Theory of These Exercises

It is not necessary that a beginning writer do all-or any of these exercises, and it is virtually impossible for even an apprentice writer of genius to do all of them in one semester, especially since the exercises should not be substituted for the writing of actual short stories, tales, fables, yarns, sketches, novellas, or novels. One of the most important things a writer can learn is the feeling from within of a complete fictional form; so the student should work on the exercises at odd moments, working just as often or more often on complete fictions.

The point of the exercises is this: most apprentice writers vastly underestimate the difficulty of becoming real artists; they do not understand or believe the grim truth that great writers are usually those who, like concert pianists, know scores of ways of doing everything they do. (No one would deny the exceptions—literary scabs like Melville, D. H. Lawrence, Samuel Beckett, Charles Dickens, and Henry James who achieved masterpieces with grotesquely small bags of tricks. Knowledge is no substitute for genius, obviously; but genius supported by vast technique makes a Homer. Men may carp at Shakespeare's "small Latin & less Greek", but Shakespeare knew virtually all there was to know about poetic and prosaic form, entertainment, and the powerful evocation of character and event.) Especially right now, when competition for publication is greater (probably) than ever before, it is helpful for a writer to know technique.

Any apprentice writer who does these exercises faithfully and well will see that when he gets to, say, exercise 22, he is in a position to do the early exercises with much more facility than when he began; and every exercise, faithfully performed, will teach a technique useful in short or long fiction. The writer who has worked hard at these exercises will see, whenever he writes a story or novel, that he has various choices available at every point in his fiction, and he will know how to choose the best—or invent something new. Knowing no technique, he will be caught in the ancient stupidity of merely trying to "tell the truth," unaware that the truth is changed by the telling, so that, for instance, describing a scene in mostly long vowels and soft consonants achieves an effect far different from that achieved by a passage mostly in short vowels and hard consonants.

Every true apprentice writer has, of course, only one goal: glory. The shoddy writer wants merely publication. He fails to recognize that almost anyone willing to devote between 12 and 14 hours a day to writing—and there are many such writers—will eventually get published. But only the great writers will survive—the ones who fully understand their trade and are willing to take time and enormous risks—always assuming, of course, that the writer is profoundly honest and, at least in his writing, sane.

Sanity in a writer is merely this: however stupid he may be in his private life, he never cheats in writing. He never forgets that his audience is, at least ideally, as noble and generous and tolerant as himself (or more so), and never forgets that he is writing about people, so that to turn characters to cartoons, to treat his characters as innately inferior to himself, to forget their reasons for being as they are, to treat them as brutes, is disgraceful.
Sanity in a writer also involves taste. The true writer has a great advantage over other people: he knows the great tradition of literature, which has always been the cutting edge of morality, religion, and politics, to say nothing of social reform. In the same way the true and serious businessman knows business, the writer knows writing. It is surely a fact that Shakespeare had a more sophisticated sense of decency and morality than Elizabeth had; that Chaucer was far more humane than King Richard; that Homer had a clearer sense of virtue than Pericles and Tolstoy a deeper sense of history than the Czar. Just as a great painter's deepest knowledge is of the character and technique of great painters, a writer's deepest knowledge is of the character and work of great writers. (Except to learn technique, or because of friendship, no serious apprentice should study minor writers, mere kale gardens to a Californian farmer. Make a list of the absolute, essential artists.)

Taste is, in fact, crucially important, especially now, when civilization may possibly be dying of self-inflicted wounds. If you write, even through the mouth of a sympathetically observed character, something Tolstoy, Socrates, or Jesus would not write—think twice. You live in a world in which it's possible to buy flavored, edible panties (strawberry, lemon-lime—), and "asshole" passes for elevated diction. Think about it.

When one is young, decadence can be—probably is—an interesting experiment. One tends to have no real sense of the harm that can be done. Eventually one reaches the discovery—the real, personal discovery—that everything in life can and eventually will fail. One has wife or child with a terminal illness, a friend who commits suicide; one realizes that all life, all fame and fortune, are in a sense a grotesque joke. For suffering people—and suffering is almost unbelievably common—heartless satire, parody, cruel gags and trifles are useless and vulgar. No true artist forgets this.

To write with taste, in the highest sense, is to write with the assumption that at least one out of a hundred of the people who read you may be dying, or have some loved one dying; to write so that no one commits suicide, no one despairs; to write, as Shakespeare wrote, so that people understand, sympathize, and live on. All the rest is ego.

This is not to say that the writer who has no firm experience of pain and terror should try to write about pain and terror, but only to say that every writer, every minute, every sentence, should be aware that he might be read by the desperate, by people who might by a single sentence be persuaded to choose the jump off the bridge.

I do not mean either that writers should lie. I mean only that they should think, always, of the worst they might inadvertently do, and not do it. If there is good to be said, say it. If there is bad to be said, say it in the way that will do least harm. Remember that teenagers have a chemical propensity toward anguish, that people between their thirties and forties have a tendency to get divorced, that people in their seventies have a tendency toward loneliness, poverty, self-pity, and legitimate anger. Do not be a bad physician. Art is powerful—even bad art.
These exercises, if you do them, will give you a certain power. If you choose not to do them, and if you happen to be a genius, you still have power. If you do the exercises, be aware of the power you're developing and write the exercises as if they were to be read by a person at the edge of suicide. Write celebrations, however dark. "Serious" fiction (I may be one of the last to maintain this) is nothing but fiction that is morally serious. That doesn't mean you can't be funny. But remember.

General Note: For all these exercises, avoid the cheap, obvious, and corny— if possible. Eg., in exercise 7 don't write a sentence built almost entirely of adjectives.

**Exercises**

1. Write the paragraph before the discovery of a body.
   **Note:** Preferably describe the character's approach to the body he will find, or the location, or both.
   **Purpose:** to at once attract reader toward next paragraph and hold him on this one (forced suspense leading to climax).

2. Take a simple event: man gets off bus, trips, looks around in embarrassment, sees woman smiling. Describe this event, using same characters, in five completely different ways (changes of style, tone, sentence structure, voice, psychic distance, etc.)

3. Write the opening of a novel using authorial omniscient voice (and make the authorial omniscience clear). As subject, use either a trip or the arrival of a stranger.

4. Write a novel-opening, on any subject, in which you shift from authorial omniscient to 3rd person subjective.

5a. Describe a landscape as seen by an old woman whose disgusting and detestable old husband has just died. Do not mention the husband or death.

5b. Describe a lake as seen by a young man who has just committed murder. Do not mention the murder.

5c. Describe a landscape as seen by a bird. Do not mention the bird.

5d. Describe a building as seen by a happy lover. Do not mention love or the loved one.

6. Write a monologue of at least 3 pages, in which the interruptions—pauses, gestures, language, etc., all clearly and persuasively characterize, and the rhythmic shifts from monologue to gesture and touches of setting all feel right. **Purpose:** To learn ways of letting a character make a long speech that doesn't seem boring or artificial.

7. Write three effective long sentences (each at least one full page, or 250 words), each involving a different emotion (eg. anger, pensiveness, sorrow, joy). Make at least one of these sentences authorial omniscient. **Purpose:** control of tone in a complex sentence.
8. Write a dialogue in which each of the two characters has a secret. Do not reveal the secret but make the reader intuit it. E.g. husband who has just lost his job, talking with his wife who has a lover. Purpose: to make dialogue crackle with feelings not directly expressed.

9. Write a two (or more) page character sketch using objects, landscape, weather, etc., to intensify characterization. Purpose: To write out of more than intellect, engaging the conscious and unconscious.

10. Write a two (or more) page character sketch or dramatic fragment (i.e., piece of a story) using objects, landscape, weather, etc. to intensify both characters and the relationship between them. Purpose: Same as 9, but now making the same scenic background serve more than one purpose.

11. From 10 (above) extrapolate a plot for a short story.

12. Describe and evoke a simple action (sharpening a pencil, carving a tombstone, shooting a rat, etc.)

13. Write a brief sketch in the (an) essayist-omniscient voice. (Same as authorial omniscient except that the narrator voice is distinctly characterized and makes pronouncements which seem true.)

14. Write three acceptable examples of purple prose—i.e., highly self-conscious and arty prose made acceptable by subject, parodic intent, voice, etc.

15. Write a brief passage on some stock subject (e.g., a journey, a landscape, a sexual encounter) in the rhythm of a large novel, then in the rhythm of a tight short story.

16. Write an honest and sensitive description (or sketch) of (a) one of your parents, (b) a mythological beast, (c) a ghost.

17. Describe a character in a brief passage (one or two pages) using mostly long vowels and soft consonants [o as in groan, e as in see; l, m, n, sh, etc.]; then describe the same character, using mostly short vowels and hard consonants [i as in sit; k, t, p, eg, etc.]

18. Write a prose passage which makes effective and noticeable use of rhyme.

19. Write the first two pages of a tale.

20. Plot each of the following: a short-short story, a yarn, a fable, a sketch, a tale, a short story, three Aristotelian novels, an architectonic novel, a novel in which episodes are not causally related (allegorical or lyrical structures), a radio play, an opera, a film which could only be a film.

21. In a fully developed monologue (see exercise 6) present a philosophical position you tend to favor but present it through a character and in a situation that modifies or destroys it. (Cf the dragon chapter in Grendel.)

22. Write a passage using abrupt and radical shifts from authorial omniscient to third subjective.
23a. In high parodic form (i.e., in the way Shakespeare parodied the revenge tragedy for his serious Hamlet), plot one of the following: a gothic, a mystery, a sci-fi, a Western, a drugstore romance.

23b. Write the first three pages of the novel plotted in 23a, but turn the trash form to serious fiction.

24. Without an instant’s lapse of taste, describe a person (a) going to the bathroom, (b) vomiting, (c) murdering a child.

25. Write a short fiction in mixed prose and verse.

26. Write, without a trace of irony, a character’s moving defense of him-or herself.

27. Using all you know, write a short story about an old man’s discovery of his beloved wife’s body. (See exercise 1).

28. Write a true story about yourself (a) using all long sentences (b) using all short sentences.

29. Write a true story using anything you need.

30. " completely fabulous story using anything you need."