to change your character? For each event, write down: what happens, how your character reacts, and how they change as a result.





Before you start the next class, turn your snowflake diagram into a broad outline.



# Class 3: Pacing and tension

## Contents

- Pacing a plot
- The role of chapters in pacing
- Writing slow and fast scenes
- Conflicts
- Foreshadowing
- Injecting tension into scenes



## Exercise 1: Pacing your plot

Take a look at your broad outline and note which parts of the story are going to take up the most pages and which parts will be over more quickly.



## Exercise 2: Chapters in pacing

Working on your outline from the last class, identify where some of your chapter breaks could go, to help you increase or decrease the pace.



### Exercise 3: Pacing a scene

Read the following extracts, and make notes on whether the scenes are slow-paced or fast-paced, and what makes them move slowly or fast.

*We hear Serena coming, down the stairs, along the hall, the muffled tap of her cane on the rug, thud of the good foot. She hobbles through the doorway, glances at us, counting but not seeing. She nods, at Nick, but says nothing. She's in one of her best dresses, sky-blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flowers and fretwork. Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers.*

*(Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale)*

*I open my eyes and I don't know where I am. Cigarette smell. Venetian blind shadow across cracked yellow wall. I turn my head and beside me, sleeping, in his bed, is Gomez. Suddenly I remember, and I panic.*

*Henry. Henry will kill me. Charisse will hate me. I sit up. Gomez's bedroom is a wreck of overfilled ashtrays, clothes, law textbooks, newspapers, dirty dishes. My clothes lie in a small, accusing pile on the floor beside me.*

*(Audrey Niffenegger: The Time Traveler's Wife)*

*Frau Elena says, "What did he want?"*

*"He only wanted me to fix a radio."*

*"Nothing more?"*

*"No."*

*"Did they have questions? About you? Or the children?"*

*"No, Frau Elena."*

*Frau Elena lets out a huge breath, as if she has not exhaled these past two hours. "Dieu merci." She rubs her temples with both hands. "You can go to bed now, Jutta," she says.*

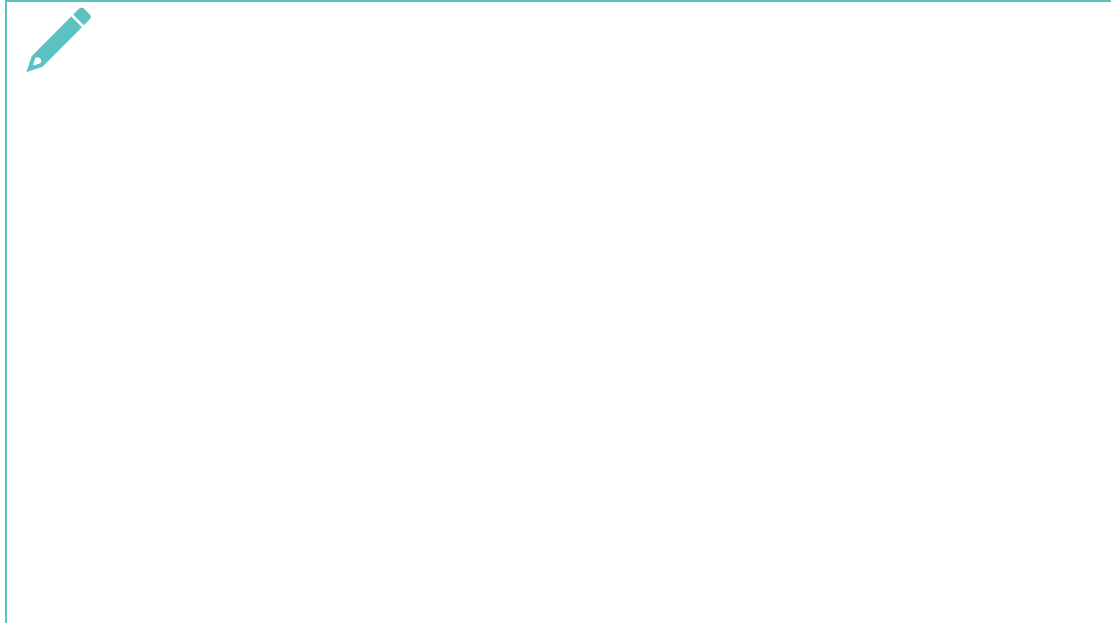
*(Anthony Doerr: All The Light We Cannot See)*

Slow pace	Fast pace



#### Exercise 4: Varying the pace

Write your character into a scene where you change the pace: either start slowly and speed up the pace, or start with a fast pace and then slow it down.



<b>Conflict type</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Character against antagonist	
Character against forces of nature	
Character against technology	
Character against society	
Character against own weakness	
Character against the intangible	




### Exercise 5: Conflicts

Choose a main conflict for your story. Are there any other conflicts you want to add?

\_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

### Exercise 6: Foreshadowing

Choose 2-3 significant events that take place in your story. How and where could you foreshadow each of these events?



\_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

## Examples

*She stands near her and breathes in. She can catch her scent – inky, musky, with a hint of hair wax, soap, rain and that perfume. Sinead trails her index finger along the shelf, draws down a book, flicks over the title page and reads the front page. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other.*

*Lily circles her, stands on the other side of the shelf, peering through the books. Sinead's eyes flick from side to side on the page Lily sees her swallow, cough, and swallow again. She rubs the heel of her palm against her head. Lily comes round to Sinead's side of the shelf, picks up a book, puts it down. Touches the cover of another. 'Sinead?' she says.*

*(Maggie O'Farrell: My Lover's Lover)*

*Marcus was never able to work out why Suzie had insisted on coming back to the flat with him. He'd been out with her before, and she'd just dropped him off outside, waited until he'd let himself in and then driven off. But that day she parked the car, lifted Megan out in her car seat, and came in with him. She was never able to explain why she had done it.*

*Will wasn't invited, but he followed them in, and Marcus didn't tell him not to. Everything about that two minutes was mysteriously memorable, even at the time, somehow: climbing the stairs, the cooking smells that got trapped in the hall, the way he noticed the pattern on the carpet for the first time ever. Afterwards he thought he could recall being nervous, too, but he must have made that up, because there wasn't anything to be nervous about. Then he put the key in the door and opened it, and a new part of his life began, bang, without any warning at all.*

*(Nick Hornby: About a Boy)*

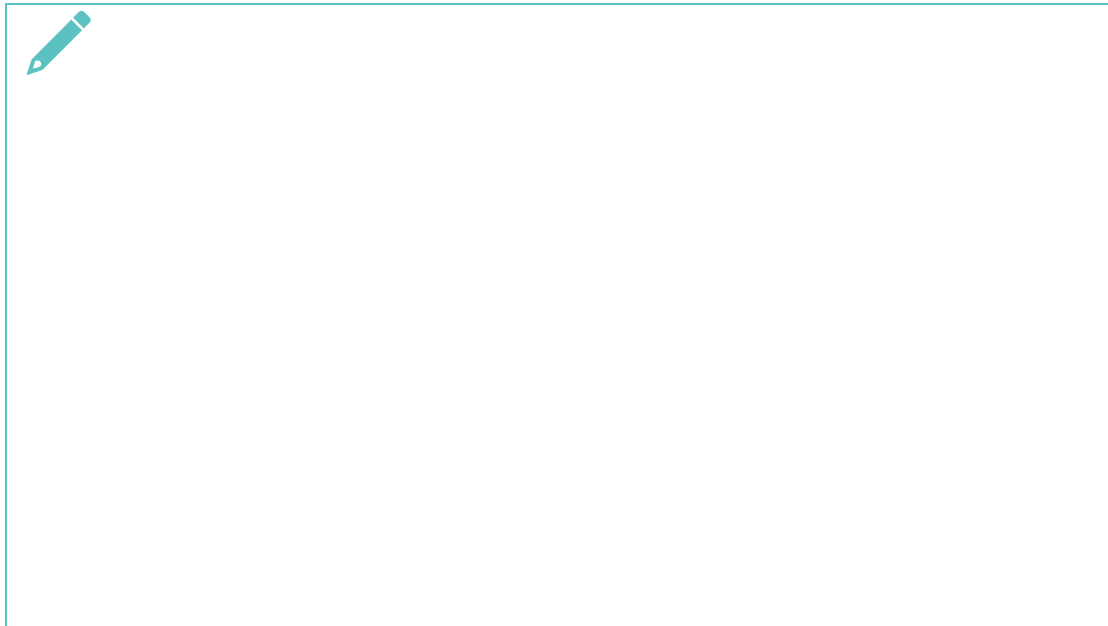
### Exercise 7: Increasing the tension in a scene

Either: re-write the scene below to increase the tension.

Or: write your own character into a tense situation.

*Francine woke to a message on the communications screen indicating that the Captain of the spaceship required her presence. She got dressed and made her way along the corridor to the flight deck. At the door, she was joined by two others who had also been mysteriously summoned by the Captain. The three of them entered the room, and the Captain greeted them with a smile.*

*"You three have been chosen for a special mission," he said.*





# Class 4: Points of view and narration

## Contents

- Perspective
- Point of view
- Tense
- Character thoughts in narrative
- Narrator voice
- Unreliable narrators



## Exercise 1: Questions about point of view

1. Whose story are you writing?
2. Who is going to tell the story?
3. How much of the story do they really know?



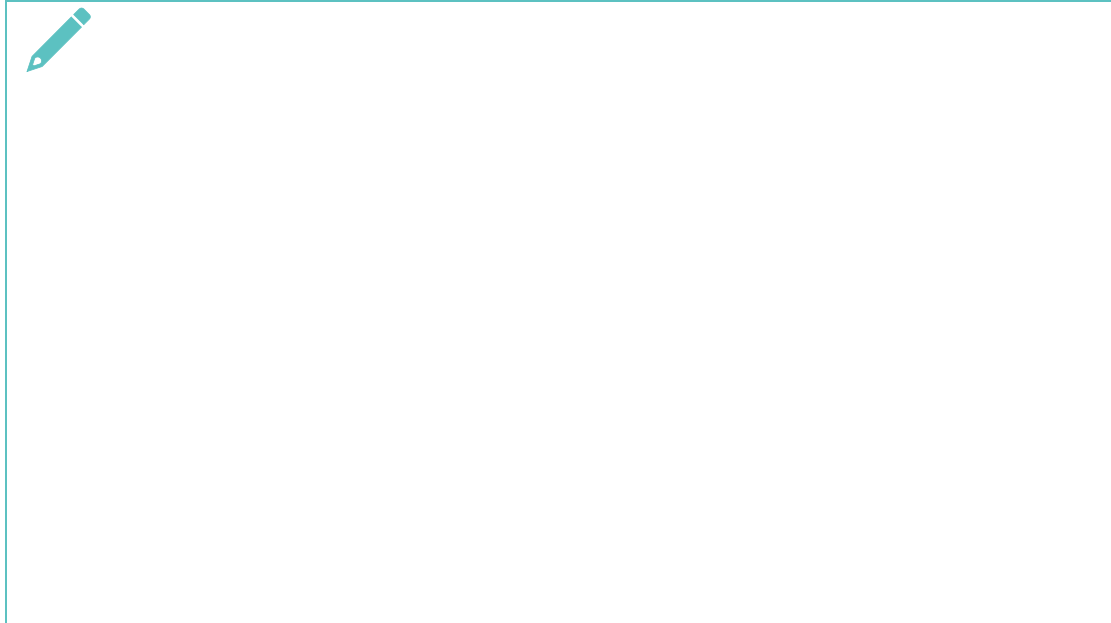
- 1.
- 2.
- 3.





### Exercise 3: Tense

Re-write one of the paragraphs from the previous exercise, changing the tense. How does the writing change?



## Examples

### Direct discourse

*'You never told me what your favourite photograph was.'*  
*It would be this, I thought. Jamie in autumn.*  
*But instead I said, 'We went to Taylors Mistake last year after a storm,*  
*and the waves were huge. But the water was so clear, like liquid glass.'*

*(Eileen Merriman: Catch Me When You Fall)*

*She threw down her phone and rolled her eyes, praying to God that Cat wouldn't say anything else embarrassing. Who am I kidding? she thought, sinking back down on the couch. It's Cat. Of course she will.*

*(Ali Berg & Michelle Kalus: The Book Ninja)*

### Indirect discourse

*We certainly don't look the way we used to, and I don't know if Fern understands that children grow up, that humans grow old, same as chimps. I can find no studies that suggest what a chimp might remember over a period of twenty-two years.*

*Still, I believe Fern knows who we are. The evidence is compelling, if not conclusive.*

*(Karen Joy Fowler: We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves)*

*He tried to stay tucked in behind them, but he lost them the moment they got out on to the main road. He would have liked nothing better than to pretend he had a flashing blue light on the top of the car, drive on the wrong side of the road and crash through as many red lights as he wanted, but he doubted whether either of the mothers ahead of him would thank him for it.*

*(Nick Hornby: About A Boy)*

## Free indirect discourse

*I dropped the compact into my pocket-book and stared out of the train window. Like a colossal junkyard, the swamps and back lots of Connecticut flashed past, one broken-down fragment bearing no relation to another.*

*(Sylvia Plath: The Bell Jar)*


*Aidan presses his forehead to the cold, slick glass, and peers into the distance at the four pale columns of Battersea Power Station rising above the low city skyline. It's weird, unaccountable and bizarre.*

*(Maggie O'Farrell: My Lover's Lover)*



## Exercise 4: Character thoughts

Try out the different techniques for showing character thoughts.



### Exercise 5: Narrator voices

What do you think these characters' personalities are like? What gives you that impression?

Martin	Can I explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block? Of course I can explain why I wanted to jump off the top of a tower-block. I'm not a bloody idiot. I can explain it because it wasn't inexplicable: it was a logical decision, the product of proper thought. It wasn't even a very serious thought, either. I don't mean it was whimsical – I just meant that it wasn't terribly complicated, or agonized.
Maureen	Frank is Matty's father. It's funny to think that might not be immediately obvious to someone, because it's so obvious to me. I only ever had intercourse with one man, and I only had intercourse with that man once, and the one time in my entire life I had intercourse produced Matty. What are the chances, eh?
Jess	You won't believe this – I don't think I do now – but in my head, what happened to Jen had fuck all to do with New Year's Eve. I could tell, from talking to the others and reading the papers, that no one else saw it that way, though. They were like, Ooooh, I get it: your sister disappeared, so you want to jump off a building. But it isn't like that.
JJ	I want to tell you about my old band – I guess because I'd started to think about these guys as my new one. There were four of us, and we were called Big Yellow. We started out being called Big Pink, as a tribute to the Band album, but then everyone thought we were a gay band, so we changed colors. Me and Eddie started the band in high school, and we wrote together, and we were like brothers, right up until the day that we weren't like that any more.

(Nick Hornby: A Long Way Down)





### Exercise 6: Your character's voice

Make notes about your character's personality. How could you reflect these traits in the way the character talks? Write a short, first-person paragraph, using your character's voice.



# Class 5: Dialogue

## Contents

- Dialogue in fiction
- How to set out dialogue
- Using dialogue to advance plot
- Using dialogue to reveal backstory
- Conflict and tension in dialogue
- Beats: speech tags and stage directions
- Characterisation through dialogue



## Examples

### Telling the story

*"I love it," she hears herself say.*

*"Then you'll move in?" he says, a smile breaking across his features.*

*"You'll come and live here?"*

*"Yes," she says, nodding, more for herself than for him, "I will."*

*(Maggie O'Farrell: My Lover's Lover)*

### Revealing backstory

*"Tell me, are you the only one? Have you ever known anyone else like you?  
With this ... condition?"*

*"Yes!" I said. "There was a man I met once, during Captain Cook's  
second voyage. A man from the Pacific Islands. His name was Omai. He  
became the rarest of things – a friend to me. And also ... my daughter  
Marion. I have not seen her since she was a girl. Her mother told me that she  
had inherited my condition. That she stopped ageing normally around  
eleven years of age."*

*(Matt Haig: How to Stop Time)*

### Creating tension

*"Do you really want to live the rest of your life like this?"*

*"No, of course not. Are you suggesting an alternative?"*

*"Yes, I suppose I am."*

*"Would you care to tell me what it is?"*

*"You know what it is."*

*"Of course I do. But I want you to be the first one to mention it."*

*And by this stage I really didn't care.*

*"Do you want a divorce?"*

*"I want it on record that it wasn't me who said it."*

*"Fine."*

*(Nick Hornby: How to be Good)*

### Characterising

*"I said, what d'you think of this bloke Samad wants up? It's his grandfather."*

*"Great-grandfather," corrected Samad.*

*"You kyan see me playing dominoes? You tryin' to deprive an ol' man  
of his pleasure? What picture?" Denzel grudgingly turned to look at it. "Dat?  
Hmph! I don' like it. He look like one of Satan's crew!"*

*"He a relative of you?" squeaked Clarence to Samad in his woman's voice. "Dat explain much, my friend, much! He got some face like a donkey's pum-pum."*

*Denzel and Clarence exploded into their dirty laughter. "Nuff to put my belly off its digesting, true sur!"*

*"There you are!" exclaimed Mickey, victorious, turning back to Samad. "Puts the clientele off their food – that's what I said right off."*

*"Assure me you are not going to listen to those two."*

*(Zadie Smith: White Teeth)*

*"He was probably just, you know. A drama queen. A male drama queen. A drama king," said Jess. "He looked the sort."*

*"That's very shrewd, Jess," I said. "In the brief glimpse we got of him before he plunged to his death, he didn't strike me as someone with serious problems. Nothing on your scale, anyway."*

*"It'll be in the local paper," said Maureen. "They usually are. I used to read the reports. Especially when it was coming up to New Year's Eve. I used to compare myself with them."*

*"And? How did you get on?"*

*"Oh," said Maureen. "I did OK. Some of them I couldn't understand."*

*"What sort of things?"*

*"Money."*

*"I owe loads of people money," said Jess proudly.*

*(Nick Hornby: A Long Way Down)*

## How to set out dialogue

*“Remember to use quotation marks at the start and end of each line of dialogue,” she said.*

*“End your sentence with a comma, then close the quotation marks, and add the speaker attribution,” he said.*

*“And every time a new character begins talking, put in a paragraph break. Make sure you begin each new paragraph with an indent,” she said.*

*“That means that as long as the same character keeps talking, you don’t need a paragraph break,” he said. “You can pause for a speaker attribution, but as long as there’s no paragraph break, it’s still the same character talking.” He paused to sip his coffee. “Even if the character stops to do something in the middle of the paragraph.”*

*“You can even,” she pointed out, “put the speaker attribution in the middle of a sentence. Just follow the speaker attribution with a comma and continue with quotation marks and the next word beginning with a lower case letter.”*

*– Alternatively, you can use dashes to indicate dialogue, she said. – The same rules apply. Just replace the opening quotation marks with a dash, and leave out the closing quotation marks.*

*– Just don’t mix the two in the same story, he said, – because that looks confusing. Choose one or the other and stick to it.*



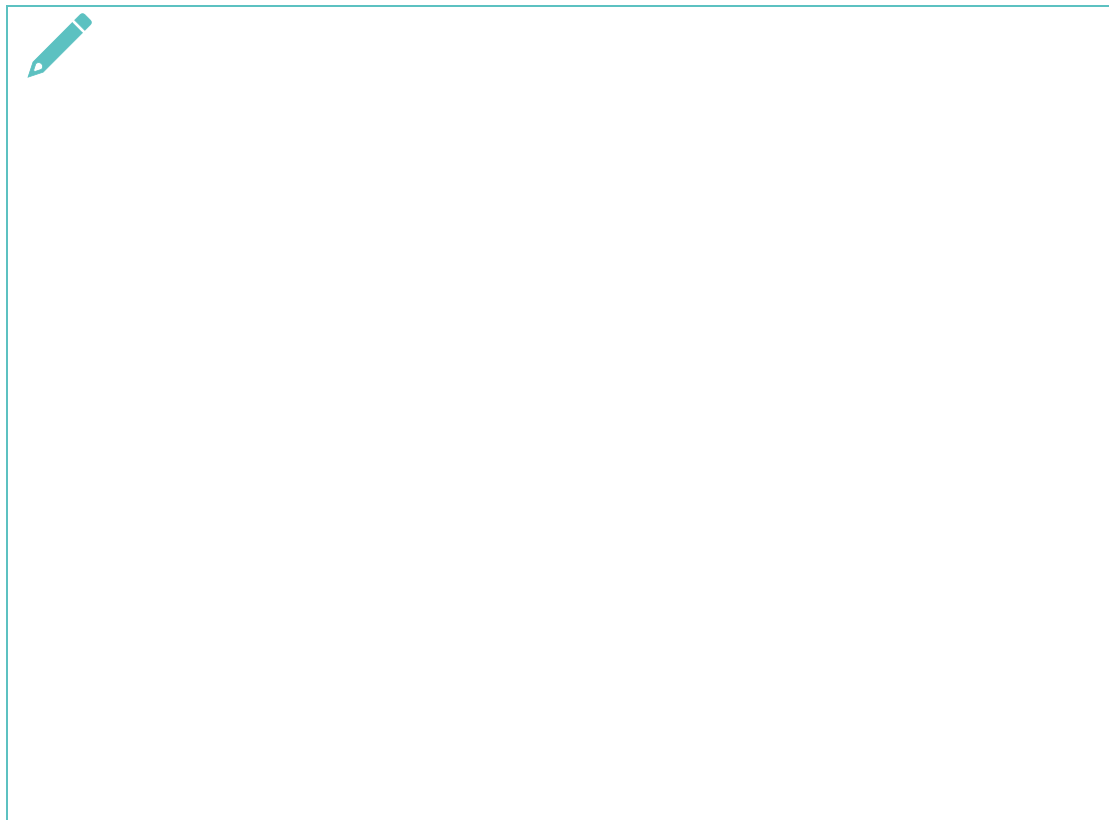
### Exercise 1: Story and backstory through dialogue

Re-write these paragraphs to tell the story and reveal the backstory through dialogue.

#### Part 1

Re-write this passage of narrative summary, using dialogue as much as possible to move the events forward:

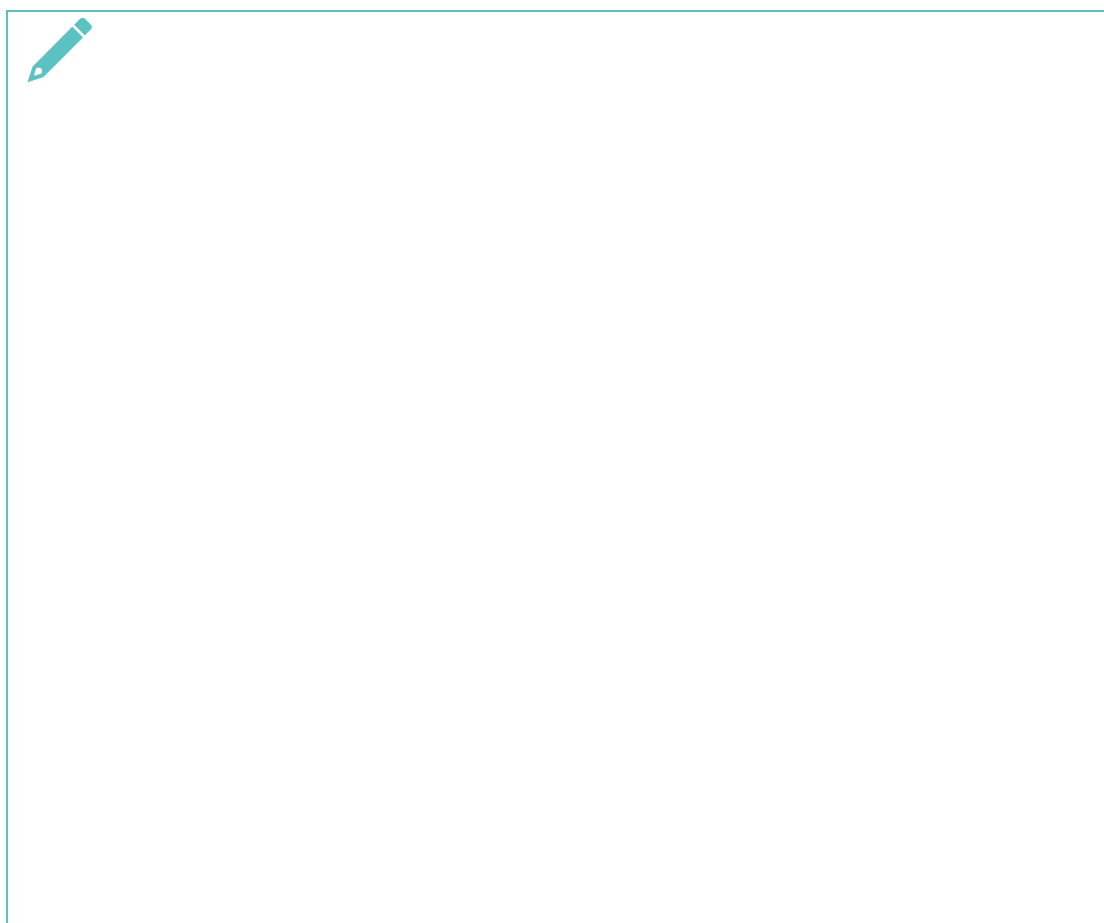
*The sun was burning Musha's skin. Val squeezed her hand. The crowds had made their way into the building, and the two of them were almost alone. They walked in through the Northern entrance. Musha was pleasantly drowsy and a little sun struck, so the cool inside was welcome. They passed through the two sets of doors, walked up to the bar and ordered several drinks. They sat down at a table and spotted some friends across the room, but Val made a point of pretending she hadn't seen them and Musha was content to go along. Val's face was flushed. From the earlier sun, from Musha's stares or from the alcohol, Musha couldn't tell.*



## Part 2

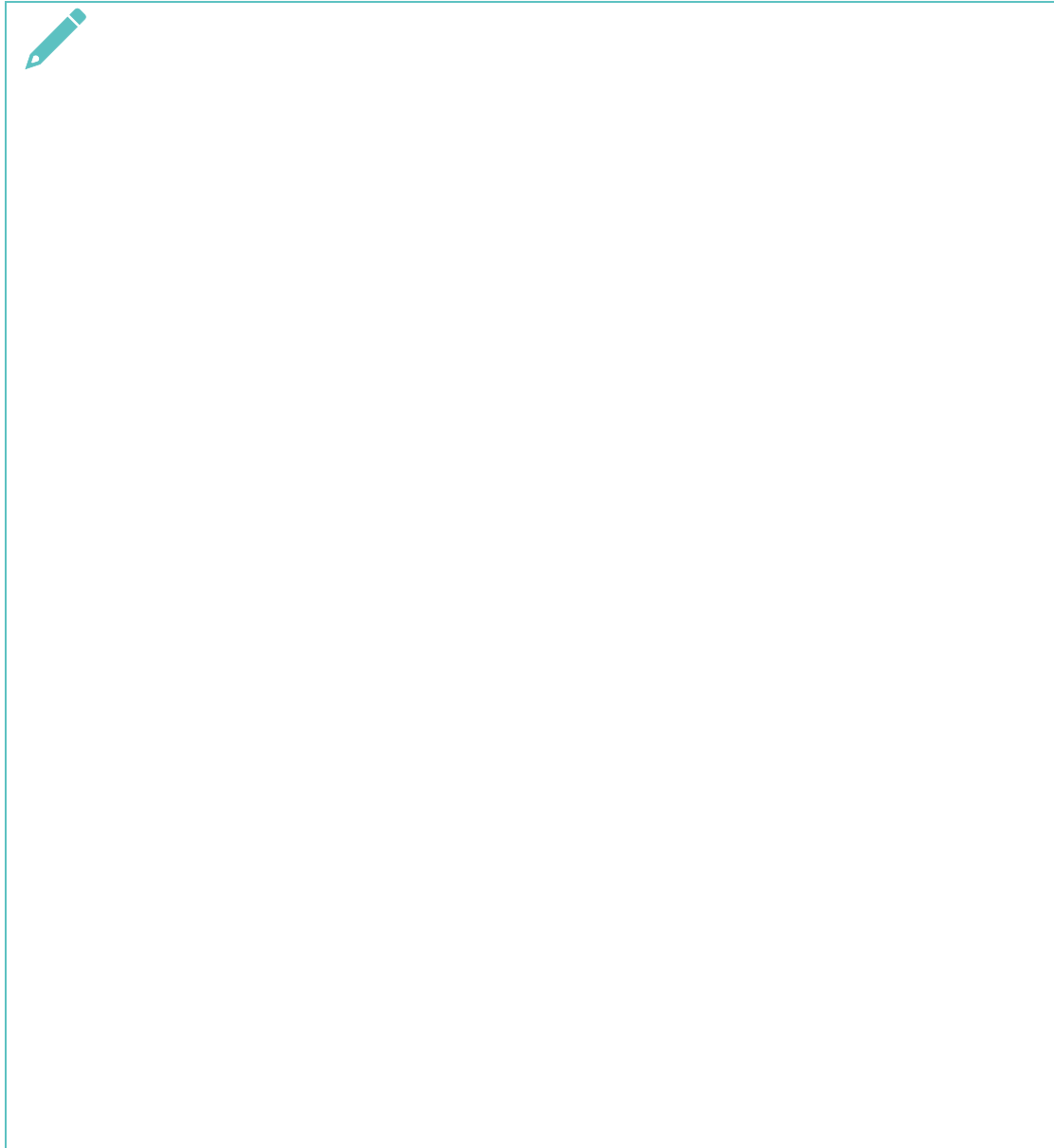
Re-write this passage of exposition, using dialogue as much as possible to reveal the backstory:

*Musha had recently moved to a new apartment. It was only a few kilometres from the city's boundary, a fact that she liked more than she disliked. Her job was in the North-East suburb, and the city administration was in the North. Few of her friends lived in the South suburb, and those who did were much closer to the centre of town. She felt a little isolated in her apartment, although the railway meant she was never very far away from anything or anyone. What she liked about her apartment was that if she took a slightly less direct route, she could avoid the railway completely and make it to the city boundary in a little under an hour.*



## Exercise 2: Conflict through dialogue

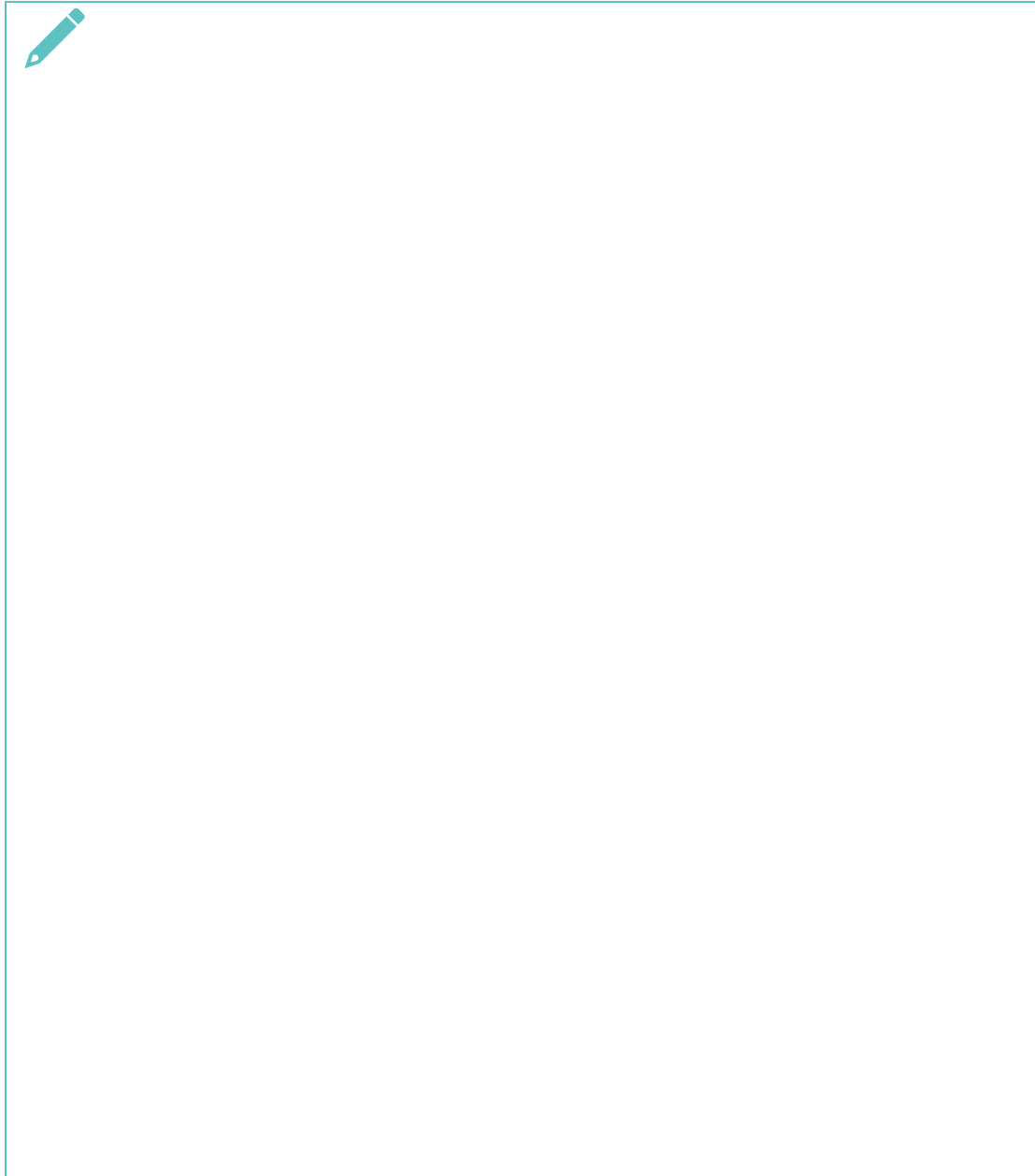
Write a dialogue between two characters with conflicting views.





### Exercise 3: Indirect response to create conflict

Write a dialogue between two of your characters, using the 'indirect response'.



## Speech tags and beats: examples

*When I stopped singing I looked at the four faces staring silently at me.*

*"Ale!" shouted Kemp. "Lord, give me ale!"*

*"The boy's good," said Burbage, "if you ignore the song."*

*"And the singing," said Elsa.*

*"You play well," said Shakespeare. "Be at the Globe Theatre tomorrow.*

*Eleven o'clock. Twelve shillings a week."*

*"Thank you, Mr Shakespeare."*

*(Matt Haig: How to Stop Time)*

*"So where is he really?" Tom asks me.*

*"He's gone to stay with a friend."*

*"Because you're getting divorced?"*

*"We're not getting divorced."*

*"So why has he gone to stay with a friend?"*

*"You've been to stay with friends. Doesn't mean you're getting divorced."*

*"I'm not married. And when I go to stay with a friend I tell you I'm going and I say goodbye."*

*(Nick Hornby: How to be Good)*

*"First things first!" said Genny. "Have a doughnut."*

*I took one, then another, eager to hide my discomfort. "These are delicious, Aunt Genny," I said, and I meant it. They had a peppery flavor I'd never encountered before.*

*"I'm glad you like them, Waldy. Have another."*

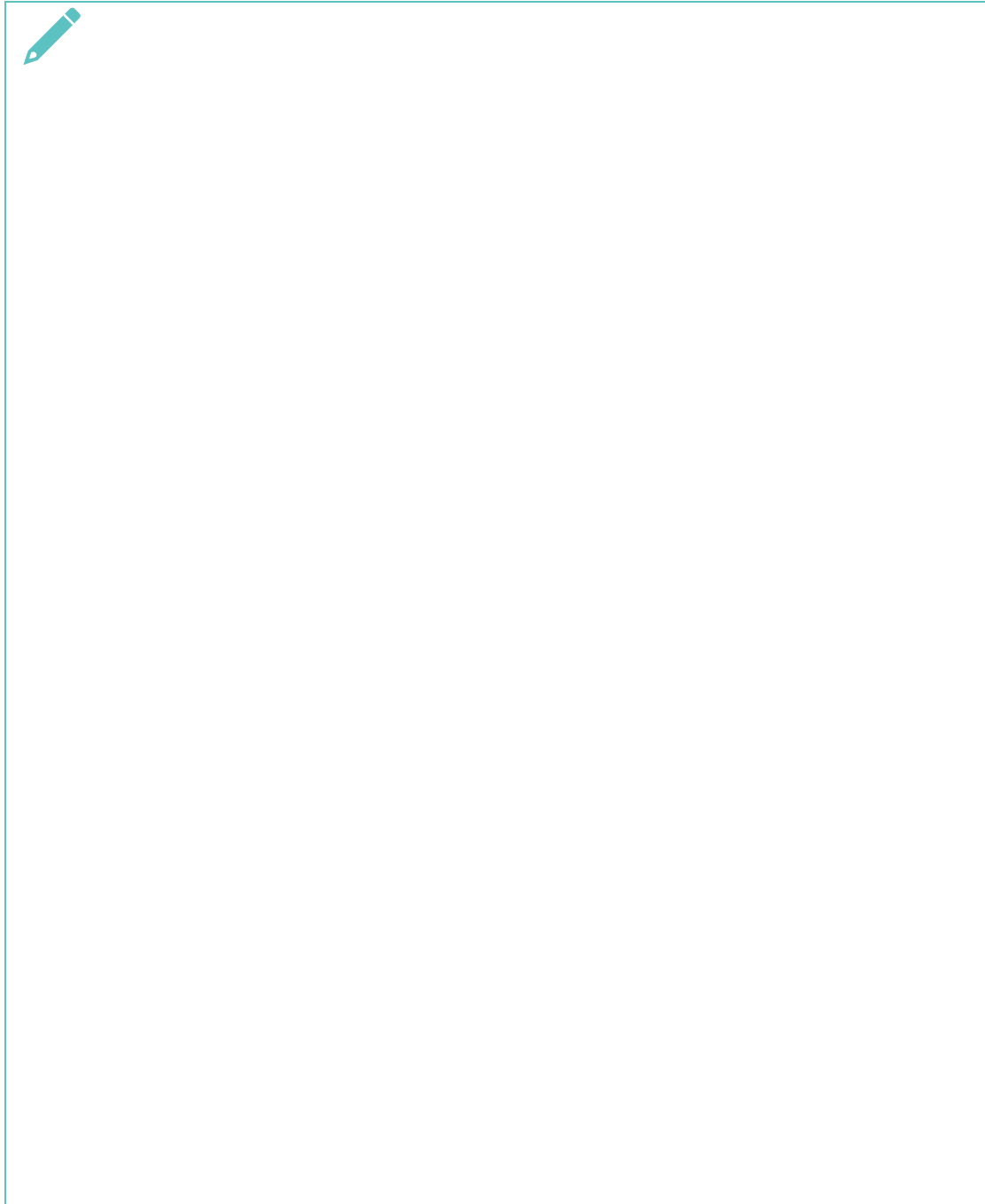
*"Thanks, Aunt Genny." I chewed for a while. "The archive sure has, um, expanded."*

*(John Wray: The Lost Time Accidents)*



### Exercise 4: Beats in dialogue

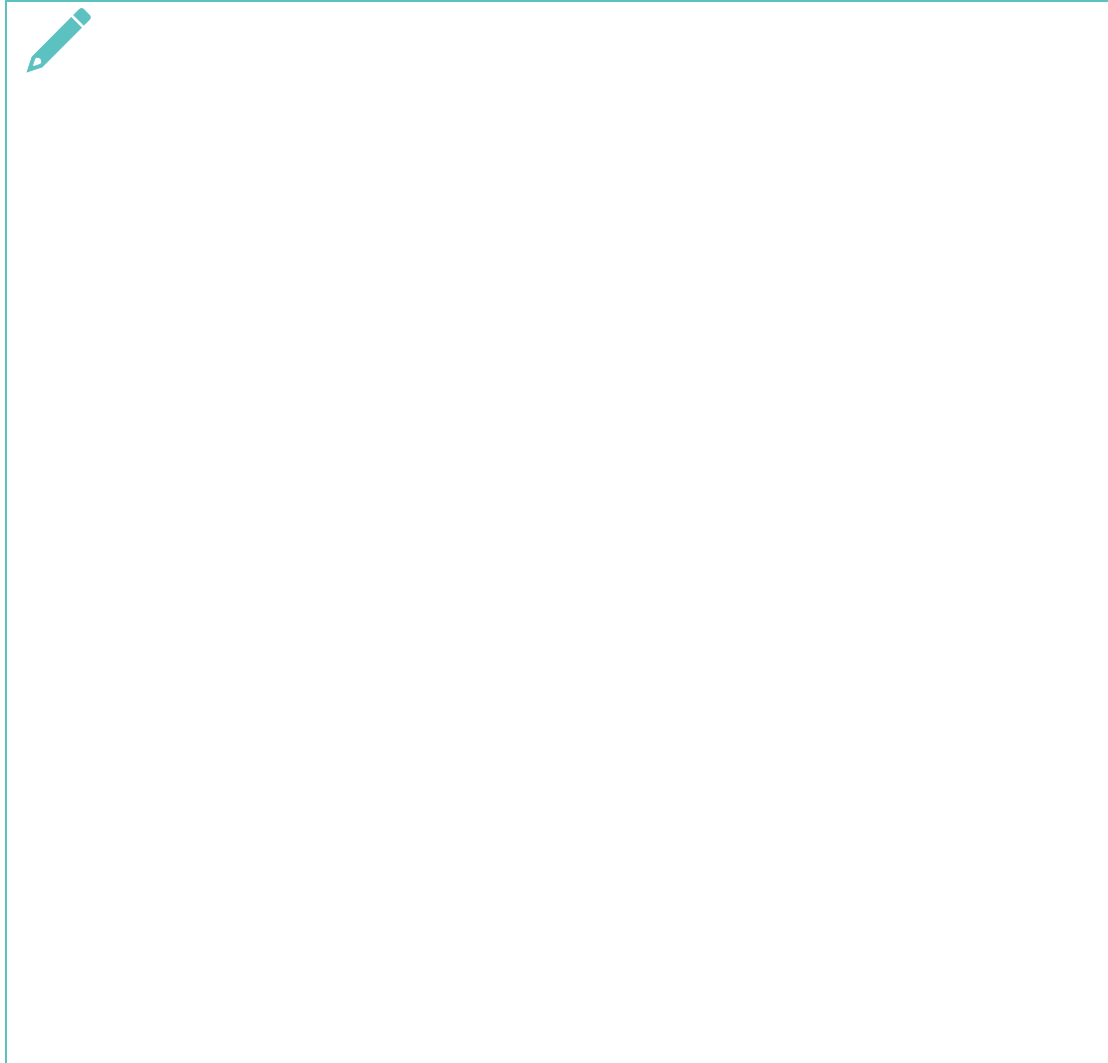
Re-write one of your earlier dialogues, adding beats.



## Exercise 5: Characterisation through dialogue

Re-write these sentences as your character would say them

1. *"I don't want to meet your parents."*
2. *"Come on, let's go to the supermarket and get something for dinner."*
3. *"Can we go out for a drink?"*
4. *"You look beautiful."*
5. *"I've had enough of this!"*



# Class 6: Description and details

## Contents

- Using all the senses
- Specificity in description
- Beyond the obvious: fresh description
- Thematic mindmapping
- Metaphors and similes



## Examples

*There are about ten people in the place, counting Mia, the bartender. Three musicians, trumpet, standing bass, and clarinet, occupy the tiny stage, and the customers are all sitting at the bar. The musicians are playing furiously, swinging at maximum volume like sonic dervishes and as I sit and listen I make out the melody line of White Christmas. Mia comes over and stares at me and I shout "Whiskey and water!" at the top of my voice and she bawls "House?" and I yell "Okay!" and she turns to mix it.*

*(Audrey Niffenegger: Time Traveler's Wife)*

*Botany smells like glue and blotter paper and pressed flowers. Paleontology smells like rock dust, bone dust. Biology smells like formalin and old fruit; it is loaded with heavy cool jars in which float things she has only had described for her: the pale coiled ropes of rattlesnakes, the severed hands of gorillas. Entomology smells like mothballs and oil: a preservative that, Dr. Geffard explains, is called naphthalene. Offices smell of carbon paper, or cigar smoke, or brandy, or perfume. Or all four.*

*(Anthony Doerr: All the Light We Cannot See)*

*The lychees had tough skin that could be pierced with a thumbnail, then peeled off like the shell of a boiled egg. Underneath was grey-white flesh, viscous, wet, the texture of eyeballs. In your mouth, they felt huge, almost choking, until your tongue split the sweet slipperiness and found the smooth, mahogany-coloured stone.*

*(Maggie O'Farrell: My Lover's Lover)*

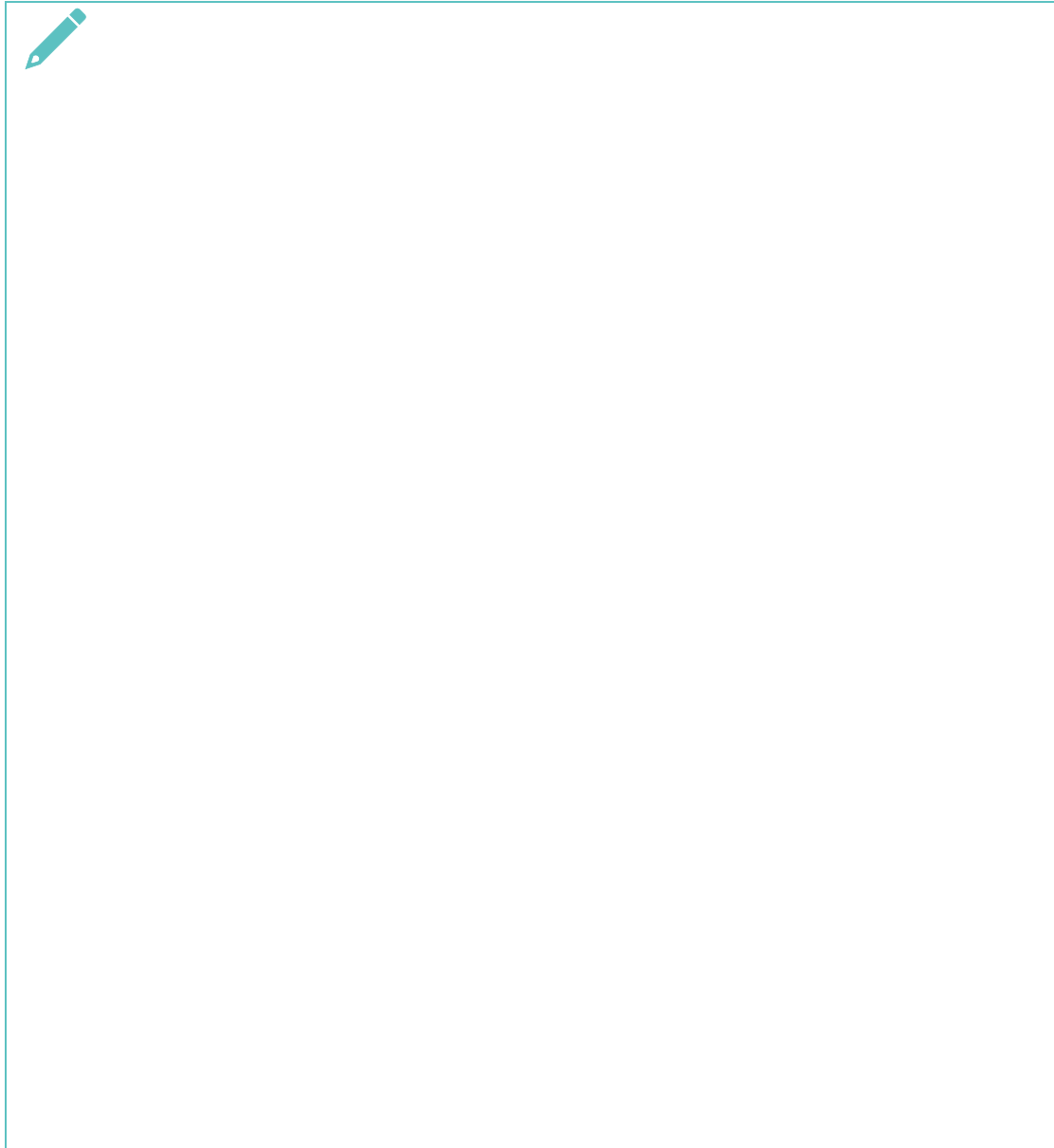
*Phoebe poured tea and gave me a plate with my toast and jam as if bestowing a huge favour the like of which I could never begin to repay. I have to admit that the cake was exceptional, the scones melt-in-the-mouth delicious and the tea weirdly but deliciously smoky.*

*(Eva Rice: The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets)*



### Exercise 1: Using different senses in description

Write a descriptive paragraph using all of the senses.



## Exercise 2: Focusing your description

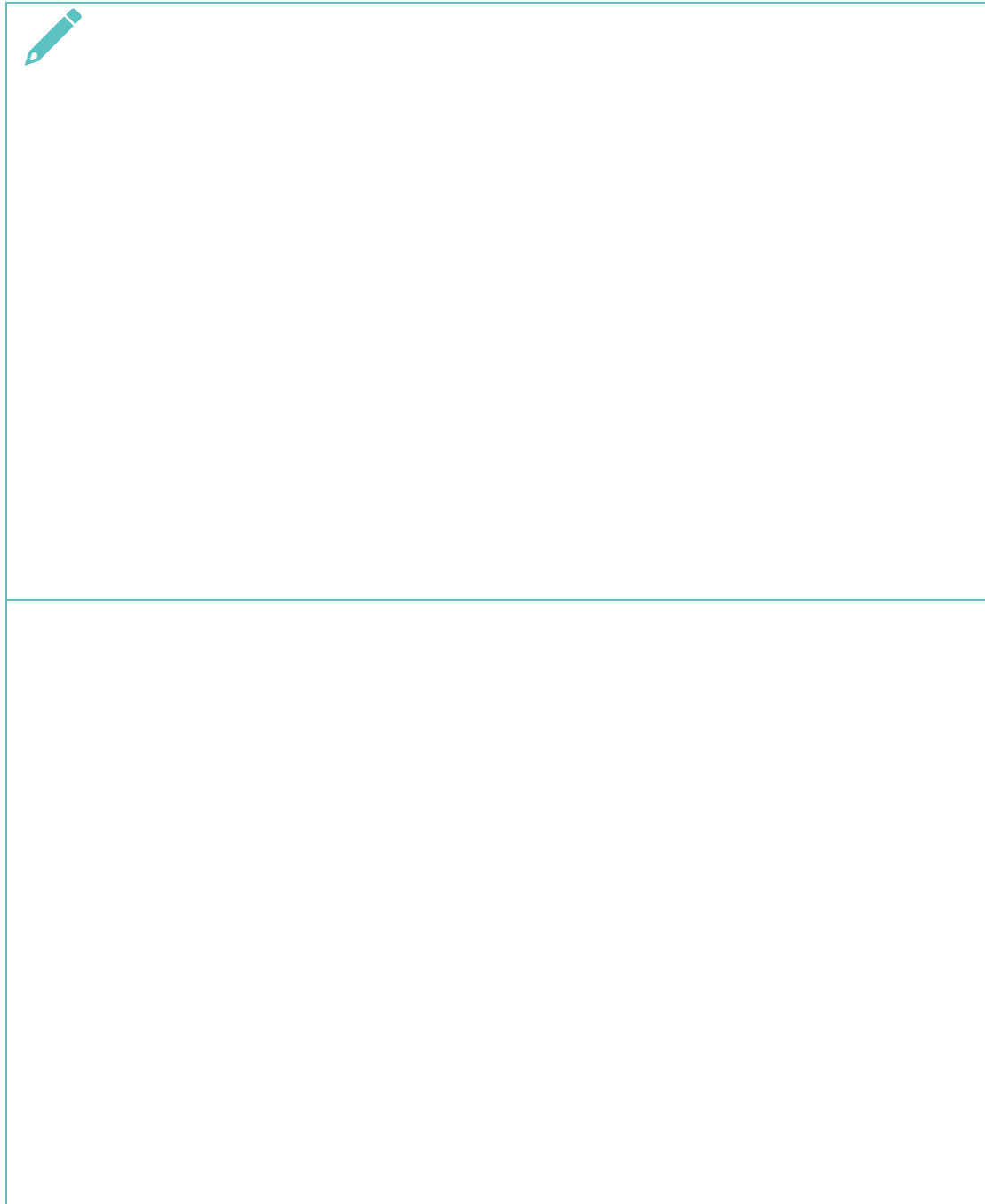
Re-write your paragraph to focus on just one or two senses.





### Exercise 3: Bringing point of view into description

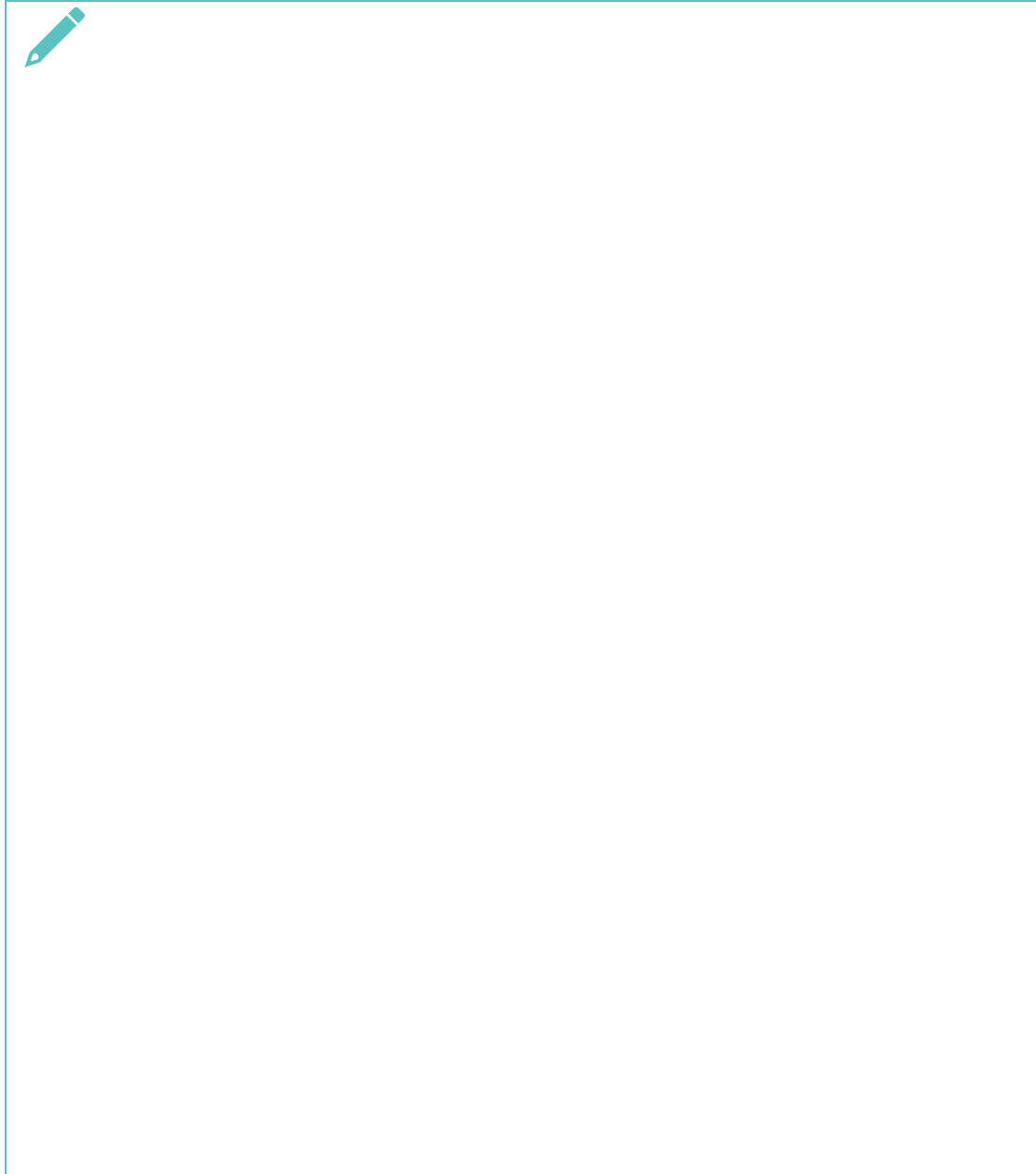
Imagine two of your characters are standing side by side, looking at the same view. Write a description of what they are looking at, first from one character's perspective, and then the other character's perspective, focusing on the specific details that each of them notices.



A large rectangular writing area with a light blue border, divided into two horizontal sections. A small teal pencil icon is in the top-left corner of the upper section.

**Exercise 4: Describe 'the beach' – part 1**

Write down as many words as you can think of to describe the beach and things that can be found on the beach.



### Exercise 5: Describe 'the beach' – part 2

Write a paragraph to describe the beach.

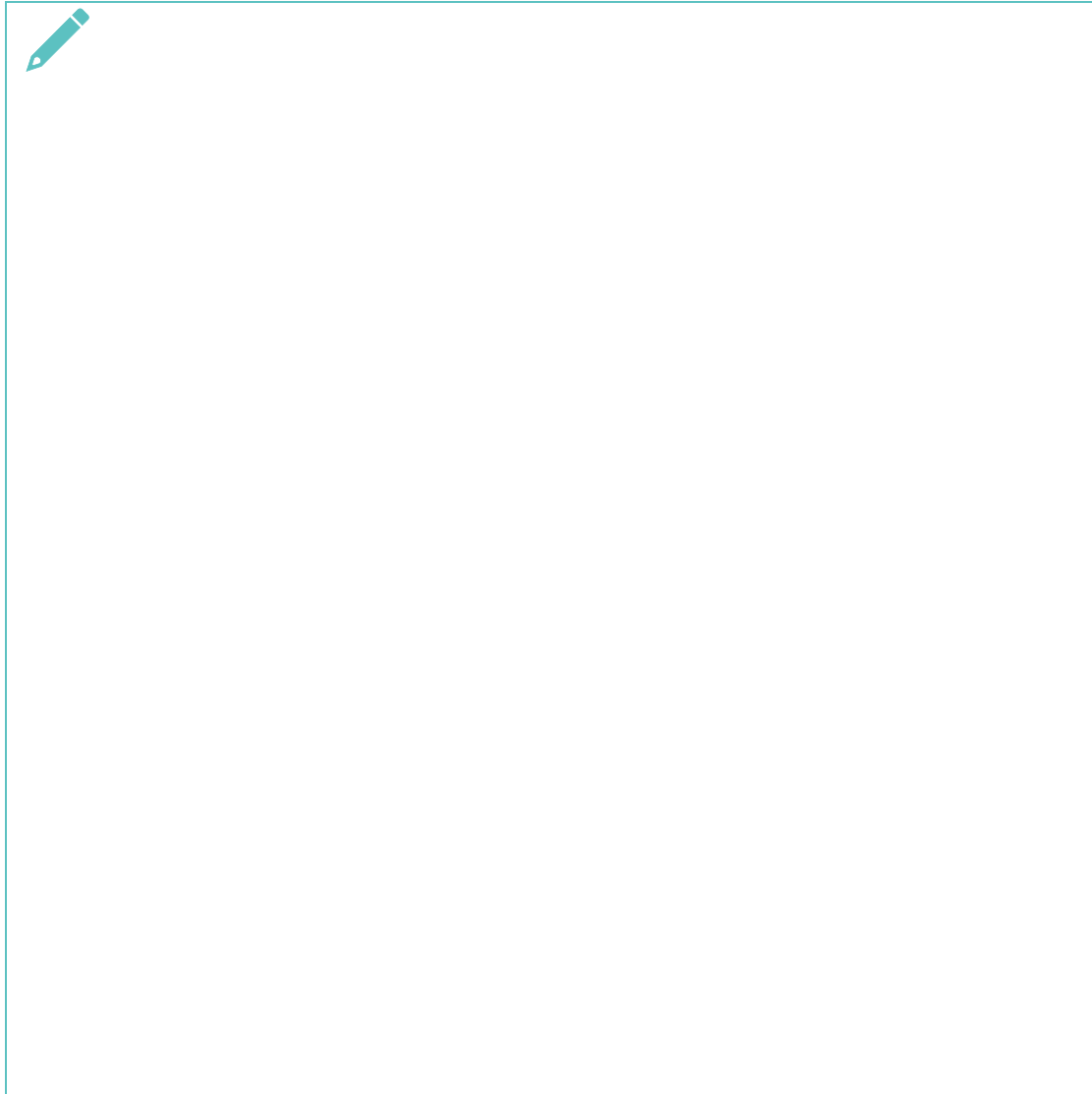


## Exercise 6: Describing your character

Write a description of your character, using:

1. Visual description
2. Actions
3. Interactions
4. Thoughts

going beyond the first thing that comes to mind.



## Exercise 7: Creating atmosphere through description

Start building a word cloud for an atmosphere.

