Writing Short Stories and Fiction

What does “fiction” mean?
Fiction is an imagined story presented as though it were about actual people in real-life situations. The two most familiar examples of fiction are novels and short stories. The story is told by a narrator who may be a character in the story or someone who is not part of the events or the plot. Because fiction must appear like real life, it must consistently offer detail so that the story seems like an unbroken stretch of time and events. This is important so that the reader will “believe” what is happening in the story, just as we accept the reality of a movie, even though we know what is taking place is mere light projected onto a screen. By experiencing the details of the story, readers are then entertained. As in real life, stories contain people who think, speak and behave in certain ways. If these seem familiar and interesting to readers, then the story has been successful.

How do I get started?
Writers have many different ways of starting their stories. But perhaps one thing they may share in common is that they keep journals. Stories hardly ever come to a writer full-blown. They are usually the product of a thinking process that occurs over time. As the writer Andre Dubus once put it, “I gestate: For months, often for years. And idea comes to me from wherever they come, and I write it in a notebook.” This kind of journal could be called a journal of ideas for possible future writing. A working journal is where a writer practices writing, making dialogue, creating scenes, trying out narration. In a journal one can record dreams, quotes, or note historical or current events that might form the basis of a story. A story can sometimes begin with a sentence spoken on the street or read in a magazine. Many writers, early in their careers, wrote their stories by imitating the writing of those they admired, perhaps by recycling their plots. However one approaches them, journals provide writers with a storehouse of writing and writing ideas.

What should I write about?
The expression “write about what you know” is a good one. Fiction draws on the commonplace things and experiences we share, including family relationships, friends and acquaintances, moments of growth and discovery. A story can be thought of as a series of scenes or episodes from daily living. It could be a seemingly simple as a story in which a character writes a letter to someone she once knew years before and thus reawakens their relationship, discovering things about this person that were once not apparent. Writers have created stories based on newspaper accounts of human events. Stories ideas are all around us. The writer’s journal is where writers record observations that might otherwise be forgotten.

The Community Writing Center has several books that give examples of short story and fiction writing, and can provide you with questions to help you get started, examples of fiction writing and other useful information. CWC Writing Assistants are always available to assist you at any stage of your fiction writing process. Just ask to sign up for an appointment.