

STUDENT HANDOUT · UNIT I · FICTION



Session 1

Opening — What Is a Story?

Sunday, May 17, 2026 · 4:00–5:30 PM · The Community Room

*Student handout · main points · reading · in-class practice · discussion questions ·
homework · first-day worksheet*

The Art of Telling

A free creative-writing salon for residents of 2601

Led by James F. Mulhern · Silver Current Press

Welcome to the Session 1 companion handout for *Opening — What Is a Story?*. This is your take-home guide for our very first Sunday together — it gathers the main points of the lesson, the reading for class, the in-class practice, the discussion questions for our conversation with room to write your own thoughts, this week's homework, and the First-Day Worksheet. For the full session materials, reading companions, and course updates, visit companion.art-of-telling.com.

Main Points of the Lesson

A story is shaped experience that means something. Three words do the whole work: *shaped, experience, means*.

Experience. Something must happen — even something small. The simplest diagnostic question: *What happens?* Answer in one sentence.

Shaped. The writer's central task is selection. What to include, what to leave out, what to put first, what to dwell on.

Means. A story leaves the reader changed by an inch. It has consequence. Why we write by hand for the in-class exercise: handwriting is slower than typing, and the slowness is exactly what good drafting needs.

Reading for Class

- Ernest Hemingway, *Hills Like White Elephants* — read on [Wikisource](#).

After Our Discussion — Critical Reception

- [Hills Like White Elephants — Background & Analysis \(Wikipedia\)](#) — concise background on Hemingway’s craft and the famous “iceberg theory” at work in this story.
- [Hills Like White Elephants — Scene-by-Scene Notes \(LitCharts\)](#) — a close reading that breaks down every exchange of dialogue.

In-Class Writing Prompt — Laptops Closed

From the live site

Write about a moment — real or imagined — when someone in your life said something you have never forgotten. Just one moment. Set the scene briefly. Then write the thing that was said, and what happened next, or what didn't happen.

You will have ten minutes. Do not stop to revise. Do not stop to spell. If you get stuck, write "I am stuck, but the room had —" and keep going.

nothing is collected. It is yours, written on paper, in your notebook. At the end of class two or three volunteers may read one sentence aloud if they would like to. No one is asked to share.

Discussion Questions

The three questions below are exactly as they appear on the Session 1 page. Use the space beneath each one to write your own thoughts before or during our conversation. Nothing here is collected.

Q1. What is the difference between something happening and a story being told? Where is the line?

Q2. In the Hemingway, what was selected in? What was left out? What does that selection do?

Q3. What does it mean to say a story has consequence? Can you name a story that left you changed by an inch?

Homework

For Session 2

Fill out the First-Day Worksheet (reproduced at the end of this handout) and bring it to Session 2. This is the **one worksheet** that will be collected — it helps James learn names and what each of you most wants to write.

The read

Read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* — [Project Gutenberg](#). It is short, roughly 6,000 words.

The optional exercise

Optional: take what you wrote in class today and expand it to about one page in your notebook. No one will be asked to share unless they want to.

Before Next Sunday — Session 2

The Seven Questions Every Story Must Answer. We turn the definition we built today into a working lens you can use on any story — including your own. We will apply the seven questions to Gilman together, and then in pairs to whatever piece of your own you would like to think about.

First-Day Worksheet — Please Bring This to Session 2

From the live site

This is the one worksheet I will collect. After our first Sunday, copy the lines below into a Word document, fill it out at home in the week between Session 1 and Session 2, and hand it to me on your way in next Sunday. It helps me learn your name, what brought you, and what you most want to write. Nothing on this sheet will be shared with the room.

1. Your preferred name (the name you'd like to be called in this room):

2. What brought you here today? (One or two sentences is plenty.)

3. What have you always wanted to write — even if you never have?

4. A book, story, or poem that has stayed with you: _____

All the other session worksheets after this one are for your own notebook — never collected, never shared. This first one is the only exception, and it is only so James can know who is in the room.

Closing Note

Because there wasn't time to tell everything, the companion site — companion.art-of-telling.com — gathers session materials, reading companions, and course updates so residents can follow along and review after each Sunday.