



Genre Workshop: Action/Adventure – Syllabus

Course Description: Action and adventure stories are some of the most exciting stories of all. They are built on high-stakes, conflict, and courage. Throughout this genre workshop, students will explore the essential parts of action/adventure stories. They will learn to create compelling characters, exciting settings, create tension, and structure story pacing. As students study this genre, they will move step-by-step through the writing process and finish the class with a polished action/adventure short story. Because this course is focused on each student's individual story idea, personalized feedback and guidance will be provided weekly along with the weekly grades.

PREREQUISITE: *The Short Story*

REQUIREMENT: Students must be willing to write an age-appropriate short story in this genre

Course Outline:

Week One: What is an Action/Adventure Story?

Week Two: Protagonists, Allies, and Villains, Oh My!

Week Three: Setting & Description

Week Four: Plot & Structure

Week Five: Story Beginnings & Action Scenes

Week Six: Powerful Endings

Week Seven: Editing

Week Eight: Final Draft

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Creative Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.



Genre Workshop: Action/Adventure

Lesson One: What is an Action/Adventure Story?

All right, adventurers! Before we begin, please make sure your backpacks contain snacks, a mysterious map, and at least one questionable life choice. We're getting ready to experience something you'll never forget!

Action/adventure stories are built on high stakes, conflict, and courage. These are stories where characters climb mountains, run from enemies, search for hidden treasure, engage in epic sword fights, survive disasters, cross dangerous lands, face impossible odds, and make brave decisions when everything is on the line.

But action/adventure is about more than long journeys, sword fights, explosions, car chases, or daring escapes.

WHAT QUALIFIES AS ACTION/ADVENTURE? –

An action/adventure story is one where the plot is driven by danger and risks, lots of movement, and a clear goal. But at the heart of every strong action/adventure story is a character who wants or needs something badly enough to take a risk. Characters may search for lost cities, rescue someone they love, escape a dangerous place, survive in the wilderness, solve mysteries, complete missions, protect something valuable—the list could go on and on! But no matter the goal, action/adventure stories push characters forward through danger, obstacles, and difficult decisions.

It's important to remember that in an action/adventure story, **the action and adventure are central to the plot**. It's possible to have a story that includes action without the story itself being an action/adventure story. For example, a quiet family story might include a scene where a character runs through a storm. A mystery novel might include a high-speed chase. A fantasy novel might include an intense battle. But those moments alone do not make a story an action/adventure story. **In an action/adventure story, the character's mission and quest shapes the entire story.**

Most action/adventure stories include some key elements:

- **A Hero** – A unique hero (or group of heroes), often exhibiting exceptional courage, quick

thinking, or a set of special skills/abilities

- **A Quest** – The very thing the hero wants or needs that keeps them moving forward no matter what stands in their way
- **A Super Villain** – An intimidating villain, group of villains, or other opposing force trying to stop the hero on their quest
- **Obstacles** – All of the other things standing in the hero’s way on their quest
- **Far-Off Locations** – The location where the hero will complete their quest (though the action/adventure is largely found in the journey to that location)

NOTE: There are times “action” and “adventure” may be separate stories.

Action – This is a focus on exciting, immediate events. It may include fights, escapes, chases, disasters, rescues, battles, survival elements, etc. Action scenes move quickly and create a sense of urgency.

Adventure Stories – This is a focus on the experience of the journey or quest. Adventure stories involve facing the unknown, exploring, discovering, traveling, navigating dangerous settings, and overcoming difficult challenges.

A story may lean more toward action, more toward adventure, or include equal elements of both. A story about a spy racing to stop a bomb before it explodes leans heavily toward action. A story about a group of kids searching for treasure on an abandoned island leans more toward adventure. A story about a girl crossing a dangerous mountain range while being hunted by enemies combines both action and adventure.

For this class, we are studying stories that use both. We want an adventure that gives the character a reason to move forward combined with action that creates danger along the way.

COMMON THEMES –

There is a lot of emphasis on excitement in action/adventure stories. But we still need our stories to be meaningful. Readers should still connect with the characters and find meaning in what the characters choose, discover, learn, and become because of what happens.

COURAGE – This is one of the most common themes in action/adventure stories. Just remember: courage does not mean that characters are never afraid. In fact, bravery cannot

exist without fear. Courage means the characters choose to act even when they are scared.

LOYALTY AND SACRIFICE – This is my personal favorite theme because it shows us what love, loyalty, and sacrifice really mean. This theme forces characters to choose between their own safety and comfort and someone else’s wellbeing. A character may risk everything to protect someone or something they care about.

SURVIVAL – This is another very common theme seen in almost every action/adventure story. This does not necessarily mean the story is a “survival story” where the character must survive harsh weather, wild animals, hunger, etc. (though those elements can certainly come into play). But rather, it is a theme of a character surviving impossible odds, whether it be natural elements, a dangerous villain, or their own poor choices. This theme is important because it reveals what a character is made of. When comfort and safety are stripped away, who does the character become? How do they find a way to survive?

GOOD VS. EVIL – This may be the most common theme in action/adventure stories. The heroes of these stories often face villains, whether they are corrupt leaders, criminals, invaders, monsters, etc. However, “good vs. evil” is much more complex. It often means that a character must learn what is right. As the hero fights against the main villains, they may also have to fight other temptations or their own inner voice, revealing that the greatest battles aren’t only against enemies we can see.

DISCOVERY – A good action/adventure story should include some elements of discovery. Though characters may discover new places, hidden truths, lost objects, buried treasure, secret maps, forgotten civilizations, the most powerful discoveries are the ones they discover about themselves.

PERSERVERANCE – Characters in action/adventure stories must have some element of perseverance. They will be pushed to the edge. They will fail. They might get lost or injured. They might be betrayed by someone they trusted. Their plans will fall apart. But they keep going anyway.

TYPES OF ACTION/ADVENTURE STORIES –

Action/adventure is a broad genre that tends to overlap with many other genres (fantasy, sci-fi, historical fiction, mystery, etc.). I will keep this section brief, but it’s important to note these crossovers as you may wish to include them in your own short story for this class.

FANTASY – This is one of the most common crossovers for action/adventure stories. These stories often include monsters, magical lands, imaginary kingdoms, etc. It is easy enough to make them also action/adventure by adding a clear goal, dangers, obstacles, high-stakes, and a journey or quest.

SCI-FI – Similar to fantasy, sci-fi is also commonly combined with action/adventure. These stories are often set in the future and may include spaceships, future technology, aliens, plants and other galaxy elements, etc. And similar to fantasy, all you need to do is add our action/adventure elements: clear goal, danger, obstacles, high-stakes, journey/quest.

MYSTERY/SUSPENSE/THRILLER – Though “mystery” and “suspense/thriller” are two different genres, they do share many of the same elements. These are stories where a character may be trying to solve a crime, uncover the truth, escape danger, stop a villain, or survive a dangerous situation. They typically involve hidden motives, suspicious characters and circumstances, danger, red herrings, and an overall feeling of tension. Danger and high-stakes are already a key theme of these stories, so to make them “action/adventure,” you need to include a journey or quest. (Most commonly, though, you may find yourself including elements of mystery and suspense into your action/adventure story instead of trying to make your mystery/suspense/thriller story a true crossover.)

HISTORICAL FICTION – These are stories that are set in the past. To make them action/adventure stories, you want to include danger, high-stakes, and a journey/quest within a historical setting. These stories might involve war, exploration, survival, escape, resistance, journeys to unfamiliar places (like *The Oregon Trail*), etc.

DYSTOPIAN – A “dystopia” is “an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.” These stories typically take place in the real world in either the present or future. These stories are ones where everything is falling apart and there are hordes of problems. These stories might involve war, oppression, total government control, scientific elements, survival, escape, resistance, etc.

YOUNG ADULT – These are any story that feature a teen protagonist facing pressure, danger, important life choices, etc. You can easily turn them into action/adventure stories by introducing a quest, danger, survival scenarios, mysteries, competitions, grand escapes, disasters, battles, powerful enemies, etc.

SUPERHERO/SPY – “Superhero” and “Spy” aren’t the same genre, but I’m lumping them together because they include similar elements. These are stories that include a unique hero who must rescue someone or something, complete a dangerous mission, stop a threat, escape from danger, etc. These stories might include secrecy, danger, cunning characters, clever planning, betrayal, ticking clocks (literally or figuratively), and/or supernatural powers.

DEFINING THE SHORT STORY –

If I asked you to define a short story, what would you say? It isn’t hard to guess your answer: “A story...that’s short.” There! We’ve done it! End of the lesson, right?

Well...almost. But it isn’t quite that easy. While short stories are exactly what they say they are—stories that are short—they have their own challenges, joys, and surprises.

But first, you may be wondering how long a short story should be. And I have some bad news for you. No one can agree on just how long any written project *should* be. There aren’t set guidelines that you can follow for everything you write—one agent, teacher, publication, or writing contest will likely have different guidelines than the next!

Here’s the good news, though: It’s easy to find a range that we can use as a guideline. According to betterstorytelling.net, a shorter short story (something small for a newspaper) should be under 2,500 words—that’s roughly six 1.5 spaced pages of 8.5” x 11” paper. Your typical short story, however, can range from 2,500 words to 7,500 words—or 6 to 21 of those 1.5 spaced 8.5” x 11” pages.

With all of that in mind, for this class, **we will be considering 400 words as our lowest point and 3,000 words as our highest.** That way, you will have the room to tell a compelling story, and I will have the ability to review it thoughtfully each week.

Assignment 1A: Let’s Get Down to Business (to Read Something Fun!)

Go out and read a short story! We have included some examples below (but we would be happy to help you find more if none of these strike you).

Requirements for your story choice:

- Professionally written and published
- Something you *enjoy*! If you start reading a story and don’t enjoy it, pick another one.

EXAMPLE STORIES –

Please check with a family member or parent/guardian before selecting your story!

- **“The Most Dangerous Game” by Richard Connell**
- **“The Unexpected” by Jack London**
- **“The Invisible City” by Clark Ashton Smith** (This one is on the creepier side, so only read if you like creepy stories and have the permission of your parent/guardian!)
- **“The Horror of the Heights” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** (This one is also creepy and does not have a happy ending, so please read with caution and with the permission of your parent/guardian!)
- **“The Escape of Wilkins” by Arthur Train**
- **“The Adventures of a Bookkeeper” by Rupert Hughes**

Assignment 1B: Let’s Get Down to Business (to Write Something Fun!)

Once you have read your story, answer the following prompts using complete sentences in addition to proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Questions to Answer:

- What’s the title of the short story you read? Who wrote it? When was it written?
- What was your favorite part? Did you have a least favorite part?
- What were some of the action/adventure elements in the story? What action/adventure themes did you notice?
- Compare the story to a novel you’ve read. Give specific examples of differences and similarities between the story and the novel (examples: number of characters, complexity of plot, etc.).

BY THE WAY. . . now is also a GREAT time for you to start coming up with ideas for your own short story! Keep brainstorming over the next few weeks, and we will ask for your ideas on Week 4.