

**MAGIC REALISM by Olga Sanchez**  
**A “script” for teachers**  
**introducing this literary concept**  
**to middle school students**

A quote to start:

“Only three things have ever astonished me: a dream within a dream, voices in an empty room, and fire the colour of ice.” – *Silvina Ocampo*, from a letter to A.M.

Why are those things astonishing?

We’re going to talk about a 20<sup>th</sup> century form of writing known as Magic Realism. What do you think that is? What is Realism? Right, it describes “reality” as we know it. But reality can be magical, yes? For example, in the fall, when you walk down the road, the sun is shining and the trees are bright with colors, what colors?

How would you describe an amazingly beautiful fall-colored tree? (Prompts: It’s on fire, it’s painted, it’s new, etc.) That’s the magic part of life, of what we call reality. What are other examples of amazing but real situations? (Prompts: Snow covered fields, rainbows, a giant supermarket, etc.) Famous Colombian author, Gabriel García Márquez said that Magic Realism was actually closer to describing life than Realism, because life is so unexpected, and surprising, all the time!

How many of you have younger brothers or sisters (or nieces, nephews, etc.)? What’s like for very young children to discover something new to them? What’s the look on their faces?

Let me read a passage from one of Márquez’ most famous books called “One Hundred Years of Solitude.” (Describe circumstances of passage.) Notice where the writer surprises you. (Clarify the word “giant” so as not to be misunderstood for fantasy.)

They insisted so much that José Arcadio Buendia paid the thirty reales and led them into the center of the tent, where there was a giant with a hairy torso and a shaved head, with a copper ring in his nose and a heavy iron chain on his ankle, watching over a pirate chest. When it was opened by the giant, the chest gave off a glacial exhalation. Inside there was only an enormous, transparent block with infinite internal needles in which the light of the sunset was broken up into colored stars. Disconcerted, knowing that the children were waiting for an immediate explanation, José Arcadio Buendia ventured a murmur:

“It’s the largest diamond in the world.”

“No,” the gypsy countered, “It’s...”

What do you think it was? (Answer: Ice.)

What did you think? Did you know it was ice when I was reading it? Does it make sense that it was ice? Let me read the description again.

One notable feature of Magic Realism is the very detailed description. It's the way we know it's real, we recognize the object as something familiar, but the writer has put it down in such a way that it becomes new to us again.

Another quote, it's a few centuries old, so the language is old:

“There is nothing that God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done everyday, but would seem a Miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once.” – *John Donne*, from LXXX Sermons

### **Writing Exercise:**

Everyone please close your eyes and think of something that's an everyday object. Imagine it clearly, colors, textures, shape, its function, its taste or smell. Imagine it as if you'd never seen it before in your life. As if you were new to this region, or a child, and you're experiencing this object for the first time.

Write this description, include as many details as possible, and you don't know the name of this object or its purpose. What do you think it's called? What do you think is its function?

There's something about this (everyday) object that you find amazing, some quality. It's an amazing object! What's amazing about it? Exaggerate! Please write that description down, and again, use as much detail as you can.

Who would like to share his or her writing? What's great is that you didn't have to invent a fantasy (monsters, spaceships, special “powers”, etc.) to present a startling experience for your audience. Magic Realism writing is different than Fantasy writing, where things are made up.

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Okay, here's a second feature of Magic Realism. Sometimes it's a code. A lot of famous Magic Realism writers have come from Latin America. Let's talk about why.

Can anyone tell me about the geography of Latin America? (Almost all answers are correct!) Yes, it's a land of variety and extremes. The land includes snow-covered mountains, jungle rainforest, desert, beaches, giant waterfalls and rivers, rolling hills.

What's the weather like? The weather varies from frozen (e.g., southern tip of Chile) to tropical (e.g. coasts of Colombia, Venezuela & Brazil.)

What animals and plants would you expect to find there? There are animals and plants found only in Latin America, such as giant condors with 12-foot wingspans, rare orchids, toucans, piranhas, anacondas. There's also an abundance of natural resources, such as gold, silver, emeralds, rubies, oil, and agriculture such as chocolate, coffee, and a wide assortment of fruits and vegetables.

With all these resources, Latin America has been fought over for generations, and especially since the arrival of the Europeans, who were seeing this kind of territory for the first time in their lives (remember the experience of little children and new things).

An excerpt from (an essay in *Magical Realism: Theory, History & Community*, p.104):

How could America be anything other than marvelously real, if we recognize certain very interesting factors that must be taken into account? The conquest of Mexico occurs in 1521, when Francois I ruled France. Do you know how big the urban area of Paris was under Francois I? Thirteen square kilometers. In Garnier's *Universal Atlas*, published less than one hundred years ago, we are told that the metropolitan area of Madrid was twenty kilometers in 1889 and that the area of Paris, capital of capitals, was eighty kilometers. When Bernal Diaz del Castillo laid eyes for the first time on the panorama of the city of Tenochtitlan, the capital of Mexico, the empire of Montezuma, it had an urban area of one hundred square kilometers – at a time when Paris had only thirteen. After attempting to tell the king what he has seen in Mexico (Hernan Cortes) acknowledges that the Spanish language is too narrow to identify so many new things and says to Charles V: “As I do not know what to call these things, I cannot express them.”

Can anyone tell me about Latin American history? In a nutshell, it's been turbulent. The conquistadors arrived, overthrew indigenous kingdoms, imposed their religion, made the Indians into slaves, brought over slaves from Africa. Changed things in a big way. Then there were revolutions in the 1800's—Simon Bolivar helped overthrow the European governments. It wasn't just one Revolutionary War, it was several that resulted in the several different nations with their own governments. But the people who came into power were mostly the wealthy landowners who were tired of paying taxes (like in the U.S.) and there remained a great inequality and injustice among the people. So in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Communism and Socialism were developed (the idea that people share the resources and wealth for the good of all) there were huge upheavals again in many of the countries. And then the military forces wanted power. Again, because of the abundance of natural resources in Latin America, there's a lot to fight over!

In these turbulent circumstances, with wars going on (for example the civil war that's been going on in Colombia for the past 50 years), and power shifts, it's often unsafe to speak one's mind. But people need to communicate, so they become creative. Art provides a way to say things in code.

Listen to the next excerpt, from Gabriel García Márquez' "Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor." This was written at the beginning of Colombia's civil war.

"Everyday at five, astonishingly punctual, the sharks arrived. Then there was a banquet around the raft. Huge fish would jump out of the water and, a few moments later, resurface in pieces. The sharks, crazed, would silently rush up to the bloody surface. So far, they hadn't tried to smash the raft, but they were attracted to it because of its white color. Everyone knows that sharks are more likely to attack things that are white. Sharks are myopic and only see white or shiny objects. Then I remembered another of the instructor's recommendations: "Hide all shiny things so as not to draw the sharks' attention."

If you thought this was written in code, to describe a wartime situation, what do you think the writer is trying to tell us? Is the sailor in control? What are the shiny things? What are the sharks? Where is the danger found?

### **Writing Exercise**

Think of a real-life situation where you are not the person in charge. Not too hard, I imagine. Now, imagine you want to communicate to a friend what's going on. You know who the power person is, but you can't speak about them out loud. So instead you're going to write a story in code, disguising the name of the powerful person. What are classic examples of powerful people? (Prompt: teachers, police, judges, colonels, etc.)

You're going to write about this powerful person in your own life, but giving them a different identity, in order to tell your friend what's going on that's unfair. (For example, "My mother makes me go to school every day" could be disguised as, "The colonel forces his soldiers to march 50 miles every morning.")

You won't be able to tell the exact details but you'll be able to let them know what it feels like.

Who'd like to read aloud what they've written?

Let's try taking both elements of Magic Realism, the exaggerated new way of looking at ordinary things, along with the writing in code, and putting them together. Take a look at the story you just wrote in code, about an injustice in your life.

If you haven't already done this, describe the setting where your story takes place. Now go back and see if you can add details to the setting in order to make it extraordinary (but keep it "real"!)

And/or: Look at the objects in your story. Go back and add details, and description, in order to make these objects extraordinary.

Who'd like to read aloud what they've written? In what ways did the added information (setting or detailed objects) contribute to the impact of the story?

Congratulations. Taking these two ways of writing—an exaggerated new way of looking at ordinary things, and writing in code—and putting them together in one piece, you've begun to write in the style of Magic Realism!

Thank you!

Another possibility for illustrating the idea of “magic” realism: use an excerpt from the film, “Miracle in Rome,” based on the short story by Gabriel García Márquez (in Spanish, subtitled). Early in the film, the father comes home and brings his seven-year old daughter a new toy. She joyfully embraces him to thank him, then suddenly she is dead in his arms. Her sudden death is inexplicable but not entirely impossible.