

Writing Historical Fiction

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Designed for Students in Grade 9-12
LSSU High School Short Story Prize
bcrossing.org/lssu-short-story-prize/

The LSSU High School Short Story Prize is a North American writing competition that features a \$500 prize and publication for high school students. The theme varies each year; this year, the theme is historical fiction. Each year, the winning story is published in *Border Crossing*, and the \$500 cash prize can be increased to a \$1000 cash scholarship if the winner chooses to attend LSSU. Student entries will be accepted online between December 1st, 2017 and March 31st, 2018, using the Border Crossing submission manager available at <http://bcrossing.org>. There is no fee to enter. Entries will be judged blind. Finalists will be selected based on literary merit by April 15th, 2018, with a winner announced by the end of the month. The winner of the contest will receive a \$500 cash prize, which may be doubled – if the student elects to attend Lake Superior State University – to a \$1000 cash scholarship. The winning story will also be published alongside fiction, poetry, and nonfiction by professional writers in volume 8 of *Border Crossing*. It is our hope that these activities will help to engender more excitement about reading and storytelling in high school students, as well as encourage them to strive to improve their reading and writing abilities. Please Google LSSU High School Short Story Prize or visit <http://bcrossing.org/lssu-short-story-prize/> to read the complete contest rules.

Contentions

1. Students should be encouraged to read texts for enjoyment first and discuss the pleasure of reading before analyzing author craft and literary devices. An aesthetic approach to literature in the classroom helps foster a lifelong love of reading and writing.
2. Students should be encouraged to think of themselves as writers and read like writers.
3. X-ray reading for creative writing craft makes students better readers, as well as writers.
4. Students should be encouraged to analyze and discover writers' decisions on their own through inquiry and the study of genres of writing both familiar and unfamiliar.
5. Student writing self-efficacy beliefs improve when they analyze peer models.
6. Descriptive analysis of diverse mentor texts within a genre encourages student invention better than a formulaic or prescriptive approach to that genre.
7. A combination of whole-class discussion, small-group conversation, and individual reflection is the most effective mode for inquiry and craft analysis.
8. Providing opportunities for student choice is an integral part of cultivating student enthusiasm for writing.
9. Students benefit from being offered real-world venues for publishing their writing.

Step-by-Step Lesson Development

Day One

1. **At the end of a class period, introduce the contest and genre. (5 minutes)** Ask the students to read and enjoy one of the following classic historical fiction short stories for homework:
 - [“The Yellow Wallpaper”](#) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

- [“A Rose for Emily”](#) by William Faulkner
- [“Babylon Revisited”](#) by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- [“Where Are You Going, Where Have you Been?”](#) by Joyce Carole Oates

Day Two

1. **Discuss the pleasure of the story as readers. (5 minutes)** Ask students: what did you think? What were your favorite parts? What were you reading to find out? What moved you, scared you, bothered you, or entertained you? Did anything confuse you? What made you stop and think?
2. **Read like writers. (varies)** Now read the story aloud or play a recording (available on YouTube), asking the students to follow along, paying attention to how the author uses imagery.
3. **Discuss imagery. (5 minutes)** Where do students see the author describing imagery? Which passages use sensory description and concrete details to draw us into the story? Which sensory descriptions – smells, sounds, or visuals, for example – are most difficult to forget after the story is over? As students discuss, annotate the story using a document camera to model how students should take notes during group work.
4. **Analyze author craft in small groups. (7 minutes)** Divide students into groups according to their story selections from the previous day to analyze the following tools the writers used to create their stories. Give the following questions on separate slips of paper to individual students and let them find others who have the same task.
 - Character** – Where do you see the author focusing on character? Which passages work to make the story’s characters feel real? What details or moments from the story tell us who these people are and help put us in their shoes?
 - Setting** – Which passages give important details about the world in which the story takes place? Which details about the setting seem most important and why? Where are we given information about the time period in which this story takes place? If time allows, students may benefit from reading more than one of these stories in an inquiry-based genre study unit, discovering for themselves what storytelling techniques make them successful.
 - Plot/Movement** – Which passages in the beginning of the story include hooks or mysterious details that draw the reader in? How does the author sustain the reader’s interest throughout the story by building on those mysteries or hooks? What are you reading to find out? As students discuss, the teacher should circulate and give the groups guidance, helping them to select and analyze passages. Students should be encouraged to talk about how the author uses the assigned craft element in each passage.
5. **Discuss author craft as a class. (10 minutes)** Once each group has traced the use of each element throughout the story, discuss each group's findings with the class as a whole. Ask each group to read the passages students found aloud, and encourage students to make notes about techniques they could borrow in writing their own stories.
6. **Analyze theme as a whole class. (5 minutes)** Distribute the final slips to each group, which ask them:
 - Theme** – What themes, or ideas, come to mind as we are reading this story?

How does the story cause us to think about some social issue or element of human nature? How does the author use patterns in the details of the story to accomplish this?

7. **Ask students to read the student-written historical fiction model, “The Black Poppy” by Kristina B. for homework.** This WWII-centered story provides a good example of how a strong historical setting can play a part in a story’s plot. It is available on *Teen Ink*, a literary magazine for teens at: https://www.teenink.com/fiction/historical_fiction/article/63690/The-Black-Poppy/.

Day Three

1. **Discuss the pleasure of the student-written story as readers. (5 minutes)** Ask students: what did you think? What were your favorite parts? What were you reading to find out? What moved you, scared you, bothered you, or entertained you? Did anything confuse you? What made you stop and think?
2. **Analyze author craft with shoulder partners. (10 minutes)** Have students discuss the teen writer’s craft with shoulder partners. How does s/he use image, character, story, and setting to draw the reader in? What moves does she make that you could borrow in your own stories? Compare/contrast the techniques and structures in the two fictions. What techniques could students borrow?
3. **Set aside time for brainstorming. (10 minutes)** Give students time to brainstorm ideas for their own short story. Have students answer the following questions about their story ideas (encourage reflection and talking with shoulder partners, as needed):
 - What is the inciting historical event that kicks off your story?
 - Where and when will the story take place?
 - Who are the main character(s)?
 - What is the conflict or struggle for those characters? What major decision(s) will they make along the way?
 - How will the plot “move”? How might the story end?
 - What ideas or issues am I interested in exploring?
4. **Set aside time for writing. (15 minutes)** Encourage students to start writing as soon as they are ready. Students who are stumped may be offered a choice of first-line story starters, so they can think about ideas for a historical short story that uses that sentence as its first line:
 - It was his letters which kept her going, the only parts of a chaotic, war-torn time of peace and love that told her everything was still okay.
 - The mornings weren’t ever quite as lovely as the ritzy parties which took place the nights before.
 - It was to be a truly unforgettable day, though when the world awoke that morning it didn’t quite know exactly how.
 - It had been a long time since he’d seen home, heard from home, spoke of home, or even thought of home for that matter.
5. **Set aside time for sharing. (5 minutes)** Students should be encouraged to share the openings of their stories or their story ideas.

Day Four and Beyond

1. **Encourage workshopping, revising, and editing. (as time allows)** Students should be encouraged to continue working on their stories in and out of class, and to workshop, revise, and edit their stories.

Bibliography

- Clark, Roy Peter. *The Art of X-Ray Reading: How the Secrets of 25 Great Works of Literature will Improve Your Writing*. New York, New York: Little, Brown. 2016.
- Fleischer, Cathy and Sarah Andrew-Vaughn. *Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone: Helping Students Navigate Unfamiliar Genres*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann. 2009.
- Wood Ray, Katie. "Reading Like Writers." *Wondrous Words*. Chapter. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE. 1999.complete contest rules.