

STUDENT HANDOUT · UNIT I · FICTION



Session 2

The Seven Questions Every Story Must Answer

Sunday, May 24, 2026 · 4:00–5:30 PM · The Community Room

Student handout · readings · in-class practice · discussion questions · homework · 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 2 companion handout for *The Seven Questions Every Story Must Answer*. This is your take-home guide for today's salon — it gathers the main points of the lesson, the reading for class, the in-class practice, the discussion questions with room to write your own thoughts, this week's homework, and the Seven Questions Worksheet for your private notebook. For the full session materials, reading companions, and course updates, visit companion.art-of-telling.com.

Main Points of the Lesson

Move from definition (Session 1) to *application*: the seven questions become a working lens on a real story.

The seven questions:

1. Whose story is it?
2. What does this character want?
3. What stands in the way?
4. What is at stake?
5. When does the story change?
6. What does the character understand at the end that they did not understand at the beginning?
7. Why this story, and why now?

A strong story answers all seven. A weak story leaves one or more unanswered — usually without the writer knowing.

The seventh question is the hardest, and the one that separates publishable fiction from competent fiction.

Reading for Class

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) — [Project Gutenberg](#) (public domain). A short, taut story told in the journal of a woman confined to a room for her own good. Every one of the seven questions has a clear answer in the text — and the unreliability of the narrator makes the diagnostic vivid.

Critical Reception (after our discussion)

- [The Yellow Wallpaper — Charlotte Perkins Gilman \(National Library of Medicine\)](#) — historical and medical background to Gilman's story.

In-Class Practice

From the live site

In pairs, take three of the seven questions and try to answer them — about the piece you wrote in Session 1, about anything you have written recently and would like to think about, or, if nothing comes to mind, about the Gilman story we just read. Use the worksheet below. Nothing needs to be brought to class beyond your notebook.

What happens with this: the conversation stays inside your pair. Notes go in your notebook. Nothing is collected. We will surface anything you choose to surface in the discussion that follows.

Discussion Questions

Use the space below each question to write your own thoughts before or during our discussion. Nothing here is collected.

Q1. Whose story is *The Yellow Wallpaper*? Where in the text do we know?

Q2. What does the narrator want? What does she think she wants? Are they the same?

Q3. When does the story change? Can you locate the turn?

Q4. What does the narrator understand at the end that she did not understand at the beginning? — and what is the gap between what she understands and what we, as readers, understand?

Q5. Of the seven questions, which one is hardest to answer — either for the Gilman, or for something you have written or are thinking about writing? Why?

From the Required Text: If you have a copy of *Imaginative Writing* by Janet Burroway, read the first chapter.

Homework

The read

Read Katherine Mansfield's *At the Bay* — one click from the Session 3 box, or from the Readings page. It is longer than what we have read so far; give yourself an hour.

The optional exercise

Optional — about ten minutes: answer two of the seven questions about a single page of writing you have done in this course so far, or about anything in your notebook.

Before Next Sunday — Session 3

Scene & Summary — When to Slow Down, When to Move. We move from what a story does to how it controls time on the page. We will mark Mansfield's opening pages paragraph by paragraph, and then mark a page of writing of your own the same way.

The Seven Questions Worksheet — for your private notebook

From the live site

Copy this list into a Word document. Answer it for the Gilman, for the piece you wrote in Session 1, or for any story you are thinking about — whether on the page yet or not. This stays in your private notebook — never collected, never read aloud unless you choose.

1. Whose story is it? _____
2. What does this character want? _____
3. What stands in the way? _____
4. What is at stake? _____
5. When does the story change? _____
6. What does the character understand at the end that they did not at the beginning? _____
7. Why this story, and why now? _____

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.