



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Hardboiled: Noir Style Sequence

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Course: English 1147

Course Title: The Mystery in the Story

Year of Award: Fall 2009

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Winner

## Fall 2009 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice, coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

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The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 11. No exceptions can be made.

## Fall 2009 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name Christopher LIRETTE

Department ENGL Course # and title 1147 Mystery in the Story

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copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to the Knight Institute ([knight\\_institute@cornell.edu](mailto:knight_institute@cornell.edu)). I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

Hard boiled Noir Style Sequence

Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature Christopher Lirette Date 5 feb 2010

## Rationale

I designed this sequence of exercises for a two-fold purpose: foremost, to make my students conscious of the decisions writers make when creating a “voice” and of the results of those decisions; and secondly, to make my students examine their own stylistic decisions that contribute to their voices. The students analyze and imitate the hardboiled prose style of Raymond Chandler, focusing on how particular usages of passive/active voice, vocabulary, figurative language, and diction can imbue the text with a certain message (potentially a morality, ideology, aesthetic framework, or attitude) as much as the content can—if not more.

The sequence falls directly after six weeks of work on analytic essays, focusing on writing topics such as thesis sentences, appropriate use of evidence, and logical organization. I intended for this sequence to come as both a break from “serious” essays and as a method to creatively address an easily overlooked topic within critical papers: how style choices affect voice. Although the paper at the end of this sequence is a fun topic, allowing some liberties in terms of form and possibility, it still fulfills an academic purpose. Instead of giving students an option to write a story or another, looser essay, I geared the prompt towards maintaining critical thinking: the students not only have to mimic noir prose, they have to do so while analyzing the credibility of another fictional private detective.

For the critical thinking aspect of this assignment, the students are asked to look deeper into how a moral world can be accessed through choices in diction, syntax, and word choice. This facet of writing is crucial to explore with students, as I experienced this fall, because they often are completely aloof as to what subtexts and prejudices come out in their writing. By calling their attention to how Chandler’s Marlowe constructs a world-view through his narration, I show students how examining “what one is saying” is potentially insufficient. In penetrating the mystery of “how one says it,” I encourage the students to be more cognizant of their own writing decisions

# Noir Style Sequence

In preparation for this sequence and for reading Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, I immediately pointed out Chandler's distinctive style, which is terse, direct, and sentimentally lyrical—using vivid and surreal similes. I lectured on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October on figurative language, paying close attention to Chandler's particular use of the simile. I explained terms such as *tenor* and *vehicle*, and urged the students to explore the relationship between the real object or situation and the fantasmatic vehicle. I thus began the foundations for showing how Chandler (and every writer) layers and ranks meanings within the sentence level, and how one can tease out a spectral layer that can indicate the author's attitude.

That evening, I screened *The Maltese Falcon*.

## Activity One

*Blackboard Post*, due before class time online; printed, and brought to class.

*Prompt:*

Write a personal reaction of about three to four hundred words on *The Maltese Falcon*. First, identify the plot and detail its various twists. Then describe the characters and your opinion of them, concentrating on Sam Spade and Ruth Wonderly/Brigid O'Shaugnessy. Make sure to point to moments in the film that cause you to admire/suspect/question them. Post to Blackboard and print out your responses for class.

Also, bring in three examples of outrageously apt similes from *The Big Sleep* (such as "Dead men are heavier than broken hearts"). These similes may be descriptive, maudlin, absurd, or shocking. Make sure yours are at least fun.

## Activity Two

Before this exercise, we further discussed similes, sharing the Chandler examples I asked them to bring in. We questioned why Chandler uses similes in the moments he does, and why the content of the similes works for his hardboiled project, especially how they do not necessarily undermine the noir outlook (due to their floridness) but rather complicate the otherwise straight-forward narration.

*Personal writing exercise*, in class, 16 October.

*Spoken prompt:*

Take the next five minutes or so to underline each instance of the passive voice and indirect statements ("It seems that...", etc). Also note with an asterisk any moments where your description is boring or otherwise needs more vivid description.

Next, take another five minutes to write one Chandler-esque simile to describe one of your asterisked moments.

After the exercise, we shared the newly created similes to the delight of all.

### Activity Three

*Revision of the personal response, due 19 October.*

*Prompt:*

Over the weekend, I want you to revise your personal response to *The Maltese Falcon* as if you were Raymond Chandler. I want hard prose, no-nonsense attitude, fast women and faster guns, and wild and sentimental similes. Now that you are almost through with *The Big Sleep*, you will notice that Marlowe's personal reflections take up as much space as the convoluted plot. In this exercise, give your reader the impression that not only is the action hardboiled, but so are you.

When writing, note the points where you changed your voice to Chandler's. What did you do? How did you arrange your syntax? Where did you choose to add metaphorical language? Pay close attention to passive and active voice, but do not forget where you changed your language from vague to direct and explicit. Although the film you are writing about has its complexities, articulate them so that the reader makes no mistake as to what is going on.

### Activity Four

*Small group discussion, 19 October, two per group.*

*Spoken prompt:*

Take ten minutes to read your partner's response. Does it successfully evoke the noir universe of Mr. Chandler? Are the similes bright, desperate, and troubling? Most of all, is the prose direct and punchy? When we reconvene, we will examine what these changes do to the prose with examples from your writing and discuss how you can use certain stylistic techniques to enrich your writing.

Once reconvened, we discussed the choices they made in trying to capture Chandler's aesthetic. Throughout our study of *The Big Sleep*, we had been trying to pin down Chandler's world-view. This discussion culminated in this seminar, where we showed the origins of the paradoxes of the noir universe (the misogyny and homophobia tied with an inherent sense of the goodness of people, etc) to be within the sentence-level choices of the narration. Once articulating the different aspects of Chandler's aesthetic—the masculine posturing of the down-to-business narration, the sense of rot beneath an everyday reality through his similes, the sense of "heart" beneath even the worst characters also through the similes, the paternalistic condescension of women through vocabulary choices, etc—we were able to pinpoint some techniques in creating both a character and the world she inhabits.

Essay prompt handed out at the screening for *Chinatown* that night.

## Essay 4: N O I R

You never thought it'd happen. Just like that your business dries up like the coroner's breath against a stiff's eyeglasses. No, it wasn't the adoption of the Hays Code, though that too left you plenty a night with eyes sore and tongue thicker than sin. The damn Pinkertons moved into town. And by Pinkertons, I mean the honest-to-god detective-for-hire agency from San Francisco. You never thought the way of a shamus would be anything more than living the hard, honest life—finding truth when there's truth to be found, etc. But it's corporate now like anything else returning from war.

You've never worked well in pairs, let alone as a company man, and so you've let your last few dimes run out. Now you're hungrier than the dog at the flophouse and need to sign on and wear the unblinking Pinkerton eye. Problem is, they won't let just anyone in, especially not you. They want someone who'll never sleep and stay away from the floozies. They want someone who won't go busting holes through hotel walls and won't expose their little operation. They've set up a little test for you, and it's a doozy. They have a little room set up where they play movies just for you, archival footage of two other private dicks and two of the best at that. And here's the whammy: they want you to critique their cases.

You knew Spade was the Pinkerton's number one guy, but you only heard of him since he's way out in San Fran. You can't believe, on the other hand, that Gittes punches the Pinkerton clock. Jake, you've run into before, became pals just before Pearl Harbor when your jurisdictions overlapped: you representing a poor bastard, him representing the guy's two-timing wife. In any case, there's a reel of one of his cases from the 30s and another from a famous Spade case in 1941. OK, but what do you have to do?

You got to **write a report** that does two things—**show you're a stand-up guy** and **compare either Spade or Jake to your efforts**. The Pinkertons are not necessarily looking for a list of wrongdoings. They want to know what their guys are doing right too. And they want to know how you're like them. Use a good case of yours, maybe the one about that porn racket and the old general who was as sad and noble as anyone in Dostoevsky. Show how you got the mettle and the hunger and that you're more than competent in dealing with the local wildlife.

They don't want you to be afraid to let a little personality come through. After all, this is the Pinkertons we're talking about, not some rinky-dink bowling club. They want to know you got the stuff they're looking for. So write vividly and clearly. Keep a shamus's sense of acute observation, a lawyer's silver-tongued logic, and a poet's eye for figurative language. You want to keep the Pinks reading. Your livelihood depends on it.

**Specs**

4-6 pages

Pinkerton job application  
hardboiled prose with a heart  
keen insights into shamus profession  
free of grammatical difficulties  
printed, stapled or clipped

draft for peer review due in class on 23 October 2009  
handed in (in person) on 30 October 2009 at 10:15 a.m.