Prose fiction is at once the most familiar literary genre and also the least well understood. Stories, after all, can feel almost transparent in their effects, especially when compared to the linguistic challenges of poetry or the performative dimensions of drama. It’s all the more important, then, to be able to help students recognize the distinctive elements through which novels and short stories create those effects, from the macro level of narrative, plot, setting, and structure, to the micro level of characterization and point of view, to the heightened dynamics of beginnings, endings, and—when the stakes are at their highest—ethics.

The fifteen exercises in this section instruct students in the art of storytelling. The first four activities on narrative and plot (“The Six-Word Story,” “Narrative Rounds,” “Splicing,” and “Is It in Your Body?”) ask students to think broadly about the nature of narrative itself: what makes a story a story, what it means to fictionalize experience, how narratives revisit (and rewrite) other narratives, and how stories end up inside readers. The exercises on setting and structure (“Mapmaker,” “Diagram This,” and “Bridges”) maintain a wide perspective, helping students visualize and theorize the often hidden ways in which authors put stories together. The next four activities tighten the focus, to consider some of the most consequential choices storytellers make, including the representation of individual characters (“Intersectional Reading” and “Proust Questionnaire”) and the perspective provided by the narrative’s point of view (“Understanding Point of View” and “Flip the Script”).

The three exercises in the next-to-last set (“First Paragraphs,” “Script Doctor,” and “Alternate Endings”) zero in on two of the most distinctive components of any narrative—how it begins and how it ends—to highlight the ways stories create expectations and achieve closure. The final exercise (“The Great Debate”) zooms in and then pulls back out, bringing to light powerful moments of conflict that offer no easy answers, in order to help students probe the ethical wagers of, and the diversity of values within, literary narratives. Taken as a whole, these exercises will ensure that even the most experienced readers will no longer take the workings of fiction for granted.