

Hello writers at Willamette Writers Conference!

Thank you for participating in the Deep Revision with Katey Schultz presentation.

We have one hour...although typically I teach this topic during a 7-day in person retreat, or an 8-hour virtual course. We will experiment with a very abbreviated version!

To make the most use of our time, please read this handout before arriving to this presentation.

All materials are copyrighted. You may use them for personal pursuit of your personal writing projects. They are not to be shared with writers who have not participated live or virtually in this specific presentation at this specific conference, nor are they for distribution to other groups, workshops, or classes you may take or teach. However, I believe in resource sharing, and if you'd like to share these beyond your personal use, please do so by emailing me directly for an arrangement: [Katey.schultz@gmail.com](mailto:Katey.schultz@gmail.com).

I really want to ignite a sense of what's possible together, even though we only have one hour. How can we write *into* the page, and unlock the sentences "hidden inside the one we're making" (Verlyn Klinkenborg)?

Let's find out!

~Katey

Email me after this class with questions or to find out about how to review these deep revision techniques in a longer format with me. I'm passionate about revision, and never want to leave anyone confused or lacking. Please—do not be shy. I genuinely love connecting with writers who are passionate about revision. Email me at:

[katey.schultz@gmail.com](mailto:katey.schultz@gmail.com)

**SKY**

**SURFACE**

---

**BEDROCK**

**Your essential sentence:**

## The Last Thing They Might Have Seen

by Katey Schultz, 2010

This was three years ago. I'm not asking for your sympathy. There were six of them along the roadside—dead on impact—and I know because I am the mortician who tried to put them back together. Every morning, the sun pushes its steady pulse across the Ozark Mountains as I drive past their roadside temple. Fake flowers for Miguel at the bend in Highway 17. Fake flowers for Raul in the same spot. Fake flowers for Eduardo, Manuel, Pablo. On the other side of the road, fake flowers for Mr. Burgess, rough silk petals blossoming in blues and purples like the bruises across their bodies, which would not come back to life.

The teacher, Mr. Burgess, was the easiest. His pale skin like a cantaloupe rind left too long in the sun. The migrant workers came to me in pieces: a lone ring finger with its gold band still intact. The head of the eighteen-year-old driver who did not have his license. Three torsos thrown from the backseat through the front window, rigamorted on my table in dance-like postures.

When Manuel's wife came, she identified the ring and then she asked for his journal. I said what journal, and she told me the one he always keeps in his breast pocket. She folded into me then and grabbed my shoulders, tears bleeding onto my lab coat. I told her *mañana*. Come back tomorrow and I will have it for you. Later, I found it in the bag of items that had flown from the car.

Manuel wrote about the other men and their journey southbound through tobacco season, never staying too long in one place. Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee. A short stop in Louisiana, where the boss man kept two wives. There was something strange there in the tobacco barn. Each bundle of stalks dangled from the crossbeams like limp bodies, swaying, though the wind never stirred. Sometimes, a dark-skinned girl appeared and watched them work. She stood at the corner of the field, thin as a stalk of corn. Her hair reflected the sunlight like a beacon but whenever Manuel looked her direction, she vanished.

He tried to speak to her once. "*Hermana*," he said. "*¿Qué es la magia en el granero?*" What is the magic in the barn? She dropped to her knees then and prayed in song. It was a long song and something from the Creoles. The other men didn't seem to hear her, but the boss came out of his house and yelled at Manuel, pointing to the place in the field where the girl had knelt. The crew packed up the next day, acres of tobacco only partially strung.

Next, the men blistered through the Carolinas, topping and pulling fat, green tobacco leaves sticky with trichomes. Burley, Brightleaf, Perique. They used sickles and stringers, whatever was kept on hand. They talked while they worked—they would spend their pay on *sopas*, on a Mustang, on a new stereo system.

Miguel. Raul. Eduardo. Manuel. Pablo. Sometimes, if I clamp my jaw closed and swallow hard, I can drive past without incanting their names. But eventually, they come back to me. That ring finger. The way the gold band reflected the fluorescents in the morgue. A clean, white light like the last thing they might have seen.

## Sample DRAFT Essential Sentences w/ commentary

Below, **in bold**, you will find sample draft essential sentences from previous iterations of my Deep Revision course. Underneath each bold type draft sentence are my comments, *in italics*. This document, in a sense, captures the sloppy middle ground of the realistic, deep, invisible, decision-making that every writer must work through. It also charts the evolution of a strong essential sentence. In these ways, I hope that it inspires you.

Does this bring up questions? By all means, please ask me!

~Katey

**This story is about what happens when the past bleeds into the present, bringing with it deception, revelation, and, ultimately, redemption.**

*This story is about what happens when deceptions from the past force revelations in the present, and why redemption is the only way forward. [I don't know if that's any better or accurate, but you have a pretty good start here so I'm just offering a slightly different tact in case it's useful.]*

**Belonging first and foremost to oneself in order to be at home anywhere and foster the connection needed for real community.**

*This story is about what "home" really means, and why [what? what are the consequences/results?]....*

*[I guess I'm wondering what "belonging" means. For instance, are you talking about accepting one's self, having others accept who you are, or both? Or, something larger like on the society or community level? If home/acceptance is the starting point, get that into your first half of your sentence very clearly and deliberately, then move the second half of the sentences toward consequences or results.]*

***Uneven Life* is an account of seeking spiritual happiness in spite of the tension between unimaginable loss in the midst of losing reality.**

*Uneven Life is about finding spiritual happiness against the backdrop of inconceivable loss of life, identity, and culture.*

*[This feels close but I stumble over the last part of the sentence. There is tension between thing A and thing B. Thing A is "unimaginable loss." Thing B is "in the midst of losing reality." But "in the midst" of something isn't really a thing...I know more about your memoir because you are in my Monthly Mentorship program, so I took some liberties there. I hope that helps!]*

**This story is about the repercussions of deception and betrayal, committed out of love.**

*\*\*\*This story explores the complex relationship between loyalty and deception, proving why sometimes betrayal is the greatest act of love.\*\*\* [I don't know if "loyalty" in particular is right for you, but can you see the way the balance of that sentence structure sets you up for a plot?]*

**This story is about exploring the physical and creative aspects of a partnership in order to find one's own agency in the world.**

*\*\*\*This story is about the paradox between deep partnership and individual agency, proving once and for all [WHAT?].\*\*\* [See how that's a set up, too? You need results. Consequences. What's the myth buster or thing that's going to blow people's mind's here...the thing that works against common assumptions?]*

**A Star Is Born is about the conflict between the desire to be seen and the fear of being discovered.**

*This story is about the desire to be seen, the fear of being discovered, and the life-changing sacrifices made in between. [That suggests a middle...a story...something where we get to witness change--right?]*

**This story is about how the power of love can transcend all– even the boundaries of time.**

*This story is about expansive love and [what? something in contrast to that---something that was there BEFORE whoever this is about believed that love wasn't so expansive...]... This story details the transformation from [what] to expansive love, transcending time along the way. [That might be closer...] This story challenges modern love by proving once and for all that [what?]....*

**This novel is about the cost and rewards of trying to claim a creative life.**

*This novel insists/proves/demonstrates/details/inspires us to believe that [some kind of cost? ex. devastation/failure] and [some kind of reward? ex. resiliency/success] stake equal claim in the creative life. [That's not quite right, but might be getting closer. In this case, I might say the sentence you've drafted is a beat TOO vague...ground it down juuuust a notch and see what you come up with.]*

**This novel is about embracing an inner journey while relinquishing the comforts of cultural status.**

*This novel is about relinquishing cultural status in exchange for the intangible/immeasurable/surprising/revealing rewards of [what? not inner journey...not quite...more like...personal transformation].*

*[And from there I might ask, transformation from what, to what? Materialistic to monastic? Like the essential sentences listed before this one, ground this down just a little bit more. What do you come up with?]*

**This series is about ignoring the expectations of others to develop one's own talents and find one's own happiness.**

*This series is about the fight [stronger word than "ignore"--suggests agency] for individual happiness, against a backdrop of cultural/societal/communal/familial skepticism, proving once and for all that [what? something about talents or expectations? something about inner guidance and intuition?].*

*[You're close. Keep going. Play around. Move stuff, try stuff, use a thesaurus. You'll get there.]*

**This story is about rivalry and identity in families.**

*Great. Now finish the sentence...use one of the \*\*\* templates marked above. We need results/consequences/takes here. As in, This story is about rivalry and identity in families, and the [what happens if you don't make it to the other side? what is the other side/result?].*

**Love Songs to My Children: a medical mother's musings from blues to rhapsody is about parenting and the importance of opening our eyes to the truth of who we are in order for our children to break free of the vicious cycles of trauma.**

*Love Songs to My Children is about overcoming self-deception and cycles of trauma, so that we can live tender, open-eyed lives alongside and with younger generations.*

*[That's not quite right either, but it's getting closer...]*

**This essay is about how the disabled body is seen as not sexy and, hence, 'othered', becoming a closet to be triumphed recursively.**

*This essay is about reclaiming one's identity from constrictive labels and expectations, and coming out triumphant on the other side.*

**My story is about struggling with loss and depression and making the choice between wanting to end her life (and pain) or finding a reason to life.**

*This story straddles the divide between a life lived in pain and a life worth living, ultimately [what? what gets us to that reason to live? what thing gets us there...can you name it? a mindset shift, a medical breakthrough, what?]*

*This story details the impossible choice between ending a life, or living a life filled with pain, and why [what?...finish the sentence here...]*

## **KILLER BE'S**

is        isn't  
am       aren't  
be        been  
was      wasn't  
were     weren't  
are      aren't  
I'm     he's    she's  
they're        we're

## **KILLER FILLERS**

that    seem    so  
the     would    very  
just    a        much  
seem    and     still  
could    had     now  
might    should    then  
will     may  
+ all stacked prepositions

## Structural Components of Prose

**Scene:** In a scene, detail, sensory information, and action (including dialogue) combine to re-create a sense of movement. A scene is when real people in actual space take concrete actions for a set period of time. A scene lets a reader see and experience something and then draw their own conclusions, ultimately winning the reader over. The things you really want your readers to remember are told through scenes.

- "Once..."
- "Last Tuesday..."
- "The summer of 1972, I spent a night at..."

*\*Note: **flashbacks** come into play as scenes and have the same effect of slowing down time; the main difference between a scene and a flashback is that a flashback fully stops time in the main narrative so that it can return to the past. By contrast, a scene permits time to continue moving forward, however slowly.*

**Summary:** The long shot or aerial view, summary is a technique you can use to cover a lot of time in a matter of sentences or a few paragraphs. It is characterized by verbs that refer to an ongoing set of actions (instead of 1 particular day) and best used when told through active storytelling. Summarize things that are important or necessary for the reader to clearly understand the larger picture of your chapter, essay, story, or book. The things you really need your readers to keep in the back of their minds as they read along are told through summary.

- "Mother baked, cleaned, and tucked us all into bed. Come wintertime, she was also the one who stoked the fire, always asking me to make sure a fresh pile of split wood remained within arm's reach of the wood stove."
- "Mornings at work went something like this: First, Bobby showed up sopping wet from his bike commute. Sometime later, our secretary arrived—always late—and made weak coffee to nurse us all along."
- "I used to play outside after school, calling my friend Jennie from across the street and begging her to climb into the tree house with me. We liked to name our imaginary friends, envisioning entire worlds in which they could play and live free of the real troubles we faced in our increasingly complicated young lives."

- “Stephanie’s children roared through the kitchen each day after school. First Thomas, leaving a trail of sweatshirts, lunch boxes, and papers that looked suspiciously like homework. Then Cindy, usually in tears over some failed flirtation on the school bus. Followed by Manton, who excelled at telling his mother odd facts such as, ‘Mom, did you know the U.S. postal services successfully delivered more than 2.8 million pieces of mail last year?’ or ‘Mom, it’s not global warming anymore. You know that, right? It’s climate change. Everything’s changing all the time. Even the cells on your body. Most of them are already dead. Dead! They’re dead!’”
- From Walter Mosley’s novel *Fear Itself*: “I never bragged (except about my sexual endowment), and the only time I ever acted tough was to shout at caged animals. But when it came to [my friend] Fearless I was often forced to become somebody else. For a long time, I thought it was because he had once saved my life in a dark alley in San Francisco. And that certainty did have a big effect on my feelings toward him. But in recent months, I have come to realize that something about Fearless compelled me to be different. Partly it was because I felt a deep certainty that no harm could come to me when I was in his presence. I mean, Theodore Timmerman should have killed me on that street, but Fearless stopped him even though it was impossible. But it was more than just a feeling of security. Fearless actually had the ability to make me feel as if I were more of a man when I was in his company.”

*\*Note: **backstory** comes into play, often masked as brief summaries. It is not a flashback because it still maintains focus and energy of the story in the main/present narrative. (ex. Walter Mosely quote underlined above)*

**Reflection:** This is when a writer uses a retrospective or reflective voice to help a reader make direct and clear meaning of an experience. Musing is the mark of memoir, in particular, because it makes stories layered and thought provoking, helping readers view the writing through a particular lens. It works in fiction, too, because a 1st person narrator or even a limited 3rd point of view can still use reflection as the character thinks, wonders, ponders, imagines, worries, etc. Sometimes, reflection is marked by rhetorical questions or a direct statement of looking back through time.

- “Looking back, I wonder about...”
- “Years later, I would learn that...”

- “I always questioned her judgment, but it wasn’t until x/y/z that I realized...”
- “And isn’t despair always the other side of hope?”
- “What would he give to have her back again?”
- “She thought about the last time she’d held a newborn, its pudgy face rather like an old man’s. It occurred to her then how horrible birth could be—nothing to celebrate at all. Just another beginning of something that would eventually fade to dust.”

\*Note: **exposition** is a structural component that, to the best of my studies, refuses to be unanimously defined. Maybe it’s close to reflection, insofar as it certainly has a musing quality to it. It’s “the stuff that connects scenes.” I call it the **prose glue** that holds it all together, the bridge that gets us to the next key moment, the meandering (yet purposeful) paragraphs that reveal character and worldview, all the while adding to theme, plot, and impact. Here’s an example from Claire Davis’ opening paragraph to the short story “Grounded” from *Labors of the Heart*. We will analyze this in class, meticulously:

- “Only an hour ago Wava Haney had grounded her son Kyle forever, but there he was, kicking down the gravel driveway as though he had every right. She knelt on the shop floor, the chair braced against her thigh, one hand supporting the dowel while she cranked on the wood clamp with the other. Her fingers were glossed with glue, and the chair, her best work yet, teetered on the edge of completion. Lifting her fingers from the clamp, she eyed the configuration for balance. She knew what it should look like, this Shaker style, ladder-back chair, birds-eye maple, with a plank seat chiseled and sanded by her own hands, those hands calloused until she'd lost the tactile details of every day—the embossed flowers on her favorite tea cups, the hairs blushing her arms. The chair lingered in a suspension of glue and faith eminently perishable. On her haunches, she looked out the door. Two precious days off from waitressing at the cafe. Two days in which she'd planned to finish this chair. Start another. She'd as soon pretend she hadn't seen Kyle, wipe her hands and wait in the shade of a tree for his sorry return, then give him a piece of her mind. She raised to her feet, studied the chair. This was a critical stage; it could all go so badly.”

**Remember:** Scene and flashback let a reader see. Summary and backstory give a reader confidence. Reflection suggests a worldview and helps a reader ponder.