

Listening Exercise One:

How do shape and structure serve your empathy and attention?

For several weeks before leading your first workshop, pay attention to the way people talk to you or one another, whether you find yourself in a classroom or a counseling setting, in a courtroom or prison visiting room.

Pay particular attention to those moments when you find yourself privy to those intimate details that usually are hidden from view...

There are reasons why one person's way of storytelling will be more moving than another's, or why a story will be one moment riveting and the next moment hollow. Yet it is important to note that within each person's way is the potential to reconstruct a moving narrative. The more that you are able to understand what causes the fluctuations in your own capacity to be moved WITHIN each overheard story, the less likely it will be that you will favor a single way of telling or a single type of content when you begin to teach writing to evoke empathy and attention.

As you listen, ask yourself

- Does the person you are shadowing build their story more or less chronologically?
- Or do they pepper their story with what we will be calling invisible backstitches, giving you background as they move their story forward?
- Do they weave back and forth in time, or do they weave several stories together, so that they are telling two or three stories at once? Or do they nest one story inside another, so that each one becomes its own long saga?
- Do thoughts and ideas drive their stories? So that they start out by musing and then weave in various tales?
- Do they tease the listener by stopping at the moment of maximum suspense and moving into another sub-story, so that one needs to continue listening in order to return to the first story's climax?

In order to become the true Stranger/Reader or Listener, who will be able to dart from one style of telling to another, it will be necessary to note patterns in what is likely to work and what is likely to get the writer into trouble across many approaches and ways.

- Track tales that are much more raw and bumpy than those you would normally like.
- Track tales that are so smooth they almost drive you crazy with their constant control.
- Track tales that are much more sentimental than those that normally attract you,
- Track tales that are so skeptical a part of you cringes just to know that the teller might one day tell a story about you.

Whatever the quality of the tale, whether you love it or hate it, when you see an obstacle that seems to get in the way or when you see an opportunity you'd like to seize, We would like you to imagine that you are the puppeteer rearranging the pieces, not in one way, but in many possible combinations. You are trying to hear through the lines, not what most interests you, but what seems to be propelling the teller.

No one will ever know you are listening with the goal of rearranging, so no one will be hurt. For now you are practicing the art of making mental bookmarks.

Later on, in our section on working with actual text, we will return to our various storytelling structures in a more analytical way. For now, listen almost playfully as you let yourself notice what works and what doesn't, without yet paying much attention to why.

Becoming an imaginary puppeteer in a situation in which you can do no real mischief, will help you to get used to evaluating your own solutions without jumping to impose them on another before you understand a lot more.