

# CRAIGSTORY: Fiction Ready-Mades from the Classifieds

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## Step One: Choose a SETTING:

<http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites>

Find a *locale* on the above page and click. Drill down as far as you like; this will be your story's world. Some locales will have a small, clickable "W" next to them. Click this to go to that locale's Wikipedia page. This is helpful if you aren't familiar with the area and need to get your bearings. Also helpful for mining specific details and/or landmarks. Whatever you end up writing needs to feel as if its narrator knows this place in a fair amount of intimacy.

## Step Two: Grab a CHARACTER (or two/three/four/etc.):

While still in your chosen locale, click on the "housing wanted" link. What you are looking for on this page is a *voice* that immediately catches your attention. Most of what you'll see here are very boilerplate descriptions, and most of it will quickly fade into the background as you scroll down the page and begin loading new ones. Keep clicking and scrolling until you see a heading that reveals something interesting, peculiar or potentially troubling.

When you read the full listing, pay close attention to the way it is written. It's important at this stage of the process to understand that you are not a psychologist, but a writer doing research. Keep in mind that the vast majority of what you see on Craigslist is written by real-world people with real-world agendas for posting what they have posted. What you are *not* trying to do is uncover the real-world identity of who wrote what you are reading; rather, what you *are* trying to do is discover the glimmer of a character somewhere amidst all those words and sentences, and then to *repurpose* that character for a story that you are building. In other words, try not to get too hung up on the reality of what you are reading (i.e., "I can't believe someone *really* posted this!!"). Do your best to stay focused on the fact that you are combing through this massive database in a purpose for which it largely is not designed. Think of yourself, then, as an artistic hacker, who has come to Craigslist to discover the stories bubbling somewhere underneath it.

## Step Three: Start a DIALOGUE:

Read and re-read your characters' listings until you have a good feel for the way they write. Try writing an additional sentence or two for their listings, a paragraph or even a full page if you can manage it. It's important to write *as your characters* would write, even if your eventual story will be constructed through a 3rd person perspective, so

give yourself some time and freedom with this. Again, remember that your job isn't to figure out this person's *identity*; you are trying to capture this person's *character*.

When you have a pretty good handle on how your characters write, start a dialogue between at least two of them. As you begin this conversation, think about the circumstances and situations that might bring them together. Are these characters in the same physical space together? Are they talking on the phone? Writing letters, email, or text messages to one another? A little bit of logic paired with specific details of your chosen locale from Step One will go a long way in making your story both credible and compelling.

#### Step Four: Create some CONFLICT:

When you have your characters talk to each other long enough, conflict is inevitable. It's important to keep in mind that conflict does not mean your characters need to get angry, aggressive or dismissive of one another. We encounter conflict every day, but it's only the rare/extreme cases when a situation turns hostile or sour somehow. Let what you discover about these characters' dispositions guide you as you write their exchanges, and try not to force a fight simply for the sake of doing so. Even if you're writing a stylized genre piece where hyperbole in both dialogue and action is standard operating procedure, do your best to resist smashing your characters together just because you can.

Also keep in mind that conflict doesn't necessarily have to happen *between* characters; conflict can manifest just as well *internally* as it does externally. Conflict can also exert itself through social conventions, politics, and economics. This is where having a solid sense of your locale can really help, so make sure to spend some time getting to know the place(s) where your story is happening.

#### Step Five: Let the PLOT thicken:

Only when you have a good feel for the setting you've chosen and some characters who live there will you be able to think about the ebbs and flows of a plotline. Plot is nothing more than a sequence of moments, and there is no universal rule that says these moments must be in chronological order or progressively linear. Having said that, it's certainly important for you to think about the significance of these moments, and to realize that you can never truly tell the "whole" story. Ask yourself which moments matter most, and let those guide the story you want to tell. This is where the *real* work and art of writing begin, and until you know your source material well enough, you won't be at the point where laying down all this ready-made material makes sense. In other words, take it slow until you see the moments materialize. There's always another sentence of that initial listing to write, or another dialogue exchange to explore. Don't rush this part. Trust that when you're really ready, you'll really *be* ready. And at that point, don't just write it. *Make* it.