Every Picture Tells a Story

There is an old saying that “every picture tells a story.” The fact is that when we see an illustration, a painting, or a photograph, our imaginations go to work creating a back story to explain what we see in that single still image. Why are the figures in the picture where they are? Why are they doing what they’re doing? If we don’t know, we create a story in our heads to explain the picture to ourselves. Creative writing involves the same kind of process.

Let’s experiment. Shut your eyes and visualize a scene in your mind. What do you see? Who are the people? Where are they? What are they doing? Why are they doing it? How did they get where they are? Is it day or night? If you answer enough of these questions you will begin to find yourself writing a story in your head.

Your ability to imagine is based on what you know about how real life works. Your personal experience, the experiences of your friends and family, what you have seen on TV or in the movies, what you have read in books—all these things seep into your imagination and allow you to create a detailed scenario. Your mind establishes the parameters or boundaries for “real life” and “fantasy.” You know what’s probable, what’s possible, and what’s impossible without having to bring in a story consultant or look something up.

Use your natural gifts for creating mental stories as you begin to work on this Unit’s writing project. In this lesson, you are going to be asked to brainstorm ideas for a short story based on a real-life situation. The story itself doesn’t have to be true—remember that most short stories are fictional—but it does have to be possible. As you know “possible” and “probable” are not always the same thing. This difference provides you with a good deal of imaginative license. In other words, vampires, unicorns, talking animals and colonies on Alpha Centauri are out, but accidents, natural disasters, television appearances, trips to Bali, visits to old English castles, and lottery wins could be part of your plot because all those things are possible. What would appeal to your audience? Your audience would include anyone who might want to read your story (in addition to your instructor). What will your brainstorming session come up with? Do you already have a great idea? If you want some help, contact your instructor right now for some brainstorming assistance. “Two heads,” as another old saying goes, “are better than one.”

Your story can be as close to your real life, or as completely alien to your real life, as you want to make it. For this particular writing project, make sure it is a realistic short story.