

Story Time

NARRATIVE DEPENDS ON A STORY UNFOLDING IN TIME, BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN TIME DOESN'T FOLLOW THE RULES? LC SHOWS YOU HOW TO READ—AND WRITE—OUTSIDE THE BOX.

Who is Amy Tan?

Like many of her characters, Amy Tan is the daughter of Chinese immigrants. She was born in Northern California in 1952, to a Baptist minister and a woman who had escaped an abusive husband in China and left three children behind when she came to America. The pain of her mother's loss inspired Tan's novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*, while her difficult relationship with her mother spawned the stories that make up *The Joy Luck Club*.

Tan wasn't always a writer. When she first got to college, she studied medicine, which she later traded for a degree in English and linguistics. She went on to do graduate work in her field and ran educational programs for developmentally disabled children in California. Slowly, writing called to her. She started a company with a partner that offered business-writing services to executives and large corporations. She then became a full-time freelance writer, but still did not pursue creative writing. Instead, she studied jazz piano.

Finally, Tan began writing fiction, debuting with a short story entitled "Endgame." She landed an agent and in 1987, *The Joy Luck Club* became a *New York Times* best-seller. Subsequent novels include *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Tan lives in San Francisco with her husband.

How to Write From Models:

>>READ THE EXCERPT ONCE WITHOUT THE NOTES.

>>READ IT AGAIN, THIS TIME WITH THE NOTES.

>>RECALL YOUR MOST VIVID MEMORIES.

>>USE THE PROMPTS AT THE END TO WRITE YOUR OWN STORY ABOUT THE PAST AND THE PRESENT.



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1. The passage opens with a clear, concrete action in the present moment. This sentence grounds the passage in a particular time and establishes the point of reference for the paragraphs that follow.

(from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*)

I sit down. Auntie An-Mei leaves the room quickly and returns with a bowl of peanuts, then quietly shuts the door. Everybody is quiet, as if nobody knew where to begin.

It is Auntie Ying who finally speaks. **"I think your mother die with an important thought on her mind,"** she says in halting English. And then she begins to speak in Chinese, calmly, softly.

"Your mother was a very strong woman, a good mother. She loved you very much, more than her own life. And that's why you can understand why a mother like this could never forget her other daughters. She knew they were alive, and before she died she wanted to find her daughters in China."

2. English is not Auntie Ying's native language. Even though the verb "die" is in the present tense, the passage implies that the narrator's mother has already died.

3. This sentence makes the transition into the past tense. Auntie Ying describes the narrator's mother as she was during her life.

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NAM'S SONS.

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4. As the narrator listens to her aunt speak, she is drawn into the story of her mother's life and begins to experience it in her imagination. She describes the past in the present tense because the images and feelings are so vivid for her.

The babies in Kweilin, I think. I was not those babies. The babies in a sling on her shoulder. Her other daughters. **And now I feel as if I were in Kweilin amidst the bombing and I can see these babies lying on the side of the road, their red thumbs popped out of their mouths, screaming to be reclaimed.** Somebody took them away. They're safe. **And now my mother's left me forever, gone back to China to get these babies.** I can barely hear Auntie Ying's voice.

5. The end of the passage combines the narrator's fantasy with reality; her mother is dead and she imagines that in death her mother has finally gone back to Kweilin to claim her lost children.

WRITE YOUR OWN TIMELESS STORY

USE THESE PROMPTS TO WRITE A PASSAGE THAT SHOWS HOW THE PAST INVADES THE PRESENT

1 Reread note #1. Before you start playing around with time, it's important to ground your reader in one time frame. It doesn't matter whether it's present or past, but you should pick one as your main point of reference and as the dominant tense of the story.

2 Review note #3. You have to make a conscious decision to transition from one tense into the other. Choose a natural point in the action and then go for it.

3 Note #4. Show your reader what it feels like to experience your memory in the present moment. What do you see, smell, hear, taste, or feel? Describe it for your reader as though it were happening to you right now for the first time.

4 Note #5. In Tan's passage, the past overwhelms the present. Be sure to show your reader which is more powerful—memory, or present experience—and bring your passage to a clear close.

>>Your Turn! We all have memories so strong that they start rushing back to us every time we recall them, flooding us with old emotions in the present moment. Choose one of your strongest memories as the subject of your piece.