

I have slept what feels like 5 minutes. I will have 4 classes today and one session of tutoring. Her selective speech complicates learning. She's behind in reading, and I'm the closest thing to certified. Certifiable is more like it. The anxiety keeps my mind churning and my head throbs from grinding my teeth.

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 12:01 PM

Comment: You could use an antecedent for this pronoun.

My son has been home for over a month. He's 15 and has mono. While rest is what is needed, it doesn't look any different than when he is well. Boys and phones and video games. They are zombies. I have no idea when he will be well, when he can return to swimming. It seems to be the only physical activity that will hold his interest. He has slept through the entire semester of Algebra, disengaged and drifting further away. He's self medicating, vaping in class, in the hall. My heart aches.

Through the night, I have exchanged emails with a mother whose child will join our class today. She casually mentions she will bring instructions for the epi-pen which remedies any reaction to multiple allergens. I attempt to sound unfazed, while my chest tightens. My brain is saturated with remembering how to be uniquely present to so many people. My assertive and proactive personal gains from family counseling, ironically which I've attended alone, are in decline. The once strong person, can no longer stop herself with the mantra of 'no tears.' I no longer feel the tears running down my cheeks. I'm a pro at lifting my glasses and clearing my eyes. No one's noticing anyway.

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 12:02 PM

Comment: When you're tempted to put a comma between the subject and verb, that's a clue that you need to rework the sentence.

My colleague is cleaning our portion of the cafeteria table so we can share our 5 minutes of a peaceful coffee. We diet together, we laugh about our midnight texts, share our most sacred news, quickly, behind screening hands. Our secretive talk

ends soon enough, when a counselor asks to speak with me for just a moment. News she needs to share, that's never good. At this point, I hope I can do justice to this conversation. She says the acting out that happened in my class stems from newly discovered abuse. It's almost a relief because now it makes sense. The comments, the determined and deliberate awkwardly age- inappropriate statements that told a story never meant for story time. My soul weeps. My brain engages how we can best support this child. My eyes begin to cloud.

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 12:04 PM

Comment: See end note.

I feel like such a snake oil salesman, knowing if these parents could see my failures they would call for my resignation. But they haven't and they trust my sincerity, my reputation of loving the slowest and most annoying child. I look at the reports from former teachers, but know a child is more than a number. He is the future of my community. He may pull me from my burning home one day, having become a volunteer fireman, just like his faithful principal. His home may have been raw and frightening, but he will know Miss Janey will have his cereal and juice at free breakfast just after Mr. Smith had safely delivered him to school. He locks eyes with me knowing I will always come and pick up 'my kids' with a loving hug and a happy heart. 'She won't forget me, today or forever.' And he's right; I never will.

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 12:06 PM

Comment: See end note...

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 12:07 PM

Comment: If this is an important point, do more with it. If it's not an important point, get rid of it.

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 12:09 PM

Comment: Who is Mr. Smith? (And who is Miss Janey)? You may be better off identifying these figures as Mr. Smith the bus-driver and Miss Janey the lunchroom lady.

For now, we will wash the hectic rush from our hands and begin our work for the day. Prepared or not, this day will unfold like the nap time mat, and we will rest in our routine. We will set our anxieties in the cubbies beside the few homemade lunches and hang up our super hero sweaters and coats. Little legs fold and arms cross in laps comfortably on the floor. Faces soften. We read a book, giggling and acting out, as we should, every rhyme and every rhythm. Even as we belly laugh and

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 1:57 PM

Comment: I love this image!

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 2:01 PM

Comment: In the next sentence you shift from future tense to present tense. It's best to avoid such shifts, but I agree with your choice to make an exception here. I think, however, that this sentence is the one in which to make the shift. Something along these lines:
"So we set our anxieties in the cubbies..."

Jonathan Rogers 9/18/19 1:58 PM

Comment: Yes! Now you're giving the reader something to look at.

rock back and forth, our souls are calm, even for a brief few hours. No snake oil, just an understood trust steeped in a safe and peaceful teacup. Everyone's included, all are welcome, all are loved. For a while, we will forget what is beyond the walls, beyond our control, and we will rest in this now of peace.

Laura—

I love the movement of this story: a teacher comes to school with a lot on her mind, exhausted, suspecting she's a charlatan since she can't really get her own home life together, yet here she is trying to make a difference in the lives of other people's kids. But then, when it's time to deliver, she finds what she needs, and she delivers.

The important movement here is internal movement. HOWEVER, one of your main jobs as a fiction writer is to figure out how to externalize that movement so that it's out here where the rest of us can look at it. It might be a helpful exercise to go through this piece and ask yourself, *where is the narrator describing her own inner processes, and where is she describing things that are happening outside her head?* You'll find that, until the last 8 or 10 lines, this story is overwhelmingly interior. This narrator is saying, "Here's what I feel, and here's why I feel it." But then, when she says, "This day will unfold like a naptime mat," it's as if a switch has flipped, and now you've left abstract world and re-entered the concrete world where your reader lives. Can you feel the difference in those last few lines? Your reader wants more of that.

Here's another helpful exercise. Imagine you're a moviemaker. How would you show that this narrator feels like a failure and/or a snake oil salesman (assuming you don't use voiceover in which she tells what she's thinking)? Solve that problem, and you're a long way toward making this story work. I'm not saying you should *only* show and never tell; as I said, the real movement is interior, and it wouldn't be

surprising if there are ideas that are best expressed by the narrator giving voice to her own inner life. For instance, "I feel like such a snake-oil salesman." I've got no complaints about that direct statement of the narrator's feelings. But what I'd ALSO like to see is some action (or series of actions) that SHOW me why she might feel that way. So not a general summarization—*my son has mono, but he's usually that lazy even when he doesn't have mono*—but a specific, concrete action (or actions).

Maybe you depict that scene in the counselor's office—not in general, summarized terms, but in-scene, with dialogue—and all the while the narrator is clutching a suspension notice that her son received for vaping in school. You can convey a lot of the narrator's inner state without her having to say, "Here, dear reader, is what is currently happening inside of me." Imagine if the counselor says something like, "This poor child doesn't know what it's like to have a loving parent. We're her only hope of stability those few hours she's here." Then the narrator crumples the suspension notice that's still in her hand and thinks back to the yelling match she and her son had as she left the house to be the loving parent to these other people's kids. Then the reader is already thinking, "This poor woman must feel like a hypocrite" even before she says, "I feel like such a snake-oil salesman." That's how the old "show-don't-tell" thing works...it's not that you always show and never tell, but by showing you allow the reader to reach conclusions that you may solidify by telling (or perhaps you decide that you have shown well enough that you don't have to tell at all).

So for this little piece of micro-fiction, you're looking for an action or two that shows the reader why the narrator feels like a fraud, and then you're looking for the action that shows what changes, what gives our narrator the courage to move forward into the day. In writing a short story, it's helpful to think in terms of that one action after which nothing can be the same. That's all you've got space for in a short story: one action, one scene, that changes things for the protagonist. In this case, maybe it's not that things will *never* be the same for our protagonist. She may have to go through this whole process again tomorrow. But things will change enough that she can go into the classroom and do her job that day.

One more related thing I want you to pay attention to is a tendency to use abstract language rather than concrete. Consider this clause:

...the acting out that happened in my class stems from newly discovered abuse.

What is the grammatical subject of that clause? The gerund "acting out." And what is the verb? "Stems from." There is real action behind that sentence, with real actors. There's a student who is acting out in class. There is a parent who is abusing that child. But neither the student nor the parent appears in that sentence. Instead, the actions become noun-equivalents. The verb (stems from) isn't an action; it's just a connector word. So the reader has nothing to look at. I don't even know if it's a boy or a girl who's been acting out. But consider what happens when you align subjects and verbs with actors and actions. First, it forces you to name the actors. *Dustin. His mother.* Now I've got a little boy and a mother to look at. But then the question

arises, what did Dustin do? What did his mother do? And in this case, you also have to decide how specific and concrete you want to be in depicting those actions. But for purposes of this commentary, let's be pretty concrete and specific. And to do that, you will probably end up splitting that sentence into more than one:

"I wanted to talk to you about Dustin," said Cindy, the school counselor.

"Dustin," I repeated, and tried to smile. But it's hard to muster a smile for Dustin. Or very much compassion.

"All that hair-pulling and pushing and yelling..." she began.

"And cursing," I added. "During storytime."

"Yes. Cursing." Cindy looked down at a folder on her desk. "Well, it looks like he comes by it honest. We found out why he missed school yesterday." She paused again, then finally looked up at me. "His mother was arrested night before last.

Aggravated child abuse. The neighbors called 911." She had started to cry. "Dustin will be back in your classroom this morning. He'll have a cast on his arm."

"Poor Dustin," I gasped. Now I was crying too.

Obviously, a passage like that takes more words than the more abstract "the acting out stemmed from abuse." That means you have to be more choosy about what gets included and what doesn't. The epi-pen may have to go, and the son's affinity for swimming will probably go too. But that's ok. You're going to accomplish a lot more with a few well-chosen and fully-depicted actions than with a stream-of-consciousness brain dump by the narrator.