



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## MAKING CONNECTIONS IN LITERATURE

What happens when a classroom full of business and math majors, after a lesson on short fiction, still cannot connect the dots? What is the protagonist anyway, and why are both round and flat characters necessary in moving a story forward? One way to make the lesson stick is to have students pen their own stories. I ask them to take on the character of the protagonist and then script in an antagonist from their own lives. Then they are to consider whether that relationship ever brought them to an epiphany. I want them to consider what action became the turning point in the relationship. I ask them to consider how this shift in the relationship effected who they are today.

Many groan, shift in their seats, even adamantly argue they never had an antagonist in their lives. I have to comfort them and explain that I am not looking to grade them on their ability to become the next William Faulkner. In fact, I normally have to poke, prod, and show them how to dig for information by giving them examples from my own life.

### Sharing Stories

- My sister and I are two years apart and had been competitive with each other up until adulthood. She dressed like I dressed, and I would get upset she was trying to steal my identity. If I made friends with her friends, she'd block me out of her birthday parties. It was the kind of sibling rivalry that peaked on my wedding day when she attempted to steal the bathroom when I stepped out to get a towel. It was a morning that almost ended in a fistfight, with my mother intervening.

Sharing with your students gives them the comfort level they need to jump into their own material. It also gives them the opportunity to understand they are writing from a biased point of view, something they need to think about when analyzing works of fiction.

- One time in line at the shopping market, I anxiously tried hushing my small baby when

a man's act of kindness moved him not only to help load my items on the belt but also bag them. When I thanked him, his reply was that "he" would have done anything to get me out of there. It was a cold slap in the face that had left me shaken, not necessarily because he was so blunt, but because I had already struggled for months with a colicky baby and had not slept more than two hours at a time. What added to the pressure was the fact that every other young couple we knew with babies bragged about how their babies slept through the night.

Who then was the antagonist? Was it the man in line, my baby, the other mothers, me?

I use these stories as a simple exercise that allows students to revisit almost-forgotten strangers who have made an impact on their way of thinking or on what they value in life. It is an exercise that can dare them to consider others than those we would expect major players to be—e.g., our parents, siblings, husbands, wives, sons, or daughters. It helps them really understand the short story and also *connect* to poetry—especially to narrative poetry when there is often only one character and the struggle comes from within. I ask them to consider an instance where they may have encountered a moment of rage on the road and the like. I ask them to consider the complexities of that moment, the layers behind the character, or the moments that led up to that event.

### Reader-Writer Relationship

This is a simple exercise that, at minimum, allows students to feel good because it allows them an opportunity to vent. Who does not want to be the good guy or the main character, and who does not want to drive the demon from his or her life? When I ask students to connect with other writers, this helps them understand the importance of the reader-writer relationship.

### Outline

An outline begins with the students' laying out the action in a paragraph or two, then adding the



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background material that will help their readers understand why there is an act of attrition between the characters. They must follow with the argument that ultimately changes the relationship between the characters and shows us the “light bulb going on” that becomes the conclusion to the story.

### **Not a One-Day Lesson**

After that first draft, I have students add to their story throughout the semester—e.g., adding some flat characters; inserting a few more fights before getting to the big one; making the ending exciting. Maybe there has not been a solution in real life. So, I encourage them to make one up! It is okay to lie! Give me the ending they would like to see!

If students need even more assistance, we visit Raymond Carver’s short story, “Cathedral,” where a husband’s life changes after his wife’s blind friend visits their home. The narrator, in first person, admits his prejudices to his audience throughout the story, even questioning how a blind man could possibly marry a woman he has never seen.

It is a story that I use for a lesson on believability. The story is believable because Carver allows us to see the flaws in his character, his little inward confessions that bring the audience in, the part of him that makes the character human. I tell them it is okay to confess along the way.

Did I wish evil on the man in the shopping market line? I sure did! And like Carver, we need to see the art in storytelling. As writers, we need to pay attention to the details that make a work worthy of being read.

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