

FREE

one story

VOL. 1

A WRITER'S

FIELD GUIDE

TO NEW YORK CITY



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WHAT IS ONE STORY?

Founded in 2002, One Story is an award-winning, 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Gowanus, Brooklyn, dedicated to celebrating the short story and supporting the authors who write them—through publication, education, and mentorship.

Each month, our subscribers get **one short story in the mail** or on their digital devices. Our innovative, one-story-at-a-time format is the same size as the chapbook you're holding in your hands right now. Our goal is to make short fiction accessible and fun, forging an intimate connection between reader and writer and allowing each author to take center stage. Committed to showcasing the best established and up-and-coming voices, our magazine publishes authors only once. One Story also hosts innovative **writing programs, events, and classes**, both online and in-person.

To join our community of readers and writers, visit one-story.com.

WHAT IS THIS GUIDE?

Just as artists sketch in museums or out in nature, a writer stepping away from their desk and engaging in the world can bring new life to their work. This **Writer's Field Guide** was created to jumpstart the imagination with generative exercises inspired by New York City landmarks.

These exercises are meant to be enjoyed in-person across the five boroughs. Each has a different focus to improve your craft, whether it's finding the perfect detail at the **New York Botanical Garden** in the Bronx, developing dialogue on the **Staten Island Ferry**, changing point of view at the **New York Public Library**, plotting wild action at the **American Museum of Natural History**, creating characters at **Green-Wood Cemetery**, playing with narrative distance at the **Queens Museum**, or using setting to tell a deeper story at **Brooklyn Bridge Park**.

We hope this Writer's Field Guide will inspire you to step outside and pen a new contribution to the literary history of New York City.

One Story would like to give special thanks to the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs for supporting this project.

NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN

- The Bronx is named after **Jonas Bronck**, a Swedish farmer who settled in the area in 1639.
- The New York Botanical Garden, established in 1891, is a **national landmark** and one of the largest botanical gardens in the world.
- The **Thain Family Forest** is the largest existing remnant of the original old-growth forest that once covered all of New York City and contains trees that are over two centuries old.

The following exercise can be done anywhere in the garden, but the best writing spots (with the most seating and plant options) are the Native Plant Garden, with winding paths, wildflowers and benches surrounding a beautiful reflection pool, and the Perennial and Herb Gardens outside the Haupt Conservatory, which offer a dense and rich variety of wonderfully curated specimens and places to sit and admire them. After you enter the park, we suggest making your way to one of these two areas.

Tour the garden. Take pictures of any plants you find interesting along the way. Then choose one you feel drawn to. If you recognize what kind of plant it is (or if it is labeled with a plaque), you should ignore those facts, and instead pretend that it is an entirely new species.

Imagine that *you are the expert* on this plant. You know *everything* about it. People from all over the world come and talk with you about it, and you are now



writing an entry for the New York Botanical Garden Encyclopedia. Answer the following questions quickly, without thinking too much. Your answers don't have to be complete sentences. A few words for each will suffice.

1. Give your plant a fake scientific Latin name (such as "Plantius Purple-us")
2. What does your plant look like?
3. What does it smell like?
4. What does it feel like?
5. What does it taste like? (Just imagine, don't actually taste!)
6. What is its growing season?
7. What kind of soil or landscape does it grow in?
8. What part of the world is it from?
9. What year was it first discovered?
10. Who discovered it?
11. What are its medicinal properties?
12. What is its cultural significance?

When you've finished, take a look at your list. How did it feel to answer these questions? When did your fake plant start to seem real? Write a scene where the expert tells someone about this plant—a student, tourist, or plant-shop customer.

*This exercise is about **description and narrative authority**. Remember that you are the expert on any fictional world you create! The right details and imaginary facts can make your reader believe.*

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

- Founded in 1869, the AMNH is an active scientific research center, containing over **30 million specimens** of animals, plants, fungi, fossils, minerals, rocks, meteorites, and cultural artifacts.
- The museum contains a model of the largest mammal on earth, the **blue whale** (94 feet), as well as a skeleton of the largest dinosaur, the **titanosaur** (122 feet).
- The exhibits in the **Hall of North American Mammals** recreate real places in nature and are widely considered the finest examples of taxidermy and dioramas in the world.

Make your way to the Hall of North American Mammals and tour the room, including the small mammal corridor. Then, choose your favorite diorama and return to it. Write down some of the facts provided on the information plaque, as well as any details you notice about the scene.

PART 1: PREDATOR VS. PREY. Is your animal a hunter? Or one of the hunted? Write a scene from your animal's point of view describing the chase. Be sure to include any details you've noticed, as well as images from the beautiful backgrounds painted by artist James Perry Wilson.

- Begin by describing the setting and some sign of the hidden predator or prey (tracks in the mud, scat, a piece of broken antler, a half-eaten salmon).

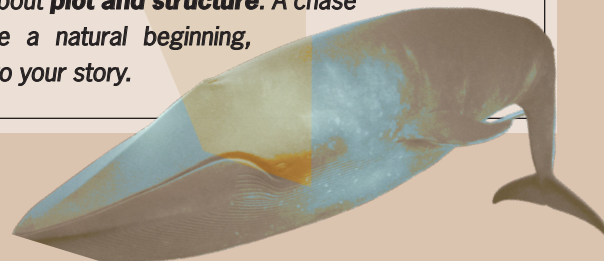
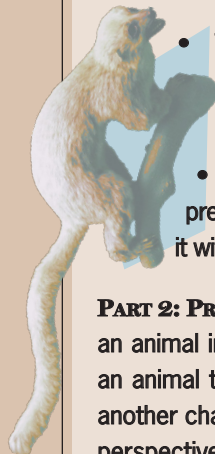
- Next, the prey (or predator) appears. How do they enter the scene? Crashing through trees? Silently watching from above on a limb overhead?

- The chase begins! How does the predator try to corner the prey? How does the prey try to escape? Put action on the page and give the chase a few twists and turns.

- The chase ends. Did the prey escape? If so, how? If the predator caught the prey, what happens next? Do they share it with their pack, dig in alone, or accidentally release it?

PART 2: PREY VS. PREDATOR. If your animal was a hunter, go find an animal in the exhibit hall that is hunted. If you originally chose an animal that is hunted, go and find one that hunts. Now, write another chase scene, using the same prompts, from the opposite perspective. Go deep into the fear—or bloodlust—and make sure there's lots of action along the way. If you want, you can throw a human being into the mix and write from their point of view. Are they hunting—or hunted by—the animals behind the glass?

*This exercise is about **plot and structure**. A chase scene will create a natural beginning, middle, and end to your story.*



NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

- Opened in 1911, the NYPL's main branch is a premier research center, renowned for its collection of over **56 million items**.
- The two **marble lions** that guard the entrance of the library are named *Patience* and *Fortitude*.
- The **Rose Reading Room** is the length of two city blocks—with 42 oak tables, chairs for 624 readers, and 52-foot-tall ceilings displaying murals of the sky.

On the third floor of the NYPL's main branch, you'll find the entrance to the Rose Reading Room. Go through the catalog room and into the main hall. The walls of the Rose Reading Room are filled with 52,000 reference books, covering a wide variety of topics. The short bookcases house literary classics. Browse the shelves and choose a book, then bring it to one of the shared table spots.

1. Write one paragraph using first person as the point of view (**I**), about a person choosing this book and reading it at this table. The first person can be you, or a fictional character you've made up. Here are a few prompts to get started:

- What did **I** notice when I walked into this room?
- What drew **me** to this book?
- What does the book look like?
- What does it remind **me** of?
- What's inside?

2. Write another paragraph, this time using third person as the point of view (**he/she/they**), describing someone else choosing the same book. This third person narrator should be different



from the previous character, and approaching the book from a new perspective.

- Upon entering this room, what do **they** notice (is it different from the other narrator)?
- Describe the same book from **their** point of view.
- What made *this* narrator choose it from the shelf?
- What does it remind **them** of?
- What do **they** hope to learn from it?

3. Write a third paragraph using second person (**you**), from the point of view of **the book**, about what it's like to be read by one of the characters (either the first person version or the third person version). To create this unusual perspective, imagine the book having thoughts and feelings, then ask yourself:

- What do **you** (the book) think about being in this room or on that particular shelf?
- How does it feel to be read by someone?
- Describe the person who chose **you**. What kind of person do **you** think they are?
- What do **you** think when **you** are put back on the shelf?

If writing from the point of view of a book is too challenging, make "you" a human reader and follow the previous prompts in second person. Keep these paragraphs short, about 3–4 sentences each, but if you feel inspired by a certain voice, keep going.

*This exercise plays with **point of view**. The choice of first, second, or third can alter not only the tone of your writing, but also the direction your story goes!*

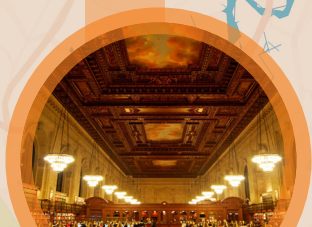




**AMERICAN MUSEUM
OF NATURAL HISTORY**



**NEW YORK
BOTANICAL GARDEN**



**NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY**



QUEENS MUSEUM



**BROOKLYN
BRIDGE PARK**



**STATEN
ISLAND FERRY**



**GREEN-WOOD
CEMETERY**

QUEENS MUSEUM

- Queens is New York's largest borough and has one of the **most ethnically diverse populations** in the United States.
- The **Unisphere** was designed by Gilmore David Clarke for the 1964 World's Fair and is the largest globe model in the world.
- The Queens Museum building was the first home of the **United Nations** (from 1946–1950).

Inside the Queens Museum, you'll find The Panorama of the City of New York, a model of New York City that includes every single building constructed before 1992 in all five boroughs of NYC, at a scale of 1 in=100 ft. Conceived by Robert Moses for the 1964 World's Fair, the original Panorama took a hundred people three years to build.

After you enter the Panorama, walk the periphery of the model and get a sense of the overall space. Take some pictures of anything that interests you. Then find a spot where you can be comfortable writing (either in the model room or on one of the benches outside).

1. Using the Panorama as inspiration, establish the setting from a wide-lens view of New York City. Imagine yourself as a distant observer sharing specific, precise details of the place. Write a paragraph about the city from a zoomed out distance. Consider time, history, buildings, landscapes.



2. Then, zoom in on a particular neighborhood, borough, or block. Write a paragraph that takes place there. What do you imagine and see?

3. Finally, move to writing about a specific person or multiple people. Imagine them in this neighborhood and the building they are in or in front of. Who are they? What are they doing? What is the time of this setting? Zoom in closer to find more specificity.

Put these characters in action in this place. Have them interact with other people and things. Keep writing and see where it goes!

*This exercise explores **narrative distance**.*

A story can benefit from wide shots that create an overview and deliver information, as well as close-ups that allow for more specificity and character exploration.



BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK

- In 1884, **P.T. Barnum** marched 21 elephants and 17 camels across the Brooklyn Bridge to prove it was steady.
- The **Manhattan Bridge** opened in 1909 and was the first suspension bridge to use a Warren truss, a weight-bearing design using equilateral triangles.
- **Jane's Carousel**, originally built in Ohio in 1922, was restored and brought to Brooklyn by artist Jane Walentas in 2011.

After entering the park, make your way to the western edge of Pier One, where you'll find Granite Prospect, a set of stone steps overlooking the harbor.

AT GRANITE PROSPECT:

Take a seat on the granite steps or on a nearby bench. Describe the New York City skyline from the perspective of one of the following:

- Someone who has just arrived and is excited to get to know the city
- A character who grew up in the city and is coming home
- A character who feels betrayed by the city and is leaving

The character can be looking back on a memory or encountering it in real time. From the description you create, we should know



where the character is at this point in their life, how they feel about themselves, and what lies ahead for them.

Begin with the first sentence: "From this distance, the city was not what I expected."

AT JANE'S CAROUSEL:

Make your way to Jane's Carousel and find a spot where you can both observe the setting and write comfortably.

In this scene you will describe a character in a specific setting. You can continue with the character from Granite Prospect or pick a new person to follow here. Describe a day at Jane's Carousel that doesn't go as planned, and start with a paragraph of description that has immediate tension.

Begin with the first sentence: "Things didn't go as planned at the carousel."

Setting tells us something about place, but we become interested when setting reveals something about character. By leaning into the setting, a writer can reveal how a character is feeling, create action by having them interact with their environment, illustrate their personal habits, or highlight the overall theme of their story.



GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY

- Founded in 1838 and now a National Historic Landmark, Green-Wood is an accredited **level III arboretum**.
- Over **75 green monk parakeets** live in the cemetery's gothic arched entrance.
- **Celebrities** buried there include Leonard Bernstein and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Green-Wood covers 478 acres, so be sure to wear your walking shoes! Wander for at least 20 minutes and look for a gravesite that you find interesting. **Please remember this is an active cemetery. Be respectful and aware of your surroundings.*

In this exercise, we're going to be using historical grave markers to inspire fictional characters.

THE FACTS. Write down the name of the deceased, the year they died, and any other information on the gravesite—if they were married or had children (look nearby, the graves of their relatives are probably close). If there is an inscription, write that down too.

Once you've gathered some facts, focus on the setting. Describe the gravesite. How big is it? What kind of stone was used? Touch the stone—what does it feel like? Try to bring in

as many sensory details as possible and be extremely specific about the details, not just of the grave but the surrounding area.

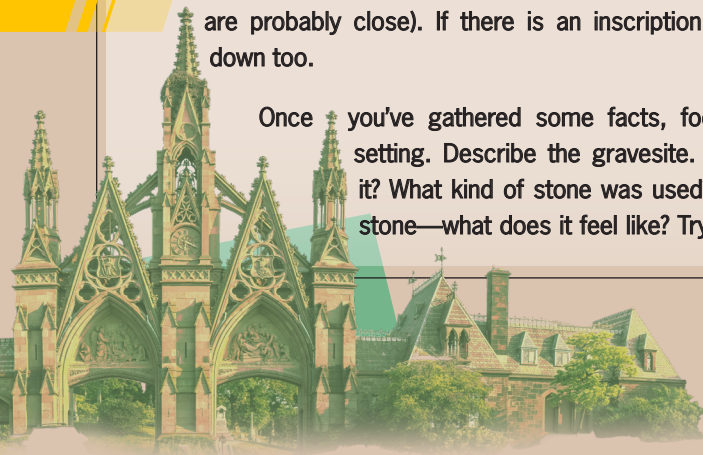
THE CHARACTER. Read the facts you've gathered about the deceased, as well as the details of their final resting place, and use your imagination to fill in some of the blanks about what kind of person they were.

Start by answering the following questions:

- What did they look like?
- What were they good at?
- How did they die?
- Who did they love?
- What was their favorite food?
- What was a secret they never told anyone?
- Were they closer to their mother or father?
- What did they want in life?

Now that you know a bit of their history, write a one-paragraph description of your character physically doing something. It can be simple, like pouring a glass of water, or more complicated—like proposing marriage or burying a loved one. Be sure to use the info gathered in the “Facts” section of this exercise to influence how your character appears on the page, and always keep in mind what they want, as that will influence what they say or do, as well as the choices they make.

*A few sharp details, especially when a **character** is physically active, can make them more memorable for your reader.*



STATEN ISLAND FERRY

- The Staten Island Ferry carries about **22 million passengers** each year, averaging 70,000 passengers on a typical weekday.
- The ferry runs a **5.2-mile route** across New York Harbor.
- One of the current ferries, **Sandy Ground**, is named after the oldest continuously settled free black community in the United States, located on Staten Island.

After boarding the ferry, find a spot where you can sit and write comfortably, but also near other people, so that you can easily eavesdrop on conversations. If weather permits, outside seats are better, as that's where groups of tourists gather to sightsee.

PART 1: GATHER SOME DIALOGUE. For the duration of the first crossing (about 20 minutes), jot down anything interesting that people are saying around you. You don't need whole conversations. It should simply be a collection of random lines. Here are a few examples (overheard on a crossing from Manhattan to Staten Island):

"Does this thing have a top?"

"I'm not sure what that lady wanted."

"Mommy, mommy, I can see a statue!"

"Familiarize yourself with the placards."

"He was quarantined on Ellis Island."

"Did you see that fish flip?"

"Your hair is crazy wild."

After the ferry docks, all passengers must disembark. After exiting, follow signs for the Staten Island Ferry and you can re-board the same boat for its return trip.

PART 2: SPEED-WRITE A CONVERSATION. On this second crossing, find a place to sit, then do a speed-write, starting with a line of dialogue that you collected on your first crossing (you can set your scene on the Staten Island Ferry, or somewhere else, if you're feeling inspired). Focus on the dialogue and think about who is talking and why they might be saying what they are saying. Add a disagreement or something unexpected that someone might say in return. If you get stuck, return to your overheard list and pick another line to get things moving again.

*This exercise will help you build your **dialogue** skills. It's a great way to reveal character, move the plot forward, and add some surprising elements to your story. Keep writing until the ferry horn blows!*



New York Botanical Garden, American Museum of Natural History, New
York Public Library, Green-Wood Cemetery, and Staten Island Ferry
exercises by Hannah Tinti

Queen's Museum exercise by Lisa Ko

Brooklyn Bridge Park exercise by Irina Reyn

Booklet design by J.L. Zhang

Founded in 2002 by Maribeth Batcha and Hannah Tinti, One Story celebrates contemporary literary short stories and publishes, educates, and mentors the authors who write them. We believe that the short story is a necessary art form, that all authors should be treated equally, that the practice of writing fiction has value, and that community is essential. Visit one-story.com or scan the QR code below to learn more.



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