

Lisa Garrigues

# Reading the Writer's Craft: The Hemingway Short Stories

The power of apprenticeship was realized by high school juniors who spent five weeks studying the style and craft of Ernest Hemingway. Lisa Garrigues provides details of several assignments that helped students analyze Hemingway's work and learn from this "master craftsman."

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In truly good writing no matter how many times you read it you do not know how it is done. That is because there is a mystery in all great writing and that mystery does not dissect out. . . . Each time you re-read you see or learn something new.

—*Ernest Hemingway*, Ernest Hemingway on Writing

**A**rtists have long known the value of studying the masters. Stroll through the galleries of any museum and you will see novice painters standing before framed canvases, up close to examine the artist's brush strokes, far back to understand the use of perspective, then seated to render a facsimile of the masterpiece on paper. Writers, too, can build on what and who came before them, even as they develop a unique style and original voice. If English educators can guide students in the study of literature as craft, if we can show them how to scan the pages of a book not just for its story line but also for its brush strokes, students will know what it means to read as a writer; they will discover that the best way to learn how to write is to learn from the masters.

Writers have apprenticed themselves for centuries. Edmund Spenser was influenced by Geoffrey Chaucer; John Keats by John Milton; Ernest Hemingway by Mark Twain; and so on. To this day, many writers attribute their success to "cutting their composing teeth on the works of the masters" (Milner and Milner 335). But apprenticing oneself to a writer does not demand copying; rather, it requires paying close attention to craft—learning how to read, as Anne Lamott said, "with a writer's eyes" (233).

In a five-week unit, *Reading the Writer's Craft: The Hemingway Short Stories*, students in English

11 and English 11 Honors apprenticed themselves to a master craftsman who is lauded for creating a new style and setting a new direction in American prose. Hemingway received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954, just one year after winning the Pulitzer Prize. Throughout the unit (see fig. 1), students asked themselves, "What can I learn about writing from Hemingway?" And they learned a great deal. They learned the value of economy in language and the importance of what lies beneath the surface of a story. They learned the power of first lines and the impact of juxtaposing a long, serpentine sentence and a short, emphatic one. They learned that "good dialogue encompasses both what is said and what is not said" (Lamott 67). And they learned the challenge of creating characters who resemble people, not caricatures. Reminiscent of the writers who gathered in Gertrude Stein's salon in the 1920s, students met in writing groups of four or five for a variety of activities. In preparation for our final Coffee House, they compiled their work in a Hemingway Portfolio, a documentation of their apprenticeship to a master.

## Hemingway Talks

It is the first day of *Reading the Writer's Craft*. Without preface, I instruct students to jot down everything they know about Hemingway. A few begin scribbling.

I prompt the rest to recall book titles, movies, rumors, anything they know—whether fact or fiction, documentation or hearsay. If they draw a blank, I tell them to write questions. Each student then reads aloud one item while the others add to their lists: “I think we read a short story by Hemingway last year for my English final.” “He lived in Paris, but I believe he’s American.” “What books did he write?” “He committed suicide.” “Why is he so famous?” I then ask students to seal their papers in an envelope, which will become the first artifact in their Hemingway Portfolio, to be revisited at the end of the unit.

FIGURE 1. Unit Overview

Lesson 1	MEET HEMINGWAY “Hemingway Talks”; Establish Writers’ Groups; Introduce Unit ✍ <i>Everything I Know about Hemingway . . .</i>
Lesson 2	WRITING APPRENTICES More on Hemingway—The Man versus the Myth Metaphor—Myself as a Writer ✍ <i>Dear Mrs. Garrigues</i>
Lesson 3	READING APPRENTICES Into “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” Text-Cutting, Line-Swapping Exercise
Lessons 4–6	CRACKING OPEN THE WRITER’S CRAFT “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” Hemingway’s Style; Hemingway Rules!; Symbols in “Snows” ✍ <i>The Long and the Short of It</i> ✍ <i>Extra! Extra! (newspaper story)</i>
Lessons 7–9	SCENE AND DIALOGUE “A Clean Well-Lighted Place” The Iceberg Principle; Staged Reading ✍ <i>Talking about Dialogue</i>
Lessons 10–12	CHARACTER AND MOTIVATION “The Killers” Portrait of a Character ✍ <i>Characters Are People—Not Paper Dolls</i>
Lessons 13–14	TO TELL OR NOT TO TELL “Fathers and Sons” The Ethics of Airing Family Secrets—Debate ✍ <i>The Final Paper Assigned</i>
Lessons 15–17	BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” Famous First Lines; The Short Story Defined ✍ <i>Portfolio Preparation</i>
Lessons 18–20	COFFEE HOUSE Gallery of Hemingway Portfolios ✍ Video Viewing

✍ Indicates writing assignment

**Note:** The unit covered twenty one-hour lessons spanning five weeks.

Now the class is ready to “meet” Hemingway. I distribute to each student one quote gleaned from the author’s fiction, nonfiction, personal letters, and interviews on the subject of writing (see Larry Phillips’s collection *Ernest Hemingway on Writing* for more quotations):

All my life I’ve looked at words as though I were seeing them for the first time. . . . (7)

The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof, shit detector. . . . (8)

[W]hatever success I have had has been through writing what I know about. . . . (21)

Prose is architecture, not interior decoration. . . . (72)

I ask students to “talk back” to their quotes in a ten-minute quickwrite, the first of many such impromptu assignments during which they write spontaneously, without stopping to plan or edit. “Do you agree or disagree with the quote? How does it relate to you as a writer? As an athlete, musician, student? What does it tell you about Hemingway?” Meeting in their writing groups for the first time, students debate the quotes and then go home to uncover three facts about Hemingway from three different sources—ideally, information that will answer some of the questions raised in class.

### The Man versus the Myth

Study of an author’s life almost always illuminates our understanding of a text, but it is especially important when I am asking students to view Hemingway as a mentor. I want them to see the writer behind the writing: a man whose life created as much of a sensation as did his fiction. A boxer and fisherman; wartime correspondent and war hero; bullfight aficionado and safari game hunter; heavy drinker and notorious womanizer; resident of Paris, Havana, Key West, and Sun Valley—Hemingway, barrel-chested and ebullient, was, at six feet tall, larger than life. No wonder it is difficult at times, as one biographer pointed out, to separate the myth from the man (Burgess 5). Beneath Hemingway’s public image of courage and valor was an insidious fear of death. Behind the mask of machismo was an obsession with unmanliness. Beneath his swaggering bravado was a perennial worry

that as a writer he was washed up. I imagine Tom Romano had Hemingway in mind when he wrote, “writers must be brave. They don’t face lions on the Serengeti. But they will face doubt, anxiety, fear—psychological carnivores that prey upon confidence” (30). From Hemingway’s life, we know about the fears he faced. But from the great body of work he left behind, we know, too, that he was brave.

## Writing Apprentices

Reading the *Writer’s Craft* is as much about the students as it is about the master. Before beginning “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” Hemingway’s favorite and most autobiographical story, I invite students to construct a metaphor that describes them as writers or illustrates their writing process. In “Snows,” they will encounter metaphors crafted by Hemingway to characterize the protagonist, a failed writer who has abandoned his craft to live a life of leisure. Harry first rationalizes that he was a spy in the country of the rich, intending one day to write about them; then he admits that he has gone soft, like a middle-aged, overweight fighter who has “destroyed his talent by not using it” (Hemingway 11). For now, I read aloud my metaphor as a model: “I was born with a pen in my hand. It dangles like a cigarette between my fingers, rolling over my writer’s callus, leaving a writer’s smudge. After all these years, I need it the way smokers need nicotine. I need it to think. I need it to remember. I need it to know. I need it to make my mark on the world as the world leaves its marks on me.”

Students now read their metaphors in writing groups. Colette is a car trying to start on a winter’s day. Jack is a ruler. Suzanne is vapor. Madeleine is fireworks. Bryan is a bear in hibernation. Miles is a pair of eyeglasses. Kyra is a snail. In a class of thirty, no two metaphors are alike.

Metaphor, wrote Mary Catherine Bateson, “is endlessly fertile and involves constant learning. A good metaphor continues to instruct” (135). And so I instruct students to use their metaphors for the first major writing assignment, a personal letter addressed to me introducing themselves as writers. Here are excerpts from their letters:

- > “All of my writing is for school, and therefore I do not enjoy most of it.”

- > “I am a horrific writer. The truth is I’m jealous of people who can write with ease.”
- > “My friend loaned me *On Writing* by Stephen King. That book gave me the confidence to write forever.”
- > “Once I mastered the alphabet, there was no turning back. I literally devoured all the books that came across my fingertips.”
- > “I do not like to read my writing aloud when it pertains to something personal. Half the class doesn’t understand and the other half doesn’t seem to care.”
- > “In school I find it exceptionally difficult to write. But at home, in my journal, I can sit and write for hours!”
- > “I want to write a book one day.”
- > “I just want to make it to graduation.”

Since much of what we know about writers comes from reading their personal letters, letter writing seems an appropriate way to begin.

## Throw Away the Rules

We are already deep in our reading of “Snows” when I turn students’ attention from story to craft. From his early years as a newspaper reporter, Hemingway developed a set of rules every writer would be well-advised to follow. I do not want to ask students to adopt a new set of rules, however, before liberating them from the old ones. I tell students to write down five to ten rules of writing, rules that sit on their shoulder and squawk while they write. *Never begin a sentence with a conjunction. Never end a sentence with a preposition. Write in complete sentences—no run-ons, no fragments, no lists. Always write from your own experience. Never write in the first person.* Reading the rules aloud makes us laugh. At best, they sound arbitrary; at worst, contradictory. I place a dented metal garbage can in the middle of the room and invite students to crumple up their pages and throw them away. They glance at me questioningly. They giggle. “Go ahead,” I assure them. “Throw away the rules.” One by one, they ball up

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their papers and toss them into the garbage. Now they are ready to consider Hemingway's rules.

### Cracking Open the Writer's Craft

Hemingway mastered precision and economy in language because he strived to convey, through a constrained and stoic style, the sense of alienation and disillusionment of the times. "But what accounts for a writer's style?" I ask. "And what distinguishes

**The deliberate act of analyzing and emulating another writer's craft is the first step toward developing their own style.**

Hemingway's style from that of other authors?" Style, according to M. H. Abrams, is a writer's "manner of linguistic expression"—that is, "*how* a writer says whatever it is" he or she wants to say (190; italics in original). To answer the *how*,

students work in pairs to analyze several passages from "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," considering three key elements: word choice, sentence structure, and descriptive language. Each pair then drafts three rules Hemingway might have taped to his typewriter (see fig. 2).

These rules become the first of an evolving list of lessons students learn from Hemingway about writing (see fig. 3). They also serve as the rubric for the first assignment to model the master, a newspaper obituary or press release inspired by their reading of

"Snows." Whether students ultimately adopt or reject Hemingway's rules is not important. The deliberate act of analyzing and emulating another writer's craft is the first step toward developing their own style.

### The Long and the Short of It

Just when students are beginning to understand Hemingway's condensed, clipped style, they discover that the author breaks his own rules. Although he was a master of the short, simple sentence, Hemingway also had a penchant for the long, labyrinthine sentence, in some cases an entire paragraph long. The class considers this example toward the end of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro":

Then they began to climb and they were going to the East it seemed, and then it darkened and they were in a storm, the rain so thick it seemed like flying through a waterfall, and then they were out and Compie turned his head and grinned and pointed and there, ahead, all he could see, as wide as all the world, great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro. And then he knew that there was where he was going. (Hemingway 27)

"That's a run-on sentence!" Jason blurts out. I hand him my dog-eared copy of Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms* and ask him to read aloud from the bottom

**FIGURE 2.** Hemingway's Style

Every writer has his or her own style. It is what distinguishes Hemingway from Hardy from Shakespeare. But what exactly *is* style? Style is a writer's manner of linguistic expression—that is, *how* a writer says whatever it is that he or she says. Just as many factors contribute to a person's individual style (the clothes he wears, the cut of her hair), so a variety of elements account for a writer's style.

Analyze selected passages from "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Using the worksheet below, consider Hemingway's treatment of three key elements of style: **diction (word choice), sentence structure, and descriptive or figurative language.** Based on your findings, draft three rules that might have governed Hemingway's writing—rules he might have kept on his desk next to the typewriter.

**Diction:** Look closely at the words. Are they florid or plain, erudite or ordinary, vague or straightforward? Do you need a dictionary to understand them? Look

at the parts of speech: Do nouns and verbs predominate? Are there many adjectives? How would you describe the verbs? Is there repetition of words? Finally, would you describe the passage as "wordy" or concise?

**Rule #1:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sentence structure:** Look closely at the sentences. Are most of the sentences long or short? Simple or complex? How are they connected? Is there a variety of sentences? Do the sentences have rhythm?

**Rule #2:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Descriptive or figurative language:** Would you describe Hemingway's writing as heavy on description? Does he use many metaphors or similes? Does he rely on adjectives to describe the characters and the setting? If not, how does he create pictures with words?

**Rule #3:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**FIGURE 3.** Hemingway Rules! A Compilation of Students' Rules
 

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During his early years as a journalist, Hemingway discovered “the best rules ever learned for the business of writing” (Gottesman et al. 1666). Later, he adapted these rules to fiction. Over the next few weeks, we will read several Hemingway short stories with an eye toward cracking open the writer’s craft. As you read, make a list of all the rules and lessons you learn about writing from Hemingway. Some you will adopt; others you will reject. The deliberate act of analyzing another writer’s craft is the first step toward developing your own style.

1. Use simple, everyday words.
  2. Use short, simple sentences.
  3. Begin with a short first paragraph.
  4. Be concise. Cut your words and cut them again.
  5. Avoid adjectives.
  6. Use vivid verbs.
  7. Juxtapose a long, paratactic sentence with a short, emphatic one.
  8. Use metaphors and similes sparingly.
  9. Repeat words for emphasis.
  10. Be specific. Include details.
  11. Show, don’t tell.
  12. Dare to begin in the middle.
  13. Write on the principle of the iceberg, with seven-eighths of the story submerged.
  14. Write short, compressed dialogue that encompasses both what is said and what is not said.
  15. Avoid dialogue guides that draw attention; try “naked” dialogue.
  16. Create real characters but don’t write about real people.
  17. Write what you know.
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of page 191. “A **paratactic style** is one in which the members within a sentence, or else a sequence of complete sentences, are put one after the other without any expression of their connection or relations except (at most) the noncommittal connective, ‘and’” (emphasis in original). Sounds technical. Jason continues, “Hemingway’s style is characteristically paratactic” (191). The class wakes up. Rereading the excerpt, we agree that it is a prime example of the paratactic style. But we also notice how the long first sentence is followed by a short one: “And then he knew that there was where he was going.” The short sentence comes unexpectedly, like a punch. *Pow!* Harry is dead.

For practice, students select a topic and write the longest sentence they can, letting the rhythm of the words dictate the punctuation, followed by a short sentence. I offer this example: “She sat at the edge of the hard-backed chair, the wooden hips of the instrument snug between her knees, and gripping the frog of the bow in her right hand she placed her left fingers on the ebony board, the steel strings cutting lines in her callouses, and then, for a second, blinded by the glare of the stage lights, she could not remember the melody, the old terror rising and paralyzing. And then the conductor lifted the baton.” The poet Georgia Heard wrote, “My high school English teacher taught me never to write long sentences. . . . But sometimes writers need to break

all the rules they were taught in school” (126). Not surprisingly, *The Long and the Short of It* was for many students the most liberating assignment.

### Informed about Form

The class studies one aspect of Hemingway’s style for every short story we read. By the time we turn to “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” students know the short story the way Nick Adams in “Fathers and Sons” knows quail country, from having been there. This is how writers become informed about form: they read and study a given form until they soak up its patterns and rhythms.

Writers are “takers apart,” said Donald Murray, but they are also “putter-togetherers” (142). For four weeks students have taken apart Hemingway, dissecting and analyzing discrete elements of his craft. Now they have two opportunities to put together all that they have learned: first, in a writing engagement that demonstrates their knowledge of Hemingway’s style (see fig. 4); and second, in the Hemingway Portfolio, a compilation of all the material generated throughout the unit. Introduced by a Personal Statement of 300 to

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500 words, the Portfolio documents students' progress as writers and experiences as students of Hemingway.

## The Coffee House

In the spirit of the poets and writers of Hemingway's time, we culminate the unit with a Coffee House, during which students read aloud one selection from their Hemingway Portfolio. Jared reads a humorous quickwrite beginning, "When I think of my brother, it is always his beer belly," inspired by a line in "Fathers and Sons" in which the narrator writes about his father's eyes. Susan reads a dialogue between two lovers in which the woman wants to break off the engagement but never brings herself to say it. Mark reads a character sketch inspired by a man he observed in Barnes and Noble, incorporating into the fictional account ten "real" details. Afterwards, students browse our Gallery of Hemingway Portfolios in search of the most alluring cover, the most candid Personal Statement, the most memorable lines, and the most "Hemingway-esque" writing sample. We devote the last class to viewing an award-winning

thens and Sons" in which the narrator writes about his father's eyes. Susan reads a dialogue between two lovers in which the woman wants to break off the engagement but never brings herself to say it. Mark reads a character sketch inspired by a man he observed in Barnes and Noble, incorporating into the fictional account ten "real" details. Afterwards, students browse our Gallery of Hemingway Portfolios in search of the most alluring cover, the most candid Personal Statement, the most memorable lines, and the most "Hemingway-esque" writing sample. We devote the last class to viewing an award-winning

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### FIGURE 4. The Final Paper

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For the final paper, you may choose one of the following engagements, or you may propose an alternative assignment for approval by me. (Note: the choices with asterisks require the inclusion of a reflection paragraph, about 300 words, in which you must state your methodology, intentions, and conclusions.) The final paper is intended to give you an opportunity to synthesize and reflect on all that you have learned during this unit.

The final paper will be graded for (1) *conventional excellence* (neatness, accuracy, form), (2) *acquired knowledge* (How much have you learned about Hemingway, his writing style, and his fiction?), (3) *analysis and synthesis* (How well do you analyze individual stories and synthesize your findings into a coherent whole?), and (4) *insight* (What conclusions, connections, insights have you drawn from your study of Hemingway?). *Your paper must be proofread, double-spaced, and typed.*

**Thematic Essay.** Certain themes recur in Hemingway's short stories. Trace one major theme through at least three of the stories we have read. Consider how Hemingway's use of symbols reinforces the theme, how certain characters embody the theme, and how his writing style supports the theme. Possible themes to explore include the Hemingway male, pending death, the rich, lost dreams, wasted talent, the conflict of youth with age, courage in the face of fear.

**Stylistic Interpretation.** The title of this unit is Reading the Writer's Craft. In a discussion of two or more Hemingway short stories, explore the ways in which Hemingway's style of writing—particular elements of his craft—elucidates his themes, furthers the "plot," and develops the characters.

**Short Story.\*** Author your own short story, using Hemingway as a mentor and a model. You might experiment with certain elements of his craft or style. You might explore a recurring Hemingway theme. You might incorporate some of the symbols or characters we have met in Hemingway's short stories.

**Parody.\*** Write a parody of the Hemingway short story. (A *parody* is a literary work in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule.) Caution: To poke fun at something, you must know it well. Just as a caricature exaggerates the most salient features of a person, a parody captures and magnifies the key elements of a story or style. Your parody must show evidence of your understanding of Hemingway's themes and/or characters as well as key elements of his craft.

**Newspaper.\*** Hemingway's style emerged from his experience as a journalist. Produce Page One of a Hemingway newspaper. Your articles should draw on biographical material of Hemingway's life as well as material from at least three short stories. Your challenge is to turn key elements of the fictional stories into the stuff of current events. Be sure to follow Hemingway's rules of writing. You may include cartoons and/or illustrations.

**Playscript.\*** In a number of Hemingway's short stories, the reader comes to know the characters directly from their dialogues and monologues on a well-conceived "stage." Rewrite one such story as a playscript (**exception:** you may NOT choose "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" since we dramatized this story in class). The playscript must include stage directions, stage sets, props, costumes, music, and so forth.

**Cross Conversations.\*** Create an imaginary conversation between yourself, Hemingway, and at least three characters from three different stories. Create a fictional context for the conversation: a dinner party, a talk show, a train ride. The conversation should explore key Hemingway themes (and symbols) and reflect the essence or primary struggle of each character. It might also address stylistic considerations. Like an essay, your conversation must have a workable shape and direction, with an introduction, climax, conclusion, and transitions.

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film biography of Hemingway (*Stacy*). With ten minutes to go, I invite students to open the envelope they sealed on the first day of class, when they wrote down everything they knew about Hemingway. Reading their first quickwrite, students are astounded by how much they know now.

I tell students that, for five weeks, we have been following a prescription Hemingway wrote in 1925 in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, advice Hemingway himself followed all his years as a writer. “I think you should learn about writing,” he advised, “from everybody who has ever written that has anything to teach you” (Phillips 91). With the knowledge that students now know how to apprentice themselves to an author—how to read that writer’s craft—I hold up whatever texts are on my desk and, in the words of Natalie Goldberg, I say, “These are your mentors. Authors can take you through your whole writing life” (108–09).

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