-A Story telling pastiche for *The Handmaid’s Tale*-

1. “There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities...about those in power...It’s like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with.”
2. Moira’s obscenities about Aunt Lydia at the Red Centre.
3. Scrabble.
4. Signs/symbols
5. Offred retells herself in her story, recreating the person she used to be and reclaiming herself from Gilead.
6. Women are forbidden to read or write and those caught in the act have their hands cut off.
7. Bible as justification. Locked and controlled by men. ‘Let women learn in silence with all subjection...but suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence...’ Prayvaganza
8. Offred is aware of the selected stories that are told at the Red Centre & misquotations: ‘from each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs’ Recited from what the Handmaids believe is St Paul 3 times each day, ironic because of course it is from Marx
9. Language (dystopian tradition); prayvaganza, particicution (portmanteau: participate and execution)
10. Story and storytelling as subversion. Moira’s obscene outburst in Chapter 34, Martha’s gossip is a form of resisitance, Nolite te bastardes carborundum’
11. Pen is Envy: corruption of Freud but also an acknowledgment by the aunts of the power of language and a woman’s desire for it.
12. Offred is conscious of how she can use language to undermine the power of the state to intimidate her. She conjures up obscene images of her oppressors ‘his extra sensitive thumb, his tentacle, his delicate stalked slug’s eye, which extrudes, expanses, winces, and shrivels back into himself when touched wrongly...’ But she also uses language for a far more personal reason. When we first meet Offred she is a jumble of fragmented images which make little sense to us. Gradually, she uses her storytelling to reconstruct herself in her own eyes. Her flashbacks gradually grow longer as she deliberately moves into her private space to put the broken pieces of her life back together. As she recounts each episode of her life she is able to put it to rest, finally saying goodbye to Moira, to her mother, to Luke when she commits herself to Nick, and to her daughter when she sees the photograph of her. Offred tells herself into her new life.
13. The Handmaids Tale is a narrative that challenges the absolute authority of Gilead, highlighting the significance of storytelling as an act of resistance against oppression, thereby making a particular kind of individual political statement. It may help when reflecting on Offred’s narrative to review Atwood’s comments :

“I’m an artist … and in any monolithic regime I would be shot. They always do that to artists. Why? Because the artists are messy. They don’t fit. They make squawking noises. They protest. They insist on some kind of standard of humanity which any such regime is going to violate. They will violate it saying that it’s for the good of all, or the good of the many, or the better this or better that. And the artists will always protest and they’ll always get shot. Or go into exile.”

1. “The writer … retains three attributes that power-mad regimes cannot tolerate: a human imagination, in the many forms it may take, the power to communicate, and hope.”
2. Atwood’s statements on the writer’s role provide a perspective on Offred’s position as the narrator, as she insists on voicing her own point of view when the regime demands total silence. However, Offred’s freedom is very circumscribed and she cannot tell her story within the Gileadean context. She can only tell it after she has escaped. We learn at the end that what we have read is a transcript of a jumble of cassette recordings that have been found on an archaeological site. What we have is a later reconstruction of Offred’s reconstruction told after her escape, and by the time of our reading Offred herself has disappeared. Yet storytelling is the only possible gesture against the silences of death and of history.
The emphasis throughout the novel is on process and reconstruction, where, truth’ is only a matter of the teller’s perspective, as Offred often reminds us. Her narrative is a discontinuous one, with its frequent time shifts, short scenes, and its unfinished ending. Margaret Atwood commented,
3. “[Offred] was boxed in. How do you tell a narrative from the point of view of that person? The more limited -and boxed in you are, the more important details become … Details, episodes separate themselves from the flow of time in which they’re embedded.”/
4. One of the first things readers notice is the way in which the story shifts abruptly from one scene to another and from present time to the past, so that the narrator’s present situation and her past history are only gradually revealed. Reading becomes an exercise of reconstruction as we piece together present details with fragments of remembered experience, revealed by flashbacks. At the beginning there are few flashbacks, for we, like the narrator, are trapped in present time. The first flashback occurs in Chapter 3 and there are brief references to Luke in Chapters 2 and 5. However, it is in the ‘Night’ sections that the flashback technique is most obvious and most sustained, for this is Offred’s ‘time out’ when she is free to wander back into her remembered past. It is here that we gain a sense of Offred as a powerful personal presence with a history
5. The readers come to understand Offred’s condition of double vision, for she continually sees and judges the present through her memories of the past. As she says, ‘You’ll have to forgive me. I’m a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I’ve left or been forced to leave behind me’ (Chapter 35). The narrative represents the complex ways that memory works, where the present moment is never self-contained but pervaded by traces of other times and events.
6. Offred is not fixed in the past as she is also writing of the present, and her record of daily life is presented with scrupulous attention to realistic detail. She records the unexciting monotony of her daily life as a Handmaid, as well as its crises, both public and personal. There are the public meetings like the Birth Day, the Prayvaganza and the terrible Salvaging; there is of course the monthly Ceremony as a semi-public event; there are her own significant private events, like her secret meetings with the Commander and their outing to Jezebel’s. However ambivalent her feelings for the Commander may be, Offred recognises that it is through these meetings in his study where she can talk and read that she is enabled to return to a lively sense of herself as an individual. Most crucial for her is her love affair with Nick (Chapters 40 and 41), which has all the conventional features of a romantic love story and possibly even a happy ending. Yet in the circumstances it is the most unlikely plot that could have been devised, and Offred tells it with a kind of dazzled disbelief in its reality.
7. Offred tells the stories of many other women as well as her own. Some of these are fixed in the past and some end even while she is telling her own. The story of her feminist mother belongs to the past and is recaptured only in memory and on film (Chapters 7 and 39). Moira’s story, like her mother’s, is one of female heroism but, unlike her mother’s, Moira’s story extends into the present, for she too becomes an inmate at the Rachel and Leah Centre, and Offred recalls with delight Moira’s courage and outrageousness in Chapters 13, 15 and 22. Offred finds Moira again at Jezebel’s in Chapter 37 and tells the story of her life as a rebel in Chapter 38. Hers is one of the unfinished stories embedded in this narrative, for Offred never sees Moira again after that night.
8. There are also shorter story fragments about other Handmaids, some of them rebels or victims or both, which form a sad subtext to Offred’s survival narrative and incidentally imply a moral judgement on the social engineering policies of Gilead. There is the story of her unnamed predecessor at the Commander’s house, of whom all she knows is the scribbled secret message (Chapter 9) and scraps of information about how she hanged herself (Chapter 29). For Offred, that woman is her own ghostly double: ‘How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us. Get it over, she says’ (Chapter 46).
9. The motif of doubles recurs in the story of Ofglen: ‘Doubled, I walk the street’ (Chapter 5). Yet Ofglen turns out to be more like Moira’s double than Offred’s, for she too is a rebel in disguise, a member of the Mayday Resistance movement and a whisperer of irreverent comments at the Prayvaganza. But her story does have an ending, for she commits suicide after the Salvaging (Chapter 44).
10. Whether women are rebels or willing victims, their chances of survival are slim, as the story of Janine illustrates. She appears and reappears, marking the various stages of a Handmaid’s career – from willing victim at the Rachel and Leah Centre where she almost has a nervous breakdown (Chapter 33), to her moment of triumph as the pregnant Ofwarren whose Birth Day is attended by all the Handmaids (Chapters 19 and 21), to her last frightening appearance as madwoman after the Particicution, holding a dump of bloodstained hair (Chapter 43).
11. Offred also tells the story of Serena Joy, with flashbacks to her earlier career as a television personality on a gospel show in Chapters 3 and 8. In a curious way, though it could not be seen as an example of female bonding, Offred’s account presents Serena Joy as another of her own doubles, trapped like herself by Gileadean ideology. In one of her more unusual anecdotes, Offred is even disguised as Serena Joy when she has to wear her blue cloak to go with the Commander to Jezebel’s, and she is forced to look at her own face in Serena Joy’s silver mirror to put on her make-up.
12. Offred insists on telling the stories of other silenced women which contradict Gilead’s claims to absolute mastery and its myth of female submissiveness. From a wide historical perspective, she can be seen as writing against the Old Testament dismissal of the Handmaids of the Patriarchs, and she is writing on behalf of all those women then and now with no rights of representation. In this way her narrative is exemplary and symbolic.
13. There is yet another dimension to Offred’s complex narrative, which signals the postmodern contemporary nature of Margaret Atwood’s storytelling technique. Offred is continually drawing our attention to her storytelling process, commenting on the way that the act of telling shapes and changes real experience, and giving reasons why she needs to tell her story at all (see Chapters 7, 23, 40 and 41). For Offred, storytelling is both eye-witness account and substitute for dialogue. It is also the only message she can hope to send to the outside world from her imprisonment, and she has to struggle to tell it, trusting that one day her message will be delivered: ‘A story is like a letter. Dear You, I’ll say. Just you, without a name … You can mean thousands’ (Chapter 7).
14. Offred’s own story ends when she climbs up into the black truck, but the novel does not end here. There is a supplement in the ‘Historical Notes’, told by a different narrator, in a different place, at a different time, projecting a second vision of the future set not in America but in Canada. Paradoxically, this shift works to convince us of the immediacy of Offred’s narrative. It is very likely that we will reject the professor’s dismissal of Offred as a figure belonging to the vanished past, and given his own sexist attitudes, we might assume that Offred’s story about patriarchal attitudes does not belong exclusively to the past but threatens the future as well. Offred’s message has been delivered 200 years later. So it is given over to us, the readers, and we are left to puzzle out the answers to all the questions she has raised.