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Topic
Literature & Language

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Writing

How to Write Best-Selling Fiction

Course Guidebook

James Scott Bell
Novelist and Writing Instructor

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Corporate Headquarters

4840 Westfields Boulevard | Suite 500 | Chantilly, Virginia | 20151-2299

[PHONE] 1.800.832.2412 | [FAX] 703.378.3819 | [WEB] www.thegreatcourses.com

James Scott Bell

Novelist and Writing Instructor

James Scott Bell is an award-winning novelist and writing instructor. He is a winner of the International Thriller Writers Award and the author of a best-selling book on writing, *Plot & Structure: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting a Plot That Grips Readers from Start to Finish*. He received his BA in Film Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he studied writing with Raymond Carver, and his JD with honors from the University of Southern California Gould School of Law. A former trial lawyer, Mr. Bell now writes and speaks full time.

Mr. Bell is a prolific author. His works include the Mike Romeo thriller series (*Romeo's Rules*, *Romeo's Way*, and *Romeo's Hammer*), the Ty Buchanan legal thriller series (*Try Dying*, *Try Darkness*, and *Try Fear*), and the novels *Your Son Is Alive*, *Don't Leave Me*, *Blind Justice*, and *Final Witness*. He has written several popular writing books, including *Just Write: Creating Unforgettable Fiction and a Rewarding Writing Life*; *Conflict and Suspense*; and *The Art of War for Writers: Fiction Writing Strategies, Tactics, and Exercises*. Mr. Bell has also published *How to Write Dazzling Dialogue: The Fastest Way to Improve Any Manuscript*; *Write Your Novel From the Middle: A New Approach for Plotters, Pantsers and Everyone in Between*; *Super Structure: The Key to Unleashing the Power of Story*; *How to Write Pulp Fiction*; and *How to Make a Living as a Writer.*

Mr. Bell served as a fiction columnist for *Writer's Digest*. He has taught novel writing at Pepperdine University as well as in writing seminars across the United States and many parts of the world, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom. ■

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HOW TO WRITE **BEST-SELLING FICTION**

COURSE SCOPE

The goal of this course is to teach you what it takes to be a successful novelist in today's competitive marketplace. The course covers a broad territory—from getting great ideas all the way through completing and publishing a novel. Throughout the course, the seven critical success factors of best-selling fiction are examined in detail.

1. **PLOT.** You will learn about the LOCK system, a set of principles that guarantees a solid plot every time. What makes for a compelling lead character? What are the three types of leads, and how can you create a bond with the reader? You'll learn about the two types of objectives and how to make them crucial to the lead character. You'll also learn about the engine of great fiction, confrontation, and the secrets of a knockout ending.

2. **STRUCTURE.** The pillars of perfect structure, every time, will be examined, beginning with an opening disturbance and then thrusting the lead character through two doorways of no return. Along the way, you will learn about such devices as the care package, pet the dog, and mounting forces. Most important is the unique and innovative insight provided by the magical midpoint moment.

3. **CHARACTERS.** You will discover how to create memorable, jump-off-the-page characters and how to show convincing character change (the character arc) without seeming melodramatic. You will also learn the secret of orchestrating a cast of characters, the way to use minor characters for spice, and techniques for creating more secrets, mysteries, and tensions between the cast.

4. **SCENES.** The building blocks of the novel are the scenes. You will learn how to write organic scenes that are connected to the overall story and how to apply the elements of structure. Both action and reaction scenes will be covered, and you will be given the tools—such as the fear factor—that guarantee strong readability.

5. **DIALOGUE.** Dialogue is the fastest way to improve a manuscript. You will discover the essentials of dialogue, along with specific tools and techniques you can apply immediately. Topics include compression, orchestration, conflict and tension, and subtext.

6. **STYLE.** The elusive concept of voice—something all agents and editors say they want but are unable to define—is covered. You'll learn the three-part construction of voice as well as various ways you can unlock it in every novel.

7. **THEME.** You will discover that theme, or meaning, is what gives a novel added depth.

Within each of these areas, there are other critical matters of craft that are covered in detail, including the following:

- ✍ **POINT OF VIEW:** The primary modes and how to keep them consistent so that the reader is fully invested in a character.

- ✍ **EMOTIONAL DEEPENING:** Ways to take the readers on a more satisfying story ride by going further inside the characters, including the antagonist.

- ✍ **COMMON BLUNDERS:** The most common mistakes that agents and editors see in manuscripts and how to correct them.

The course also covers the two main publishing options open to writers today: the traditional route and the self-publishing route. You'll learn about the pros and cons of each so that you can make an informed decision about which is best for you.

Once you have a book available for sale, the challenge of marketing presents itself. You will discover the single most important marketing factor, along with the other methods that work best. The goal is to keep you from wasting too much writing time pursuing less-than-advantageous marketing strategies.

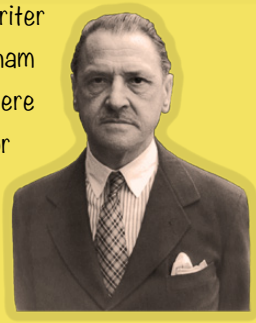
The course ends with one of the most important overall considerations for the writer of fiction today—the mental game—with the goal of helping you become more productive as you move forward in your career. ■

TELL ME A STORY

Lecture 1

Ever since humans began speaking to each other—and probably sometime before that, with grunts and gestures—we have been telling each other stories. Regardless of the delivery system of stories—whether oral, print, or electronic—storytelling has always been a craft. Certain fundamentals of that craft have proven to work time and time again. And this means they can be learned, studied, absorbed, practiced, and applied. Once you master the fundamentals, you're free to improvise and try different things. But if you're ever at a loss for why something isn't working in your fiction or how to make something work better, the fundamentals will always be there for you.

The famous writer Somerset Maugham once said, "There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."



Types of Fiction

The type of fiction that has always sold best in the marketplace is called commercial fiction. That simply means it is written and published in the hopes of capturing the widest reading audience possible. The writers of commercial fiction, and their publishers, want to make money—because publishing is a business that requires a profit to keep going, and a writer has to pay the bills.

Commercial fiction is often distinguished from literary fiction, which is usually confined to a narrower audience—one that appreciates a more complex style of writing, isn't afraid of being challenged by a piece of writing, enjoys deciphering layers of meaning, and so forth.

Over the years there have been some literary novels that have become quite popular, even classics—such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*—but when you look at books that win prestigious literary prizes, quite often you will see that these novels sold only a few thousand copies.

And that's OK, because we need great literary fiction. Commercial fiction sells primarily because it entertains. We need fiction that sweeps us up and helps us escape for a little while the harsh realities of life.

The term *genre fiction* means that a book falls neatly into a category that has certain conventions readers expect. A mystery needs to have a sleuth. A romance needs to have lovers. Science fiction needs to have scientific or technological advances beyond our current world. Genre books are always intended to be commercial.

In his book How to *Write Best Selling Fiction*, Dean Koontz wrote, "In a world that encompasses so much pain and fear and cruelty, it is noble to provide a few hours of escape, moments of delight and forgetfulness."

Best-selling fiction is well structured. The further you stray from solid story structure, the more you get to experimental territory. Experimental fiction is fiction that doesn't sell. It's not that there isn't an audience for the experimental; it's just that it's very small. And it's not that a writer shouldn't go there if he or she wants to; it's just that the writer shouldn't be shocked if the book is not a best seller.

Sometimes you will hear critics or even other writers denigrate commercial fiction, or, as it is often called, genre fiction. They will classify it as formulaic or hackwork. But that's much too broad a brush. The best commercial fiction is beautifully written and just as meaningful as literary fiction.

There doesn't have to be a sharp contrast between dry literary fiction and action-packed commercial fiction. You can have a blending of both. An example is one of the best-selling books of all time, *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. It is beautifully written, like the best literary novels, and it has a dramatic plot.

Seven Critical Success Factors of Fiction

Anything you can learn about fiction writing will fit under one of the seven critical success factors of fiction.

1. **PLOT.** Plot is the stuff that happens in the story. It is the events, the things you choose to tell your readers about what happened.

2. **CHARACTERS**. There is no plot without characters. And characters who don't have a plot to interact with simply don't interest us. So, putting plot and characters together, making each of those elements attractive to readers, is the foundation to the craft of commercial fiction.

3. **STRUCTURE.** Structure is the ordering of the plot in such a way as to make it the most effective translation from what is in your imagination to what the reader experiences.

4. **SCENES.** These are the building blocks of your novel. You tell your story scene by scene, and what happens in those scenes must be done in such a way as to keep readers interested enough that by the end of the scene, they want to turn the page to the next one.

5. **DIALOGUE.** Dialogue is what the characters say to one another, and it is the fastest way to improve the manuscript. When editors or agents or readers see crisp and distinct dialogue in a book, they immediately gain more confidence in the writer.

6. **STYLE.** Style is the way you shape your sentences—something called voice. If you go to a writers conference and listen to a panel of editors or agents respond to the question of what they're looking for, invariably one or more will say something like "a fresh voice."

7. **THEME**. All stories carry a theme, or meaning, whether the author intended it or not.

Ten Characteristics of the Writing Life

Simply taking a course about writing is not going to turn you into a successful writer. You must also develop a writing life. There are 10 characteristics a writer should nurture to increase the odds of success.

1. **A BURNING DESIRE.** If you want to make it as a writer, it's going to take sacrifice of time, money, and frustration. If you don't have the desire—the strong drive inside you—there are too many ways to quit.

> The famous mystery writer Phyllis Whitney once said, "You must want it *enough*. Enough to take all the rejections, enough to pay the price of disappointment and discouragement while you are learning. Like any other artist you must learn your craft—then you can add all the genius you like."

2. **THE DISCIPLINE TO DO.** There is a correlation between discipline and success as a writer. This primarily means the discipline of producing a certain number of words on a regular basis. Discipline means you write to a quota even when you don't feel like it. Check your normal schedule and writing practice and figure out how many words you can comfortably produce in a week. Then raise that number by 10 percent, just to give yourself a bit of a push. Make it your priority to write that number of words every week for the rest of your life.

> Novelist and writing teacher Leonard Bishop said, "Dramatic characters, inventive plotlines, exciting and intense situations are not achieved through accident or good luck. The writers of great books zealously learn the craft of their profession so they can release the power and depth of their imagination and experience."

3. **STANDARDS TO MEET.** Writers who have enjoyed long careers are virtually unanimous in saying that they feel like writing gets harder for them with each successive book. When you dig down into that, you find that it's not that they don't know how to do it again, but that their standards keep rising.

They want to improve with every book they write. And they know more about their craft, so they can see their own problem areas better. As a writer, you should want every book you write to be the best it can be. If you follow a course of study and disciplined output, you can make it so for yourself.

4. **A TON OF PATIENCE.** As with any of the arts, you need to have a lot of patience in learning the fundamentals. It's not something people get overnight.

5. **THE ABILITY TO BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF.** Arrogance is not going to help you in your writing career. Having a chip on your shoulder about how much you think you know is only going to hold you back. Be willing to confront, honestly and openly, the areas where you need to improve as a writer. Then you can make plans to strengthen those areas.

6. **A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF JOY.** When you can write with the fire of joy inside you, even when you're facing challenges in the writing, that joy will show up on the page as if by magic vibration. The secret to joy in your writing comes from your characters. If ever you feel yourself hitting a snag in a book or finding the writing less joyful than it should be, go deeper into the lives of your characters. The infinite world of human behavior is endlessly fascinating and the source of writing enjoyment.

7. **A BUSINESSLIKE ATTITUDE.** Although many writers want to believe that all they have to do is sit in a coffee shop or on the beach with their laptops and write their stories and a career will fall into place, that's just not true. The successful writers of fiction approach their careers as a business. You should plan your career like an entrepreneur planning a venture. What is your definition of success? How are you going to measure it? How will you know when you get there? Where are you going to submit your work? What are your financial needs?

THERE ARE TWO TRACKS FOR PUBLISHING FICTION.

The traditional track has existed for most of the time novels have been published. It's the publishing industry, where you have business partners in the form of agents and acquisitions editors and marketing people within a publishing company. They can all help you with direction for your career.

The other track is self-publishing, or independent publishing. Writers now have the opportunity to publish their work themselves and sell it online. But this new way of publishing does not mean you can do it haphazardly—or alone. You will need to gather your own team. You'll need early readers and a good editor, and someone to design your book covers.

8. **RHINO SKIN.** Writing as a career or vocation has never been for the faint of heart. Rejection—often a lot of it—is part of the journey. Almost all successful writers went through initial periods of rejection, some for many years. Are you prepared for that? Once you do get published, you're going to be subjected to reviews by consumers. To prepare yourself for negative reviews, you'll need a thick skin. And you need to know that the best way to deal with these negatives is to just keep writing good books for a growing base of happy readers.

Thirty publishers rejected a horror novel by a young high school teacher. He put those rejection letters on a spike in his wall. Finally, a publisher took a chance on the novel—*Carrie*—and the career of Stephen King was launched.

9. **THE ABILITY TO KEEP YOUR HUMANITY.** The best writers are those who have a balanced view of their life. They don't burn bridges. They have some close relationships, and they have a life outside of writing. That's one of the ways you get material: by being open to life and experience. The days when Emily Dickinson could just sit in her room and write poem after poem are pretty much over. The larger writing community—when you go to conferences, and so on—is a pretty supportive fellowship. But if you develop a negative reputation, it will only hurt you in the end.

Sixteen literary agents and 12 publishing houses rejected the first book by John Grisham.

10. **A DROP OF TALENT.** Although talent does make a difference, it only takes you so far, just like in all other endeavors. And there are innumerable examples of people with less inherent talent exceeding those blessed with abundant talent simply because they work harder and never gave up.

Suggested Reading

Block, *Writing the Novel.*
Koontz, *How to Write Bestselling Fiction.*

Exercise

Take five minutes to write a free-form document, without editing yourself, answering this question: I want to be a writer because _____. Go deep. What do you want readers to feel? What do *you* want to feel?

ANATOMY OF A BEST SELLER

Lecture 2

The essence of a best seller is the idea of something crucially important and dangerous and exciting going on so the reader has to keep turning the pages to find out what happens next—and, even further, to read all the way to the end to find out the resolution to the whole matter. Further than that, the reader wants that ending to leave him or her with a feeling of supreme satisfaction. So, to coin a phrase, *page-turningness* to a satisfying ending is really what makes a best seller. But what goes into making a book a page-turner?

This course teaches the principles of best-selling writing assuming the basic model of one lead character and one main plot question. If you wish to write a book with multiple protagonists, or with some wide sweep, these techniques will apply. All you do is take each main plotline of your book, each main character, and do the work for each one.

Your Character's Fight against Death

A novel is the record of how a character, through strength of will, fights against impending death. There are three kinds of death: physical, professional, and psychological.

- Physical death is obvious. If your lead character actually dies—as in, stops breathing—the story is over. So, your character better win in the arena of conflict or he or she is gone. Most thrillers today are about a bad guy, or group of bad guys, trying to kill someone, or maybe even everyone in the whole world. This can mean the death of the lead character is the issue. One type of thriller involves a series character for whom trouble is their business. An example is the Jonathan Grave series by John Gilstrap. Grave is a freelance specialist in covert rescue operations. In each book, if Grave and his team do not succeed, somebody else is going to die.

- Another kind of death is professional death. When the novel revolves around the lead character's profession, a best seller focuses on a current case or controversy that can mean the lead's career is over if the case is not brought to a successful conclusion. This is the thread that makes Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch detective novels so compelling. For Harry, there's no getting around his professional drive to solve cases, so every case becomes a matter of solving it or dying professionally. He is also in danger of being drummed off the force at times, which means not being able to go on as an LAPD detective.

- Psychological death is dying on the inside. There is imminent danger of the lead character dying psychologically if the conflict isn't won. Take Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye.* If he doesn't find authenticity in the world, he's going to die psychologically (does he? At the end, we're not sure, but it's close). In fact, if he doesn't find this reason, we're pretty sure actual death—by suicide—is inevitable.

Psychological death is crucial to understand, as it elevates the emotions of fiction like no other aspect. And it is powerful in any genre.

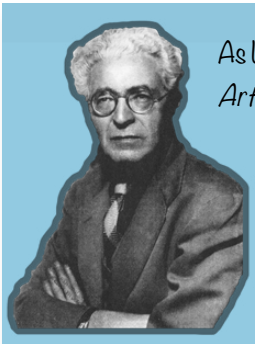
For example, this is the key to all romances: If the two lovers don't get together, they will each miss out on their "soulmate." Their lives will be incurably damaged. Because readers of most romances know the lovers are going to end up together, it's all the more important to create this illusion of imminent psychological death.

When you describe the plot of a book or film in one or two lines, the death aspect should be evident. For example, in most of the Harry Bosch novels, professional death is on the line. Bosch is an LAPD homicide detective. He has a desire to be the voice of cold case victims, and if he doesn't do his job, there is no justice. But then in many of the books, there is a psychological aspect to Bosch: the need to grow in his own humanity. That becomes a second level of death. It can add a great layer of emotional complexity when you do that, but you should think about your novel with one primary mode of death on the line.

Your Character's Strength of Will

A best-selling novel is the record of how a character fights with death through strength of will. There is no story unless a lead character at some point (and the earlier the better) exercises strength of will. In a great story, the lead character is not passive but active.

Think about Scarlett O'Hara. Do we want 200 pages of her sitting on her porch flirting with the local boys? Do we want to listen to her selfish prattle or watch her flit around in big hoopskirts?



As Lajos Egri states in *The Art of Dramatic Writing:*

> A weak character cannot carry the burden of protracted conflict in a play. He cannot support a play. We are forced, then, to discard such a character as a protagonist ... the dramatist needs not only characters who are willing to put up a fight for their convictions. He needs characters who have the strength, the stamina, to carry this fight to its logical conclusion.

Most of us don't want anything to do with her at all after seven pages or so, but then she learns that Ashley Wilkes, her dream husband-to-be, is going to marry that mousy Melanie!

She immediately lays plans to get him alone at the big barbecue. She'll tell him of her love, and he'll dump Melanie. Through strength of will, she draws him into a room where they can be alone.

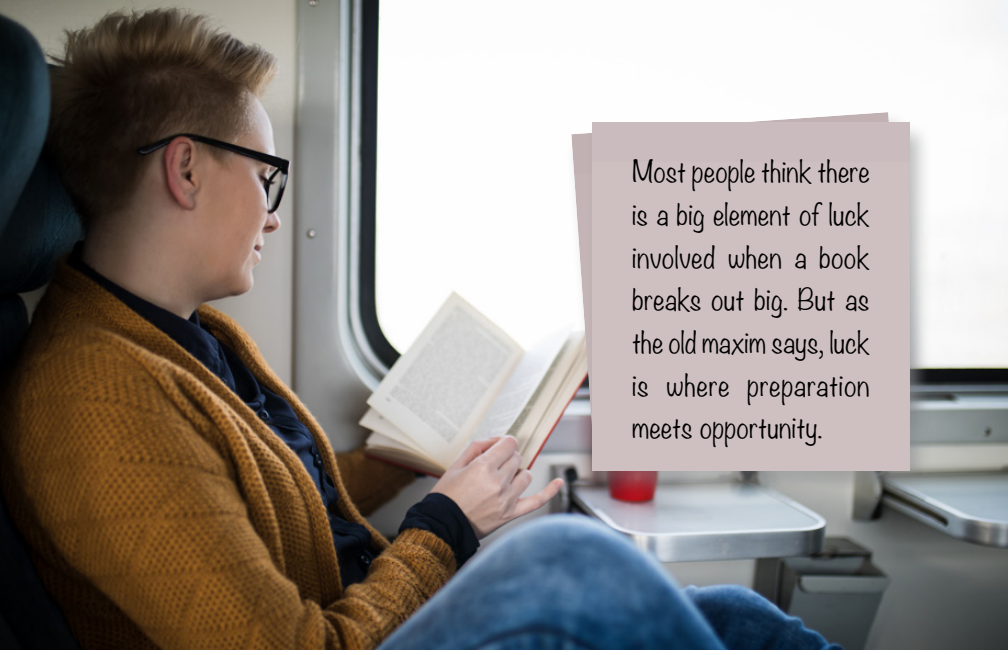
Only her plan does not work out as intended. This is good, because strength of will must be met with further obstacles, challenges, and setbacks. The protagonist has to keep fighting or the book is over.

That's why, after the setback with Ashley, Scarlett faces a further complication—the Civil War. For the rest of the book, Scarlett will have to show strength of will to save the family home and fight for the man she loves.

A character can start passive, but he or she cannot stay there for long. One of Stephen King's early novels, *Rose Madder*, is about a terribly abused wife seeking to escape her psycho cop husband. The opening chapter depicts an episode of this abuse. The chapter ends with this chilling line: "Rose McClendon Daniels slept within her husband's madness for nine more years."

Wise storyteller that he is, King does not give us more pages of this. Rather, he quickly gets us to the point where Rose exercises her strength of will. She sees a blood spot on her sheets from the latest battery by her husband. It is the last straw—the last spot. She gathers up the courage to finally walk out the door.

Why did she wait so long? Because her husband will track her down and kill her. He has the means and the training to do it. So, it was never a matter of going to a shelter or filing for divorce. It's physical death that's on the line. The point is that the story doesn't get going until Rose begins to exercise her own will.



The Reader's Bond with the Character

A further requirement for best-selling fiction is character bonding. In some way, the readers must bond with a lead character—have some emotional investment in following that character through an entire book.

One of the reasons people read is to worry about a character. Subliminally, part of the reason we read entertaining fiction is to escape into a story where troubling things are happening to someone else so that we can forget about the troubling things in our own lives.

This leads to another important point: A successful novel takes the reader on an emotional ride. A novel is not a lecture or a sermon, though you as an author might want to send a message. Unless a reader is caught up emotionally in the story, he or she won't stick around for any message.

Another metaphor is something called the fictive dream. We all know how good it feels to get so caught up in a story world that it's like we've been taken away to another place. So much of what is covered in this course is about not only how to weave a fictive dream, but also how to stop doing the things that startle readers out of the dream.

A Writer's Pyramid

The writer's pyramid is divided into six sections. Inside the pyramid are writers, with each section representing a different level of achievement.

1. The bottom, where most of the people are, is the realm of the *want to*—or *I think I have a book inside me.* But outside of some scribblings, maybe a short story or two, or perhaps an unfinished novel, these people never move on to the next level.

2. This level holds people who actually try to learn something about writing. These people buy writing books, go to conferences, take classes—and write.

3. Above that is the level for those who actually finish a full-length novel. This is a great place to be. This is where real writers come from.

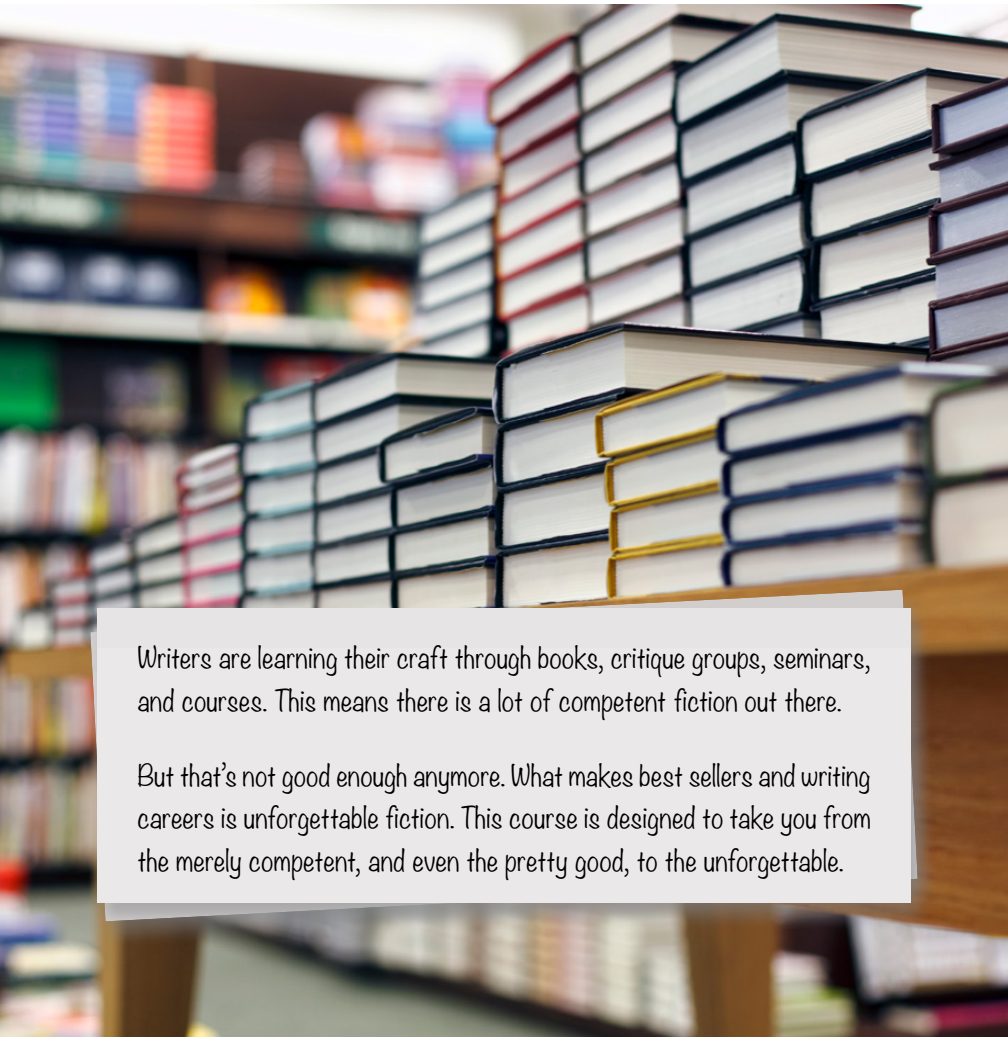
4. The next level holds those who write another novel—because the first one is probably going to be rejected. They do this because they are novelists, not just people who happened to write a novel.

5. Next are those who get published.

6. Above that are those who are published multiple times.

Sitting on top of the pyramid is a wheel of fortune. This is where the breakout hits come from. The wheel goes around and lands on a book like *The Da Vinci Code* or *Harry Potter.* No one can control this—not even a big publisher. No one knows how to guarantee a hit or it would be done every time.

Your job is to keep moving up the pyramid. Each level presents its own challenges, so concentrate on those. As you move up, you'll notice that there are fewer people, not more. People drop out of the pyramid all the time. But if you work hard, you might get a novel on the wheel, and that's as far as you can go on your own. After that, it's not up to you anymore.



Writers are learning their craft through books, critique groups, seminars, and courses. This means there is a lot of competent fiction out there.

But that's not good enough anymore. What makes best sellers and writing careers is unforgettable fiction. This course is designed to take you from the merely competent, and even the pretty good, to the unforgettable.

If you want to be published—if you want a hit book—don't worry about things you can't control. Focus on the page right in front of you. Make it the best it can be, and build those pages into a book. And then work on another one.

Keep climbing the pyramid. The wheel spins on its own.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *Plot & Structure.*
Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing.*

Exercise

Reread one of your all-time favorite novels. As you do, ask yourself what it is about the characters, setting, scenes, and overall plot that grabs you. Look especially at the first 50 pages. How did the author draw you in? What sets this book apart from run-of-the-mill fiction?

DEVELOPING IDEAS

Lecture 3

Perhaps most of the novels ever written have started when an author gets an idea in the form of *what if?*

Getting Ideas for Novels

The idea for a novel—the concept—is the first step in writing popular fiction. And as creativity experts will tell you, the key to getting great ideas is to come up with lots of ideas, without assessment, and then pick the best ones for further development.

And that's something you should think about as someone looking to build a writing career. If that's your aim, you need to think like a movie studio. A studio at every moment will have projects that are being filmed, projects that have been given the green light to begin filming, many other projects being developed, and lots of ideas being pitched for consideration.

You should write that way, too. You should, at every stage of your writing life, have a book you're working on. This is called the work in progress, or WIP. But you should also have other projects that you've begun developing. This means writing down scene ideas and character possibilities and doing some free-form journaling.

In addition to all that, you should have a file of ideas that have come to you in various ways, and you should look at that file on occasion for the ideas that still excite you.

In his book *What a Great Idea!*, Charles "Chic" Thompson offers rules of thumb for developing creativity.

The first and most important rule is this: "The best way to get great ideas is to get lots of ideas and throw the bad ones away." In other words, when you are setting out to be creative—to generate ideas—it's important that you don't edit yourself. Your imagination has to be allowed to play. Don't make any judgments. That comes later, after you've generated lots and lots of potential ideas and you take a cooling-off period before you do any assessment.

Another of Thompson's rules is this: "When you ask a dumb question, you get a smart answer." Often it's the dumb questions that allow you to see things in a new light. So, ask yourself basic questions about what you want to write, what you're feeling, why you're feeling it, and so on. Dig a little deeper into your writer's soil.

Thompson also suggests that you never see a problem from its original perspective: "Always look for a second right answer." So often when you go further—when you get past the initial answer that your mind comes up with, which is usually something familiar because that's what you know best—that's where you're going to find real originality.

Ways to Spark Your Creativity

Schedule a weekly creativity time—a minimum of half an hour every week. It's a time when you do nothing but creative exercises that are meant to generate ideas.

Here are some great creativity exercises.

- **THE WHAT-IF GAME.** This is the gushing fountain of creativity. Train yourself to ask *what if?* all the time. Driving down the street, you might see a billboard of happy people in a restaurant and think, *what if there was a bomb under the table?* If you are intentional about this, eventually your imagination will train itself to do this on its own.

✍ **THE FIRST-LINE GAME.** Dean Koontz, in his book *How to Write Best Selling Fiction*, told how he used to do this all the time to find material. One day he wrote this: "'You ever killed anything?' Roy asked." He stared at this sentence awhile and then decided Roy was 14 and talking to a younger boy. And from that one line, he developed what became an early best seller, *The Voice of the Night*. Keep a file dedicated to any first lines you make up.

✍ **NEWS FLASHES.** There's always something going on in the news, and if you're into political or crime thrillers, there's always lots of fodder. The TV series *Law & Order* constantly mined news stories and fictionalized them. But go beyond that. Find the personal stories, the local items, the odd news. Collect these. Throw them in a file.

✍ **OCCUPATIONS.** The Bureau of Labor Statistics has a huge database of standard occupations at https://www.bls.gov/oes/2017/may/oes_stru.htm. Clicking on the links on this page and learning more about the various occupations is a great way to explore an interesting job for a main character that might then trigger a plot idea for a novel. Stephen King says that readers love to read about interesting work that characters do. Take advantage of that fact. Create a character with an interesting job and use that job as a starting point for a plot, asking *what if?*

Combining familiar plots of books and movies has a long tradition of success.

To be clear, this is not plagiarism. You're not stealing an author's work product, which is of course something you must never do. What you're doing is making a combination of ideas to yield a plot that you make original and your own by changing the setting, genre, characters, and so forth.

This is done in Hollywood all the time. Try it. It's perfectly legit.

- **OBSESSION.** Ray Bradbury used to say you ought to give a character an obsession and then let her loose. He said he got his plots by following her footsteps in the snow. That's a great starting point for an idea. From it will flow all sorts of ideas about who can oppose this character, what drives the obsession, and the beginnings of a plot.

- **BURNING ISSUE.** Some writers really want to tackle a social or political issue they strongly care about. There's nothing wrong with that, but there's a right way and a wrong way to do it. The wrong way is to stack the deck in favor of the side you believe in. The danger is you'll write cardboard characters and start writing sermons instead of dialogue. The right way—the courageous way, and the way that will make your book more than a screed—is to make sure each side gets a hearing. To get the plot juices boiling, you might start this idea process by writing a letter from someone on the other side trying to justify his or her position.

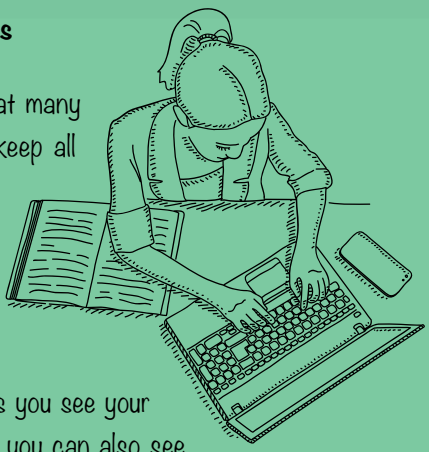
- **"BOYS IN THE BASEMENT" MORNING PAGES.** Stephen King has a great metaphor for the writer's subconscious mind: the boys in the basement. The idea is to put the boys to work at night and record what they come up with in the morning. Try to ask yourself a writing question before you hit the sack. Then, as soon as you get up in the morning, start writing for five or 10 minutes, letting whatever is in there pour out.

Developing Your Novel Idea

The next stage of development is to begin a free-form document—a document where you think out loud about your idea, only you think by typing. You can also do this by dictating into your phone or computer.

Talk to yourself in this document. You might begin by saying, "Hey, tell me about this idea of yours." Then, type some thoughts and see where they lead.

A Software Program for Writers



Scrivener is a writing program that many writers swear by. It's a way to keep all of your notes and scenes and research and actual writing in one place so that you can view it in different ways. It lets you write your scenes and keep synopses of them on a digital index card. It lets you see your cards on a virtual corkboard, and you can also see your characters and photos of your characters on a corkboard. It keeps track of your word count, by session and overall. When your book is completed, Scrivener lets you compile it into a Word document for sending out to editors or an e-book ready for self-publishing.

For more information about Scrivener, check out the blog post "Getting Started with Scrivener": https://killzoneblog.com/2014/12/getting-started-with-scrivener.html.

There are also video tutorials available for free on the company's site: www.literatureandlatte.com/learn-and-support.

Ask yourself questions and answer them as best you can. You can also write ideas for characters, scenes, and plot twists that occur to you. But you're constantly trying to figure out why you're so interested in this idea. What is it about it that grabs you at an emotional level? That's very important, because if the idea doesn't matter to you, it's not going to matter to readers. So, keep digging.

After about an hour of writing this way, set the document aside and don't go back to it until the next day. That allows your "boys in the basement" to be working on it during the night. Reread what you've written and highlight things that jump out at you. Select the best material and leave other stuff alone. Then, ask questions about what you've highlighted and go even deeper still. And you're off to more freewriting.

After a few days, or maybe a week, things will really start to coalesce. Let the document sit for a few days and then find a quiet place to read it over, making more notes. Crystallize the main characters, the most important secondary characters, the basic situation, the plotline, and the death stakes. Then, condense the whole thing into a logline—a Hollywood screenwriting term referring to a single line that can summarize the basic plot. Try using the form *who/who must*, like this:

> My story is about a Kansas farm girl who must kill a wicked witch in order to get home.

This needs to be simple and clear. It's your through line, something you can always remember to keep you on track.

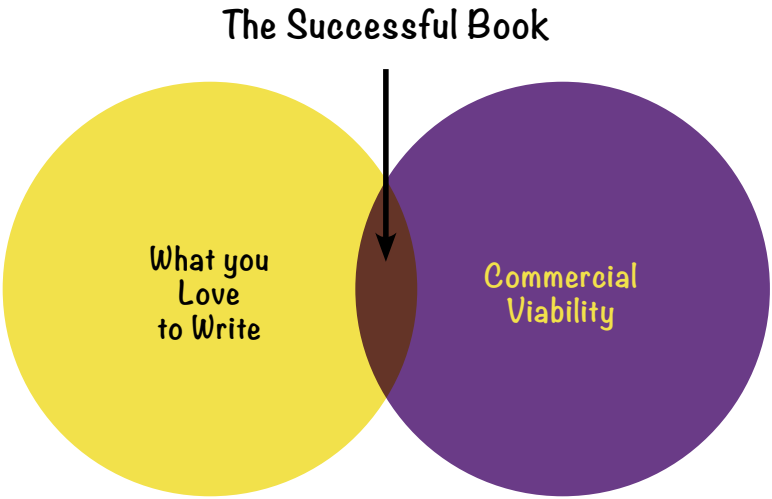
Another exercise you can do at this early stage is the killer-scenes blast. With a stack of blank index cards and a pen in hand, start imagining random scenes that you think would be interesting. Don't analyze their place in the plot. Don't think about structure. Just let your wild mind come up with 20, 30, or sometimes 40 scene ideas.

Then, put the cards together and shuffle them, pulling out two at a time and asking how they might connect. New plot ideas come from this.

You won't end up using a lot of these scenes. You hope to end up with five or 10 really killer scene ideas.

Next, do some market research on your idea. You want to know if this is the sort of thing a lot of people will buy—because that's what makes a best seller, after all.

What you are looking for is a sweet spot. It's like a Venn diagram. In one circle is what you personally love to write; in the other circle is commercial viability. Ideally, you want your idea to be where those circles meet.



If you move too far to the right, you could end up with a commercial concept that comes out plain or cookie-cutter. On the other hand, if you stray away from commercial viability, even if you really love your concept, you risk not having much of an audience. But taking risks within that sweet spot is often where the kind of best seller that really breaks out is found.

You can do simple market research first by looking at best-seller lists within your genre. Go to Amazon.com and search for best sellers in that category. Read the book descriptions. See what people are buying. Would your book appeal to a broad readership?

Now you've got a concept for a novel that you are serious about moving to the front burner, which is where a project of yours will get the green light to write. Before you do, apply the freshness test. Ask yourself these questions:

THE ELEVATOR PITCH

Imagine you get on an elevator with an agent, or an editor, or a famous movie director, and as the doors close, this person looks at you and says, "I hear you're a writer. What are you working on?" You have until the elevator reaches the 10th floor to answer this question.

The formula for an elevator pitch is made up of three sentences.

1. The first sentence introduces the main character and describes his or her initial situation:

   Dorothy Gale is a farm girl who dreams of getting out of Kansas to a land far, far away, where she and her dog will be safe from the likes of town busybody Miss Gulch.

2. The second sentence begins with the word *when* and describes the first doorway of no return, or the inciting incident—the event that causes the rest of the story to happen:

   When a twister hits the farm, Dorothy is transported to a land of strange creatures and at least one wicked witch who wants to kill her.

3. The third sentence begins with the word *now* and describes what must happen for the main character to win the objective:

   Now, with the help of three unlikely friends, Dorothy must find a way to destroy the wicked witch so that the great wizard will send her back home.

A good elevator pitch is neat, brief, and gives you the essence of the story. You can use your elevator pitch in real life when you meet a person who is taking a pitch. Don't memorize it word for word, but know it so well that you can say it conversationally. The value of this pitch is that it gives you the most commercial, most compelling distillation of your story. It is the thing that will keep you from wandering too far away from what makes this idea work.

- What unique twist or angle can I give this plot?
- What's unique about the character? Dig deeper.
- What's unique about the setting? Find something.
- What's unique about the relationships? Can I make connections among the characters—relationships they share that are secret when the story begins?

Turn all clichés on their head. If you're thinking about making one of your characters a truck driver, don't let him be a boot-wearing, blue-jeaned guy in a flannel shirt and baseball cap.

- What's the wow factor? What would make a person to whom you're pitching this say, "Wow"?

Suggested Reading

Bell, *The Art of War for Writers.*
Thompson, *What a Great Idea!*

Exercise

One-hour brainstorming: Take 10 minutes and come up with five opening lines. Make them as gripping as you can. Then, spend 10 minutes with each line, brainstorming what kind of story and characters might go along with it. Go wild. The next day, look for the idea that most excites you and begin to develop it using the principles in this lecture.

THE LOCK SYSTEM: A FOUNDATION FOR YOUR NOVEL

Lecture 4

When plotting a novel, there are a few basics that, if understood and applied, will help you come up with a solid plot every time. How far you go from there is, like most things, a matter of hard work and practice. The LOCK system is a simple set of foundational principles: lead, objective, confrontation, and knockout ending.

L is for Lead

A strong plot starts with an interesting lead character. In the best plots, that lead is compelling, someone the reader simply has to watch throughout the course of the novel.

This does not mean that the lead has to be entirely sympathetic. There is a car wreck dynamic to this: Just as people slow down to look at wreckage, readers can't resist seeing what happens to fully drawn human beings who make an unalterable mess of their lives.

There are three types of leads, also called protagonists, you can choose to write about.

- The first type is positive. It's what we have traditionally called the hero. In storytelling, in myths, the hero is someone who embodies the morality of the community and therefore represents the community in the conflict of the story. This is a character the readers root for because they can identify with and embrace the character's quest. We want the hero to win because we believe his cause is just or that he's trying to do the right thing.

Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* is a hero.

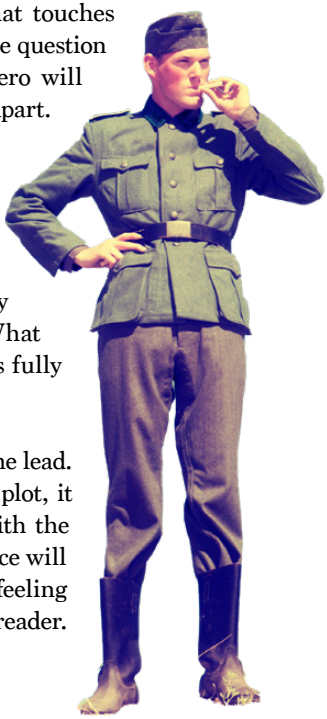
- The negative lead is the opposite. This is a character who does not adhere to the collective moral code and is therefore opposed to the community. Why would we care to read about negative leads? The answer is that we hope for their redemption.

We would like to see them change for the good, thus restoring them to the community. On the other hand, if they do not change for the good, we hope that they get their just deserts. That sense of justice is, again, part of the community feeling that we want to see vindicated.

Maybe the most famous negative lead in our literature is Ebenezer Scrooge.

✍ The antihero acts according to a personal code and is not actively part of the community. The antihero is a popular character in American literature and movies because of the strong individualist streak in our culture, along with a bit of antiauthoritarianism. When writing about an antihero, the plot involves this character being dragged into some problem that touches the community, and the question is whether that antihero will be restored or remain apart.

Rick in *Casablanca* is an antihero.



No matter what kind of lead you write about, your first task is to bond the reader with your lead. What follows is a list of factors that increase reader bonding with a character. You can choose what works for the particular story you're working on. Brainstorm from this list. What you're doing is using craft strategy to get readers fully involved with your lead character.

The first factor to consider is identification with the lead. Because the lead character provides access to a plot, it follows that the more the reader can identify with the lead, the greater the intensity of the plot experience will be. With identification, you create the wondrous feeling that the story, in some way, is happening to the reader.

Identification means, simply, that the lead is like the reader, who feels that he or she could, under the right circumstances, find him- or herself in the same position in the plot, with similar reactions.

Another word for this is empathy. The lead appears to be a real human being. What are the marks of a real human being? Look inside yourself: You are trying to make it in the world, a little fearful at times, and not perfect.

Your key question here is this: What does your lead do and think that makes him or her just like most people? Find those qualities and readers will begin to warm to the lead.

In contrast to mere empathy, sympathy intensifies the reader's emotional investment in the lead. Some of the best plots have a lead with whom some sympathy is established. Even if the lead has negative qualities, such as Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*, you can find ways to generate sympathy nonetheless.

There are four simple ways to establish sympathy. One is all you need. Don't overload them, as it may make the reader feel manipulated.

- The first way is to put the hero in terrible, imminent trouble physically. Imminent trouble can also be emotional; Dean Koontz often uses this device.

In Dean Koontz's *Midnight*, FBI agent Sam Booker is close to an emotional abyss. His teenage son hates him, and he is fighting to find reasons to keep on living. He is in emotional jeopardy. Part of the depth of the book comes from his finding reasons to carry on.

- Another sympathy factor is hardship. If the lead has to face some misfortune in life that is not of his or her own making, sympathy abounds. The key to using hardship is to not allow the character to whine about it. There can be moments when the character lashes out emotionally due to the hardship, but don't let him or her stay there. We admire those who take steps to overcome.

- Another great sympathy move is to make the character a tremendous underdog. America loves people who face long odds. John Grisham has used the underdog in many of his books.

John Grisham's *The Rainmaker* is the classic David and Goliath story switched to the courtroom. We can't help but root for Rudy Baylor as he battles a huge defense firm.

- We also sympathize when a character is vulnerable. Readers worry about a lead who might be crushed at any time.

Another feature of many enduring lead characters is likability. A likable lead is someone who does likable things. They do favors for people. Or they are witty in conversation. They are not selfish. They have an expansive view of life. These are people we like to be around. Think about people you like and then incorporate some of those characteristics into your lead.

Another thing to consider is inner conflict. Characters who are absolutely sure about what they do, who plunge ahead without fear, are not that interesting. We don't go through life that way. In reality, we have doubts just like everyone else. Bringing your lead's doubts to the surface in your plot pulls the reader deeper into the story. Inner conflict is nothing more than a fight between two opposing emotions. Many times, it is fear on one side, telling the lead not to act. Inner conflict is resolved when the lead, by listening to the other side—duty, honor, principle, or the like—overcomes fear and acts accordingly.

Exercise

On a sheet of paper or electronic document, make a list of all the factors that increase reader bonding with a character.

Then, brainstorm scene ideas for each of these. Don't judge the ideas; remember, the key to creativity is coming up with lots of ideas and keeping the ones you like.

Ask yourself how you would show the readers something that would demonstrate this factor.

Go through the whole list. For each factor, come up with at least three scene ideas. At the end of this exercise, you will have at least a few scenes you will want to develop and use in the plot.

O is for Objective

Objective is the driving force of fiction. It generates forward motion, keeping the lead from just sitting in the corner. An objective can take either of two forms: to get something or to get away from something.

- In *Jaws*, Brody desperately wants to *get* the shark.
- *Getting away from* is the basic plot of the Harrison Ford movie *The Fugitive*, in which he has to keep from getting caught by the US Marshall who's after him. At the same time, he has a *get* objective: to get the real killer, the one-armed man who murdered his wife—to get justice.

Remember, from lecture 2, that the objective, whatever form it takes, must have death at the center of it, whether it be physical, professional, or psychological.

C is for Confrontation

Opposition from characters and outside forces brings your story fully to life. If your lead moves toward his or her objective without anything in his or her way, you deprive readers of what they secretly want: worry. Readers want to fret about the lead, keeping an intense emotional involvement all the way through the novel.

Put obstacles in your lead's way. Make things tough on him or her. Never let your lead off easy.

The other side of the confrontation is the antagonist, or opponent—the person dedicated to preventing the lead from realizing the objective. The opponent does not have to be a villain or bad guy, just the person with the opposite agenda as the lead.

Of course, many times you will write about an opponent who is, in the eyes of the readers, a bad guy. And this is where you must avoid a common trap: writing the villain as a cardboard character bent on doing evil.

That kind of villain is a cliché and not interesting, and it ultimately cheats the reader out of a deeper emotional experience when reading your novel. The key is that the villain always feels morally justified. In some way, the villain thinks he or she is doing the right thing.

Exercise

Come up with the opponent's closing argument. Pretend he or she has to address a jury and justify his or her actions. The opponent is not going to argue, "Because I'm just a bad guy. I'm a psycho. I was born this way!" The opponent is going to argue that he or she is right.

You can also add a note of sympathy. Dean Koontz, the thriller novelist who has specialized in twisted villains, once said this:

> The best villains are those that evoke pity and sometimes even genuine sympathy as well as terror. Think of the pathetic aspect of the Frankenstein monster. Think of the poor werewolf, hating what he becomes in the light of the full moon, but incapable of resisting the lycanthropic tides in his own cells.

K is for Knockout

Readers of commercial fiction want to see a knockout at the end. They want to know who won and who lost. A literary novel can play with a bit more ambiguity. What you don't want is to leave the reader scratching his or her head, wondering what the whole experience was about.

There are five basic types of endings.

- The lead wins, gaining the objective.
- The lead loses, missing the objective.
- The lead loses the objective but gains something of value.
- The lead wins the objective but loses something of value.
- The ending is left open.

It's a good idea to have an ending in mind before you start to write. Some people say just write and you'll figure out the ending when you get there, but some advocates of this method have written themselves into a corner and thus into unsatisfactory endings. But if you have a direction, you can head toward it, and of course you're free to change it as the book develops.

The final part of a knockout ending is resonance—that last note in a magnificent symphony that produces a feeling that affixes itself to the soul, leaving you walking out with a satisfying note in your mind.

That's why working on your last page and last paragraph is worth every ounce of your effort. It's the last impression. Leave a lasting impression and you will build a readership.

Suggested Reading

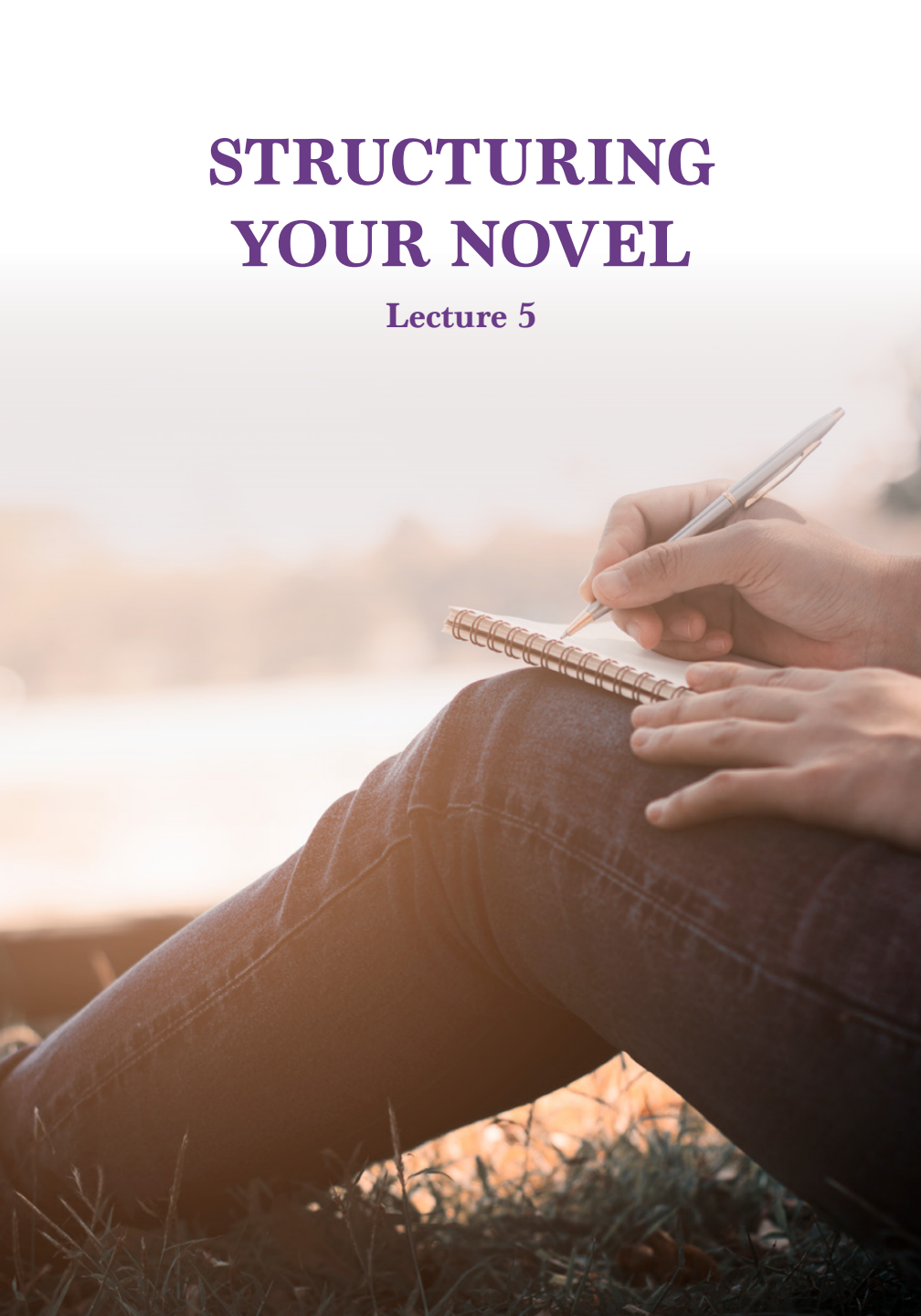
Bell, *Plot & Structure.*
Bickham, *Writing and Selling Your Novel.*

Exercise

Write a page describing each one of the LOCK elements for your idea. Why will readers care about your **LEAD**? How is the **OBJECTIVE** a life-or-death proposition? For **CONFRONTATION**, how is the antagonist stronger than the lead? If you have an idea for the **KNOCKOUT** ending, flesh it out; if you don't, at least describe the feeling you want readers to have at the end.

STRUCTURING YOUR NOVEL

Lecture 5



You have a story idea in you, you've developed it, and you're passionate about it. Maybe you even start writing a lot of it. If you want it to be a novel—one that has a chance to connect with a lot of readers—then structure is essential. It gives the readers a recognizable fiction experience.

Plotters and Pantsers

For some writers, the word *structure* says to them control, restriction, restraint, a damper on creativity. They want to be free to go wherever their story takes them. They hate preplanning everything. This kind of writer is sometimes referred to as a pantser—that is, someone who writes by the seat of the pants. Pantsers start each writing session with virtually no plan.

When pantsers get the heebie-jeebies about structure, they are usually confusing structure with outlining or planning. That is not the issue, because every pantser who wants to write best-selling fiction has to consider structure at some point, and that point is usually after a big mess of a first draft.

Writers who preplan—plotters—think of structure before they start to write.

Whatever kind of writer you are, you need to understand structure.

Story Loves Structure

Sometimes you'll hear that story is what counts, not structure. But in fact, story loves structure—because structure enables story to more powerfully connect with the reader. And that's your goal if you want to write best-selling fiction.

Sometimes you'll hear a writer protest, "But I don't want my novel to be formulaic!" That's not the issue, either. Something becomes a formula because it works—over and over. Structure is a formula in the same way that a recipe is a formula.

> Structure is translation software for your imagination. It takes the story you love and puts it into a form readers can understand.

That doesn't mean your book cannot be original. You, the author, get to choose the mix of ingredients. And they are infinitely variable, especially the characters you write about. You can put together a combination of characters that no one's ever seen before. When the dialogue you write, the scene surprises, and your voice and style go into a structured novel, you've now got something to sell to a wide reading audience.

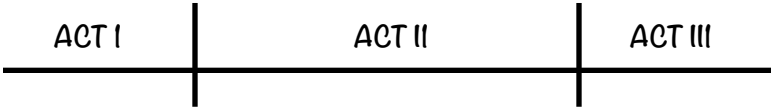
Can you play with structure? Can you mix things up a bit and go between past and present, for example? Can you tell bits of the story out of order? You certainly can do this, so long as you realize the reader is going to be trying to figure out your story in a linear fashion.

The further you move away from structural principles, the more you get into the realm of the experimental novel, and recall that's usually a novel that doesn't sell.

The Three-Act Structure

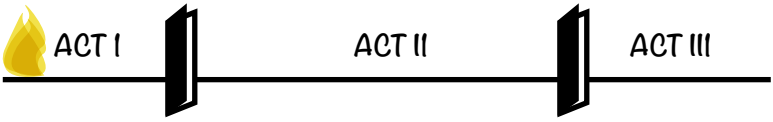
The three-act structure—with a beginning, middle, and end—is the storytelling form that goes all the way back to when humans first started telling stories and myths.

The classic breakdown of the three acts, especially when it comes to screenwriting, has been that the first act should take up one quarter of the running time, the second act one half, and the last act another quarter.



For a novel, don't wait the full 25 percent before you move into the second act. The story starts to drag that way. Instead, as a rule of thumb, don't go past 20 percent before you get into the confrontation section—that second act. As for the second turning point, into the third act, you can push that so it's about 20 percent from the end if you like. But don't go further than that.

As you think about the overview of the structure of your novel in three acts, think in terms of a disturbance and two doorways.



The disturbance in the opening is something that gets the reader into the story right away. That transitions into the second act, also called a doorway of no return. The reader has to have the feeling that the lead is being forced through a doorway into a world that is the arena of death stakes. It's a doorway of no return, because once through that door, there is no going back to the way things were before. Then there is a second doorway of no return, where the lead finally gets into the arena of the final battle and resolution.

1. In act 1, you set things up for the rest of the novel. But don't think of this setup in passive terms. The reader wants to see things that happen to a character who is not passive. Remember, your reader is looking for characters who meet conflict through strength of will. The first act introduces the reader to the main character and that character's ordinary world. There will be a disturbance to this ordinary world, giving the reader a sense that things will not stay ordinary.

2. That trouble is in act 2, also called the arena of conflict. This is the main plot—the place of the primary confrontation, as discussed under the LOCK system. This part of the novel is often viewed as a series of peaks and valleys, ups and downs, strivings and setbacks, attempts and failures. It should also be what's called rising action. In other words, things are more dangerous to the main character; the forces are mounting against him or her. Doing this well creates the phenomenon known as the page-turner.

3. You need to get the main character into the final act, where the death stakes of the story can be settled. The character passes through another doorway, this one leading the way toward the resolution. There will still be trouble through that door—the worst trouble, the ultimate test.

To Outline or Not to Outline

On one side of the writing fence are writers called plotters, or outliners, who like to prepare an extensive outline of the complete book before they start to write it. That way they know exactly what they're writing and where they are going throughout the entire first-draft process. These are not the kind of outlines you learn about in high school; they don't have Roman numerals and letters and subcategories. These outlines are made up of summaries of what is going to happen in a chapter or scene.

On the other side of the fence is perhaps the most famous pantser, Stephen King. In his book *On Writing*, he asserts that the most important thing is to start with an intriguing situation and a group of characters affected by it and then just "watch them" and write down what happens. And don't worry about the ending. "Why be such a control freak? Sooner or later every story comes out somewhere."

Some of the most successful writers of commercial fiction have been plotters.

John Grisham, a well-known plotter, told an interviewer, "It's important to outline because if you don't know where you're going you can waste huge amounts of time."

The knock on this approach is that often pantsers find that the ending they get to doesn't really work. It feels tacked on, which is a common criticism of those who follow this pattern. On the other hand, the knock on plotters is that too much control stifles creativity.

A simple way to avoid either of these extremes is with a concept called signpost scenes. The idea is that you can choose to create a complete outline by way of the signposts. Or, if you are a committed pantser, you can use the next signpost up ahead to write toward.

Whatever your preferred method of planning is, from complete outline to nothing at all, the signpost-scene method is there to help you whenever you need it.

If you are someone who thinks that plotting or outlining is somehow stifling of creativity and that the only way to be truly creative is to just write—even though you get a really messy first draft and have to do a lot of fixing later—know that you can be just as creative, and possibly even more creative faster, by knowing signpost scenes and letting loose with your development before you start to write. As discussed in lecture 3, you can keep adding to a white-hot document, coming up with killer scenes, and play all you want—and then put the pieces together in an outline.

Character-Driven or Plot-Driven?

Sometimes you'll hear people describe two types of novels: character-driven or plot-driven. You'll even hear some teachers say that all novels are character-driven.

These formulations are woefully incomplete. All successful novels are a combination of character and plot. Without plot, a character won't change or even do anything interesting for very long. Without the pushback of plot elements, you don't have a story. You don't have a character showing strength of will against death stakes.

On the other hand, you can have a twisting, turning plot with a lot of action but cookie-cutter characters. That's ultimately unsatisfying, too.

Best-selling novels respect both plot and character.

Mythic Structure

You've probably heard mythic structure described as the hero's journey. It largely comes from the work of Joseph Campbell and his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.*

When it became known that Campbell had been a major influence on George Lucas and *Star Wars*, Hollywood took notice—and so did a script analyst named Christopher Vogler. He wrote a lengthy memo for his studio bosses on the hero's journey, and it became so widely known around town that he turned it into a book that many writers have used: *The Writer's Journey.*

It's called a journey because it involves the hero leaving his or her ordinary world and venturing forth into a dark world of tests and challenges. It ends with a return to the community, back to the ordinary world, with the wisdom gained from the ordeal in the dark world.

Thus, act 1 begins in the ordinary world. There is a call to adventure, but the hero resists the call or for some reason can't go forth. There's often a mentor in this section. Think of Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*. The first act ends when, in mythic terms, the hero crosses the threshold and presses on into the dark world. Crossing the threshold can also be referred to as going through a doorway of no return.

Act 2 gives the reader the heart of the hero's journey—conflict and challenges, allies and enemies. There is a major test, the ordeal, that the hero must go through.

Finally, in act 3 is the road back and a transformed character, which Vogler refers to as a resurrection. At the end, the hero has, in Vogler's terms, "returned with the elixir," a lesson for the betterment of the community. This can be a lesson whether the character lives or dies, so long as it is a cautionary tale.

The purpose of the Greek drama, primarily tragedy, was to be a cautionary tale. It taught the audience not to behave in this certain way, lest they become tragic figures themselves.

In addition to the story beats of the hero's journey, there are also certain mythic archetypes. There is, of course, the hero, but along the way, he or she will usually meet a mentor, someone who the hero trusts and who will impart wisdom to him or her. Out in the dark world, there are figures that are shadows, tricksters, shape-shifters, heralds, and so forth.

All of this can be considered when you are brainstorming your story. You may find some helpful material there for your own story. None of this is rigid, nor is it meant to be. The various elements in the classic hero's journey are there for you to consider.

But if you always remember that a story is about a character demonstrating strength of will in a fight against death stakes, you'll find your hero's journey almost automatically—because the character is going to go through all of the trials and at the end becomes transformed.

Try different writing approaches. If you are a pantser, you might want to try a little more plotting, and if you are a plotter, don't be afraid if you get to the middle of your book and find some other direction or character demanding attention. You can always readjust your outline.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *Super Structure.*
Field, *Screenplay.*

Exercise

Analyze a classic movie from the 1940s. Write down what disturbs the lead's ordinary world. Locate the first doorway of no return (it should be somewhere in the first quarter of the running time). What are the main confrontations in act 2 of the film? What feeling do you have at the end?

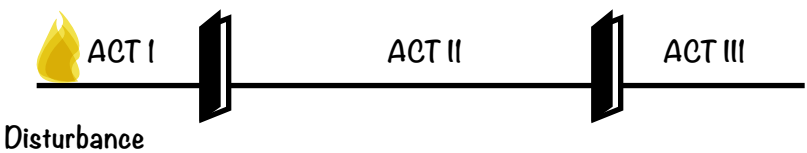
ACT I:
THE DISTURBANCE

Lecture 6

Readers read to worry. They want to be lost in the intense emotional anticipation over the plight of a character in trouble. Only when that connection is made does reader interest truly kick in. But in their opening pages, many writers fall into the "happy people in Happy Land" trap. They think that by showing the lead character in his or her normal life, being happy with his or her family or dog or whatever, readers will be all riled up when something bad happens to this nice person, perhaps at the end of chapter 1 or beginning of chapter 2. Or writers fall into the *I'm the greatest literary stylist of our time* trap, where they desire to display prose brilliance before bothering with a plot kicking in. To avoid these pitfalls, begin your novel with a disturbance to the lead's ordinary world.

The Disturbance

The first signpost in act I is called the disturbance. A disturbance is something that causes ripples in the placid lagoon of Happy Land. It can be anything, so long as it presents a change or challenge to the lead.



It's important to note that this disturbance need not be big—as in, say, a thriller prologue. The opening disturbance can be a jolt, however slight, that indicates to the lead that he or she is not having an ordinary moment here. In that sense, it can even be something positive. In mythic structure, that's often described as the call to adventure.

Put this jolt on page 1 of your book, preferably paragraph 1—and, if you can swing it, the very first line. Note that this applies to both commercial and literary fiction.

Dean Koontz used to use single-line openings for his novels. Look how he grabs with an immediate disturbance in *Dragon Tears*:

> Tuesday was a fine California day, full of sunshine and promise, until Harry Lyon had to shoot someone at lunch.

The kicker of the disturbance can be placed at the end of the opening paragraph or, as Harlan Coben does in *Promise Me*, the end of a long first sentence:

> The missing girl—there had been unceasing news reports, always flashing to that achingly ordinary school portrait of the vanished teen, you know the one, with the rainbow-swirl background, the girl's hair too straight, her smile too self-conscious, then a quick cut to the worried parents on the front lawn, microphones surrounding them, Mom silently tearful, Dad reading a statement with quivering lip—that girl, that missing girl, had just walked past Edna Skylar.

But an opening disturbance is not just for genre fiction. Here is the opening paragraph of the literary novel *Blue Shoe* by Ann Lamott:

> The world outside the window was in flames. The leaves on the pistachio trees shone fire-red and orange. Mattie studied the early morning light. She was lying on the side of the bed where her husband should have been sleeping.

Dialogue, if it indicates immediate conflict, is another way to create an opening disturbance, as Ernest Hemingway does in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

> "The marvelous thing is that it's painless," he said. "That's how you know when it starts."

Some literary agents say they like to see dialogue in the first pages because it means you are writing a scene—not exposition or description or backstory, but a real scene.

"Is it really?"

"Absolutely. I'm awfully sorry about the odor though. That must bother you."

"Don't! Please don't."

Perhaps you have a reason why you don't want to grab readers right away through disturbance. Maybe style is what you're after most of all—a mood. Or maybe you're writing a grand epic and want to set the scene. But before you abandon the disturbance principle, look at the opening line from Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*:

The boys came early to the hanging.

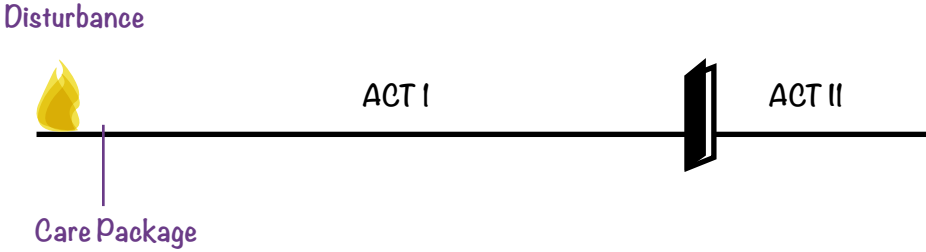
That's enough narrative energy to propel the reader through the next few pages. If the reader gets a long weather report up top or two pages on the sunlight over Rio (no matter how beautifully rendered), he or she will be sorely tempted to put the book down. If the writer tells the reader how the character got to the scene, via backstory or flashback, the reader will most likely move on. But if you indicate there's a character facing change or challenge, uncertainty or conflict, the reader is going to want to know why. The reader doesn't need to know the background info yet; he or she will wait for that if trouble is brewing.

The Care Package

The second signpost in act 1 is the care package. It's optional, but it can be a powerful bonding agent to a lead character.

When a character cares about someone other than him- or herself, we begin to like that character. We at least begin to admire the character. It's just a natural part of our human existence—we appreciate and honor somebody who has a strong emotional bond with another character to the point of helping him or her through this crucible we call life.

Create a relationship that your lead character has before the story begins and give us a scene showing that relationship.



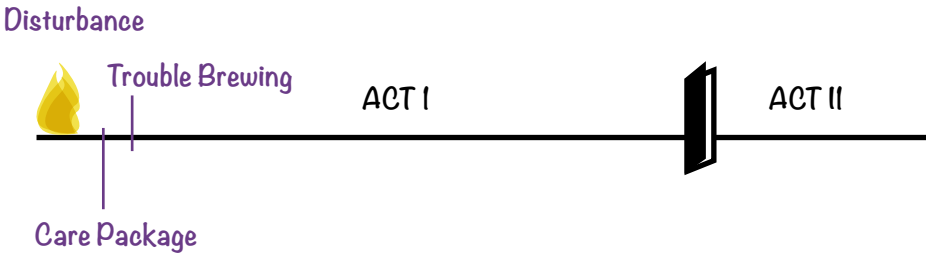
Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* cares for her family, her mother and sister. She demonstrates just how much she cares by taking her sister's place in the Hunger Games. She is essentially sacrificing her life for little Prim, and you can't get any greater care than that. Alternatively, the care package can be subtle, with the purpose of humanizing a character.

The care package signpost works best when it is placed shortly after, or even within, the disturbance.

> Between signposts, you have freedom to write whatever scenes you want, all the time knowing that you're headed in the right direction. You can plan those scenes out beforehand or you can wing it as you go, as long as you know what the next signpost is.

Trouble Brewing

After you create a disturbance and show the care package, you might choose to reveal a bit more of the character's vocational or professional life, introduce new characters, or drop in some background information. But at some point, the reader needs to have the sense that there is real trouble on the way. Remember the worry factor. Readers won't worry if the characters dwell too long in Happy Land.



In the classic film *Casablanca*, the main character is the antihero Rick Blaine, played by Humphrey Bogart. He runs a café/saloon/gambling hall in French-occupied Morocco during World War II. When we first meet him, he is playing chess—by himself. And a few times during act 1 he says, "I stick my neck out for nobody." He does have a care package, though, and that's Sam, his piano player.

The opening disturbance is when the character Ugarte, played by Peter Lorre, informs Rick that he has two letters of transit, the most highly prized exit visas to be found. Rick also figures out that to get them, Ugarte has murdered two German couriers.

Ugarte asks Rick to hide the letters for him, and Rick consents only for a few hours. He doesn't want them overnight. He hides them in Sam's piano.

Let's say you are the author of *Casablanca*. And you are a plotter, an outliner. Let's say that what has just been described is what you have written in outline form. You're ready to outline some more scenes. Where should you focus?

Look ahead at the next signpost: trouble brewing. You think about it and decide that having the Nazis show up at Rick's and threaten him a bit would be perfect. Now you can brainstorm the scenes that will get you there.

If you're a pantser and you've written this story so far, you, too, can think about trouble brewing. Why not give your pantsing writer's mind a little prompt and let it play? You come up with the same idea—the Nazis show up—and maybe even write that scene. Then, you can back up and write the scenes that came before.

Then come a few little scenes, one where Rick has a former lover taken home because she's getting a little tanked up and another where he's sitting outside and Louis, the French police captain played by Claude Raines, sits down to chat with him. Louis is still trying to figure out what Rick is about and presses him to explain why he came to Casablanca. Rick says, "For my health. I came to Casablanca for the waters."

Louis says, "The waters? What waters? We're in the desert." And Rick says, "I was misinformed." This is great dialogue, with more exposition and character development.

Then comes a scene where Louis and Rick place a bet on whether Victor Laszlo will be captured by the Nazis. And then poor Ugarte is captured, screaming for Rick to help him, but Rick sticks his neck out for nobody.

Immediately after that, Major Strasser, the Nazi who has come to Casablanca to capture Lazlo, insists that Rick sit down for a little chat, along with Louis and a Gestapo man. It's a great scene with subtle dialogue as Major Strasser cross-examines Rick, who puts up some smart-aleck resistance.

That is trouble brewing. The Nazis are in town. They're suspicious of Rick. Something big is going to happen in his café, and if he doesn't watch out, he'll be closed down and maybe even imprisoned for harboring enemies of the Third Reich.

The Argument against Transformation

A fourth signpost in act 1, called the argument against transformation, can be planted just about anywhere. This beat is connected to theme, or meaning. If you have a handle on your theme, you can plant this very cool signpost where the character argues against the theme, which is usually in the form of a life lesson learned.

At the end of *Casablanca*, Rick, who began as a loner—an antihero—has transformed into a self-sacrificing hero. He goes off with Louis, the French police captain, to rejoin the war effort. He is back in the community.

His argument against this is that line he repeats: "I stick my neck out for nobody."

This plants in the viewer's mind what the arc of the character will be. And when the transformation happens, the viewer experiences a very satisfactory feeling, even if he or she doesn't consciously understand why.

If you have a meaning in mind before you write, consider planting this signpost in act 1. If you don't have a meaning yet, wait until the end and look for it. Then, you can go back to act 1 and put this argument in, either within an existing scene or by writing a new one.

The First Doorway of No Return

One of the most crucial signposts is the first doorway of no return. The death stakes are on the other side of that door, and once through it, the lead can't go back—back to the ordinary world.

Another way to think about this is that, like most of us, the lead character would rather rest comfortably in the ordinary world and avoid death stakes altogether.

So, something must happen that virtually forces the lead through the door and slams it behind him or her.

> The first doorway of no return, sometimes described as a plot point or an inciting incident, is important because if it's weak, the story will not seem crucial enough. And if it's late—beyond the 20 percent mark—the story will start to drag.

The first shot of *The Wizard of Oz* is the disturbance: It's Dorothy and Toto running down a dirt road in fear. We don't know why yet, not until she gets back to her aunt and uncle's farm. There, she tries to tell them that Miss Gulch is after Toto for digging up her garden and wants to kill him. The doorway of no return is the cyclone that lifts her out of Kansas and dumps her in Munchkinland.

Your own first doorway has to feel as if it's inevitable that your lead is pushed across that threshold—that an event of such magnitude happens that there can be no resistance—such as a cyclone ride to a magical land. It can be something quieter, so long as it affects the lead.

None of this should be seen as restrictive to your creativity or preferred method of writing. The purpose of all the tools and techniques in this course is to help you be creative in the direction that is best, ultimately, for your story.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *Super Structure.*
Vogler, *The Writer's Journey.*

Exercise

Brainstorm the lead's care package (a relationship in place before the novel begins) for your novel. What will be the first sign of trouble brewing?

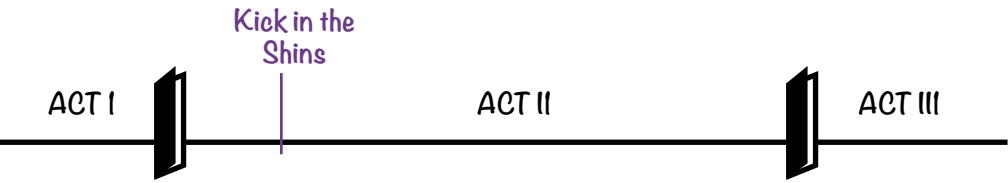
ACT II: THE ARENA OF CONFLICT

Lecture 7

Act 2 begins with a section of the novel called the confrontation, or the arena of conflict. It's like the Roman gladiatorial games. Once the gladiators entered the arena, there was going to be a fight to the finish. There was no going back through the gates into the waiting area. Now the readers know they're in the heart of the story. There's one overarching story question: Will the lead gain the objective or not? The lead has been pushed through the doorway of no return and can't go backward. The way home is only forward, through the rest of the story. Knowing this, the lead can take a moment to analyze, wonder, take stock, and get acclimated, but you want your lead to head toward the next signpost scene, called a kick in the shins.

Confrontation, or the Arena of Conflict

A kick in the shins is more than just trouble brewing. It hurts more; it pushes back harder. It's the first big volley in the act 2 battle. It gets the reader fully grounded in the confrontation.



When Dorothy looks around Munchkinland in *The Wizard of Oz*, she's wondering what's going on. And then Glinda the Good Witch floats over in a bubble and starts explaining the situation to Dorothy—how her house dropped on the Wicked Witch of the East—and the Munchkins are curious about her. Then, Glinda sings for the Munchkins to come out, and they give Dorothy a hero's welcome.

When you step into act 2, don't let things stay trouble-free for very long. That's what a kick in the shins is for, and it happens when the Wicked Witch of the West crashes the party with a direct threat: "I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog, too!"

Now we know that the battle is joined. The two sides are defined, their objectives clear.

For the rest of act 2, you'll be creating scenes in this battle, scenes that show reactions to the fight, and scenes for subplots. Remember that you have wide latitude when writing between signposts, and the next one you should be looking toward is the one that is right in the middle of your novel, and it may just be the most helpful signpost of all.

The Mirror Moment

In the middle of some of the best books and movies is the mirror moment.

In the center of the movie *Casablanca*, Rick is sitting after hours, getting drunk, because Ilsa has reentered his life. She came into his saloon with her husband, Victor Laszlo. Rick is kicked in the heart when this happens. We don't know why exactly, until this scene where Rick is getting drunk. There's a long flashback that shows how they were together in Paris before the occupation, fell in love, and were going to get married. But when the final train is pulling out in the rain, Ilsa doesn't show up. Instead, she sends a note, and as the ink runs down the page because of the rain, the note explains that she can't come with him, and she can't tell him why, but he has to know she'll always love him. Rick feels betrayed and devastated, and that's why he has come to Casablanca—to stick his neck out for nobody and slowly live out his life.

After the flashback, we are in the middle of the movie. Ilsa comes to the saloon to see Rick. She wants to explain what happened in Paris. And she pours her heart out to him. She tells how as a girl she had heard stories of the great Victor Laszlo and looked up to him with a feeling she supposed was love, but as she's saying this, Rick drunkenly interrupts her and begins to tell her that the story sounds like the familiar tales of woe told by women in places that have the sound of a tinny piano in the parlor. He's describing a house of prostitution.

Rick goes even further. "Tell me," he says. "Who was it you left me for? Was it Laszlo? Or were there others in between? Or aren't you the kind that tells?"

By this time, Ilsa has tears running down her cheek. She looks at Rick as if to say this is not the man I knew and loved in Paris. She gets up and leaves.

And at that moment, filled with disgust at himself, Rick puts his head down on the table. He's thinking, What did I just do? Is this who I am—what I've become?

Metaphorically, he's looking at himself in the mirror and doesn't like what he sees. And for the rest of the movie, the question is going to be this: Will Rick remain this same, cold, hateful person, or will he regain his humanity?

And if you step back from *Casablanca*'s plot description, Rick's transformation is really what the movie is about. It's about how one man goes from being a lone wolf, antihero, dispirited man to rediscovering his purpose in life and therefore saving himself.

In the middle of *The Fugitive*, Richard Kimble is renting a basement room from a Polish woman in Chicago, the city where the murder of his wife took place. He finally has some rest and is making plans.

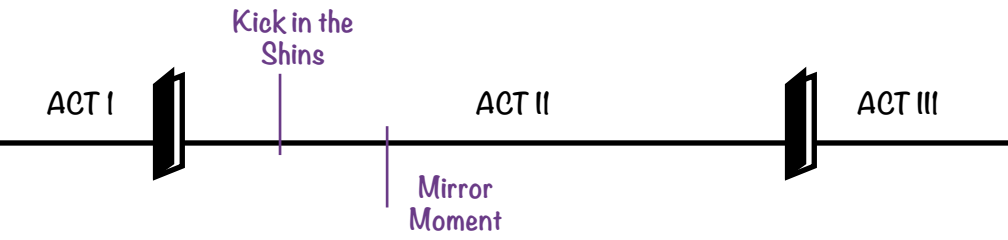
All of a sudden, the place is surrounded by cops, shouting and drawing weapons.

Kimble jumps up and looks out the window. He can't possibly escape this. He's doomed.

Then, it turns out that the cops aren't there for Kimble. They're there to pick up the drug-dealing son of the Polish woman.

When Kimble realizes this, he breaks down—just like Rick in *Casablanca*. But what Kimble is thinking here is this: There is no way I can do this! There is no way I can survive this way! I'm probably going to die!

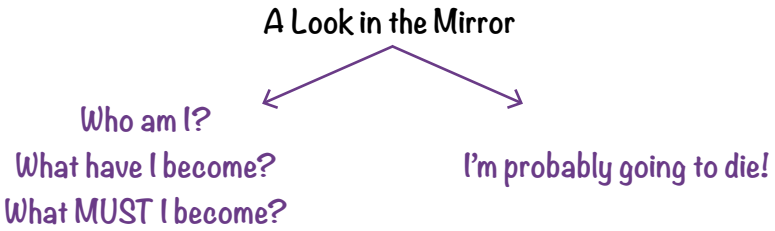
And the rest of the movie is about whether or not Kimble will overcome, find his wife's killer, and not die.



There are two kinds of looking at yourself in the mirror.

1. The first kind, like Rick in *Casablanca*, is about the character confronting him- or herself—looking deeply at his or her own character.

2. The second kind, like Kimble in *The Fugitive*, is a realization that the character doesn't have the resources to fight this and is probably going to die.



The most common mirror moment is in the middle of a character's arc from negative to positive—either because that character transforms into a better human being or because that character becomes stronger. Richard Kimble in *The Fugitive* does not need to transform as a person. He's fundamentally decent and remains so. What he has to become is more resilient.

But there's another arc to consider, one that goes from positive to negative. The best example of this is *The Godfather*, both novel and movie. In the beginning, Michael—Vito Corleone's "good" son, the Marine who served honorably in World War II—doesn't want to enter the "family business." But by the end, he looks at himself and makes the decision to kill for the family.

Exercise

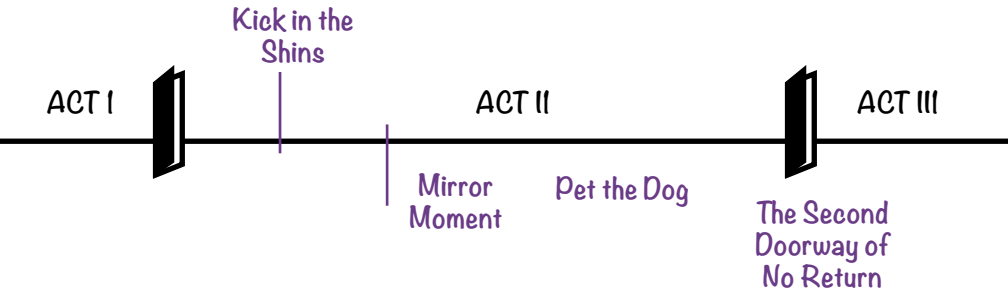
At some point, either before you start writing (if you're a plotter) or in the midst of the first part of your draft (if you're a pantser), take 10 minutes to brainstorm a list of six or seven or eight possible mirror moments for your lead. Don't censor yourself. Imagine your character looking in a mirror and talking to him- or herself, taking stock, and being brutally honest.

One of the items from this list will jump out at you and give you the direction for your whole novel. It's subject to change or modification, of course, but you will have a signpost now, right in the middle, so you don't get lost on your journey.

Pet the Dog

The next signpost is one that you can put close to the mirror moment, on either side of it, called pet the dog. It's an old Hollywood screenwriter's term that means the hero takes a moment out of the serious danger to help another character weaker than him- or herself—or a little scraggly dog that's in trouble. It's an act of kindness that the character does not have to show, but when he or she does, it bonds us even more to the lead.

It's a bit like the care package, but the difference is that the care package is a relationship in existence before the story begins. Pet the dog happens in the midst of the trouble, just before or after the midpoint.



A great example of petting the dog is in the novel *The Hunger Games.* Katniss, of course, has one objective in mind: Don't get killed. And every other Games participant is a potential killer as far as she is concerned.

But then there's little Rue, the waiflike character who warns Katniss about the nest of tracker jackers right above her head, which saves Katniss's life. Later, Katniss hears a sound and turns to it with her bow and arrow. But then she sees the tip of a child's boot. It's Rue, who's been following her.

Now she has a decision to make: form an alliance or leave Rue be? She won't be much help, because she's the smallest player, but Katniss doesn't hesitate. "I can't seem to shake you anyway," she says, thus taking on the role of protector.

The Second Doorway of No Return

We are now fully into act 2, on the other side of the middle. We know that eventually we're going to need to resolve this thing, in act 3. We will have more scenes where the lead keeps trying to move forward and keeps getting set back.

This kind of give-and-take can go on as long as your novel demands. But at some point, you need to provide the means for a resolution to take place. The story will have to end.

This brings us to the final signpost in act 2: the second doorway of no return. This happens at the three-quarter mark at the earliest, though you can push it a little further. The first doorway has to come by the 20 percent mark, and you can bookend the second doorway to the final 20 percent.

Remember that the first doorway of no return has to be that the door slams shut and the lead cannot go back through it. The only path is forward.

The second doorway has to feel the same way, because something happens that makes the resolution inevitable. So, again, the lead cannot go backward. In act 3, we're going to have the final battle. The lead can't avoid it, nor would he or she want to. The lead wants to win.

What constitutes this doorway, which makes the final battle possible, is usually one of four things:

1. **a major crisis**
2. **a major setback**
3. **a major discovery**
4. **a major clue**

As just one example, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there is a major setback when Tom Robinson, an innocent black man, is found guilty of rape by an all-white jury. This setback to Scout's view of the world cannot be undone. It will never be undone. In act 3, she will be finally transformed because of it.

Readers do not like to see the lead helped out of trouble by way of a coincidence. If a coincidence happens, make it lead to more trouble, not less. But don't have a happy clue fall out of the sky at just the right moment. Instead, make sure the lead has put in some effort, even if it's just putting things together in his or her head, like Sherlock Holmes.

If you are a plotter, this second doorway can be somewhat murky before you begin. Don't be bothered by that. Have some idea of what might happen, but understand that the content of the scene will be affected by all that you have decided up to this point. Characters you have fleshed out, scenes you have written with happy surprises, and new events you've added to the book as you've been writing will all give you possibilities for the second doorway of no return.

If you are a pantser, you love the idea of discovery, so this is one signpost you should love. Just think about it from time to time, no matter where you are in your draft. Get your writer's mind chugging away on it while you do your daily writing. You'll probably find yourself thinking of several possibilities well before you get to that scene. Write those ideas down. One of them may very well be the one that fits best.

Suggested Reading

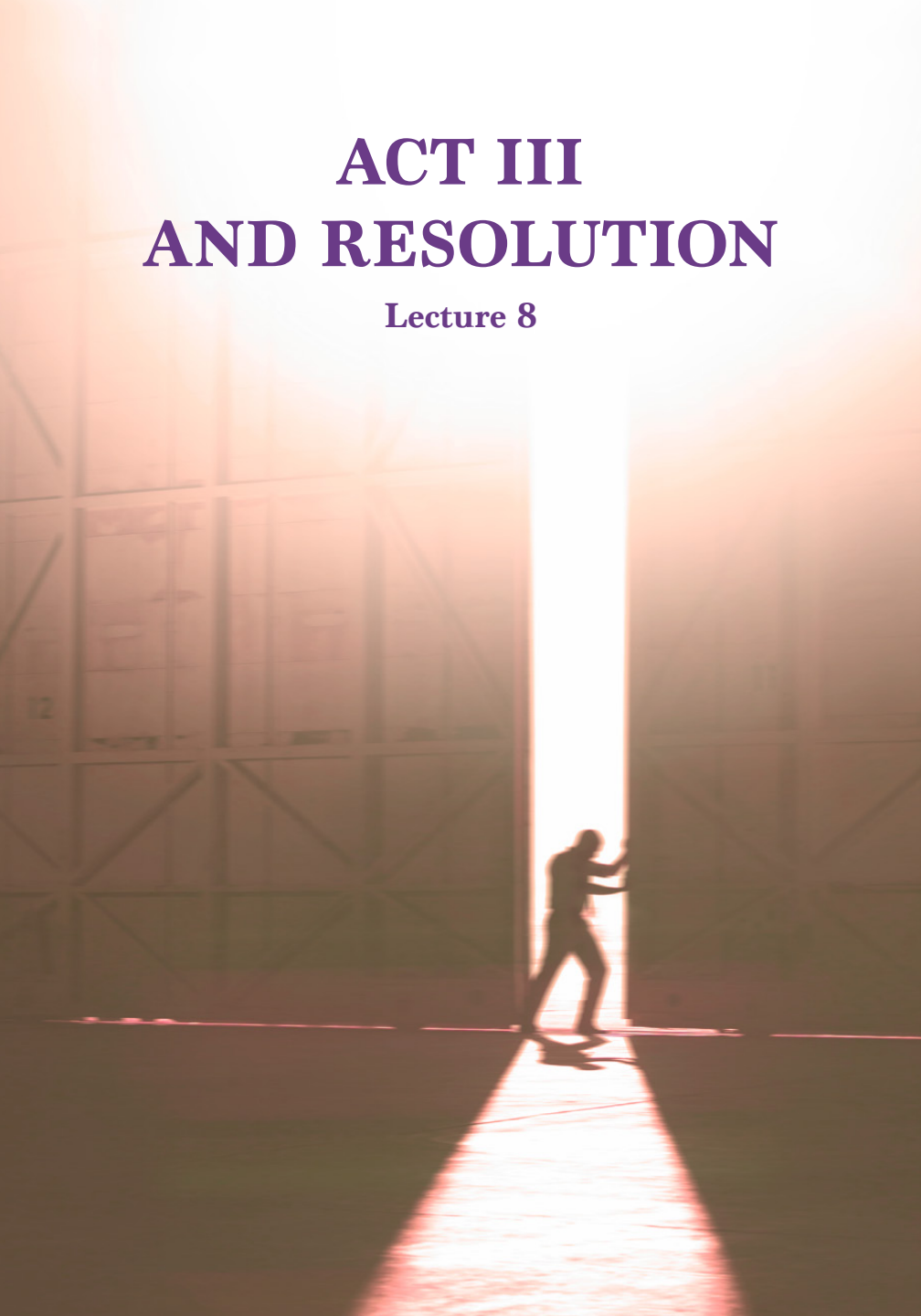
Bell, *Write Your Novel from the Middle.*
Brooks, *Story Engineering.*

Exercise

Come up with six possible mirror moments for your lead. Make three of them of the *Who am I? What have I become?* variety. Make three of them *I'm probably going to die!* For each, write half a page describing what the character is feeling inside.

ACT III AND RESOLUTION

Lecture 8



Act 3 is the resolution. Your lead has now passed through the second doorway of no return, by way of a crisis or setback or some clue or discovery that now must lead to the final battle. There are five signposts in act 3: mounting forces, lights out, the Q factor, the final battle, and the transformation.

> One of the most prolific and best-selling authors of the last century is Mickey Spillane, who wrote a series of hard-boiled detective novels. He once said, "The first chapter sells the book. The last chapter sells the next book."

Mounting Forces

The first signpost is mounting forces. This refers to the opposition, the antagonist, and his or her allies. This opposition gathers its forces for the final battle, even as the lead presses forward, sometimes alone or sometimes with his or her allies.

In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett finally marries Rhett because he can keep her in money and provide that lifestyle she wants but also keep her close to Ashley Wilkes, who is the real object of her desire. When Scarlett bears Rhett a daughter, the forces against her desire get stronger—meaning that Rhett wants more children but Scarlett does not, for vain reasons and also because she doesn't love him (at least she doesn't realize it yet).

She tells Rhett she will no longer sleep with him. Rhett consoles himself with the notorious madam Belle Watling, but one night, full of drink, he forces himself on Scarlett. Clearly, the forces against her selfish desires are getting stronger.

The moment you have the lead through the second doorway, you can write toward the mounting forces signpost and know you're heading in the right direction.

Lights Out

Now look ahead toward the next signpost: lights out. As the name implies, this is when things are the darkest for the lead. There is no other way to go than into the final battle, yet it doesn't look like there's any way to win.

The dark night is where Scarlett is plunged in *Gone with the Wind*. She has married Rhett Butler but still has designs on Ashley Wilkes. She's managed to set up a lavish lifestyle with Rhett, and even bore him a child, a girl named Bonnie Blue Butler.

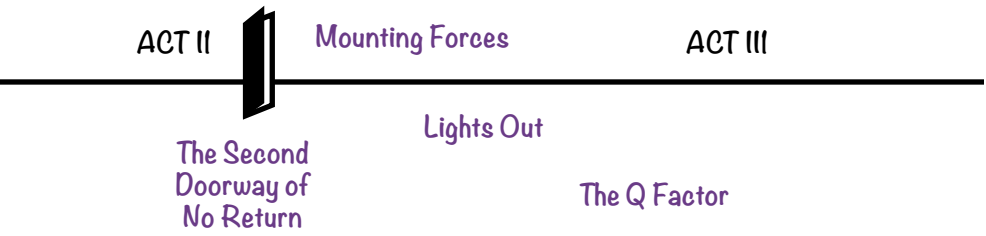
But then, in a horrible accident, Bonnie Blue, their only child, is thrown from a pony and dies. This plunges everyone into darkness, especially Rhett. But it's going to lead to Scarlett's transformation, finally, into the woman she's supposed to be. The tragedy, of course, is that this transformation comes too late to save her marriage to the man she now knows she truly loves. Frankly, he doesn't give a damn.

The Q Factor

When it's darkest for the lead—or close to it—and the confrontation is reaching its highest intensity, the lead often needs a jolt of courage to face what will be the ultimate challenge, the final battle. And that's where the Q factor comes in.

This is named for Q from the old James Bond movies. He's the gadget man for British intelligence. At some point in act 1, he gives Bond the gizmos for his next assignment. His importance is realized when we get to a typical Bond ending, in which Bond relies on the gizmos from Q to escape a sticky situation.

If Bond produced those items for the first time, we'd all be groaning. How convenient! What a cheat! But of course, it was all set up by the Q scene back in act 1. Because we saw these items before, we accept them when they come out at the right time.



There's a similar move for our characters when they must summon moral or physical courage to face the ultimate test. If suddenly they're just more courageous, the readers would feel a little let down.

So, give your lead a Q factor. It's an emotional jolt—like a James Bond gadget—that comes just in time to give the lead the courage needed for the final battle. You set this up in act 1. The place for the Q factor is flexible but usually comes right before or right after lights out.

The Q factor is sometimes a physical object that reminds the character of something important, or it could be recalling the words of a trusted friend or mentor.

Here's an example of a physical Q factor. Early in *The Hunger Games*, before Katniss and Peeta are shipped off to the Games, another girl from District 12, Madge, gives Katniss a gold mockingjay pin to wear. Mockingjays have an emotional significance for Katniss, whose deceased father had a particular fondness for them. The mockingjay pin represents her loving father and better times—protection and security.

Late in act 3, the lights are about to go out, which is when Katniss, Peeta, and Cato are in an awful position with muttations, giant mutt wolf-dogs, below them. But things aren't all that great before that moment. Peeta is wounded and Katniss is caring for him, even as the one other Tribute who's left, Cato, is coming for them.

Then, Katniss notices a flock of mockingjays. She begins to sing out the tune that her beloved friend, Rue, used to sing. And the mockingjays answer back the same way.

> "Just like your father," says Peeta.
>
> My fingers find the pin on my shirt. "That's Rue's song," I say. "I think they remember it."

That's the Q factor: the mockingjay pin, her reminder of all that her father meant to her and also a remembrance of Rue. It's enough to communicate to the reader that Katniss is gathering solace and strength—which she's going to need when the lights go out.

In *Star Wars*, the Q factor is the voice of Obi-Wan, his trusted mentor, reminding Luke to "use the Force" at the crucial moment in the attack on the Death Star.

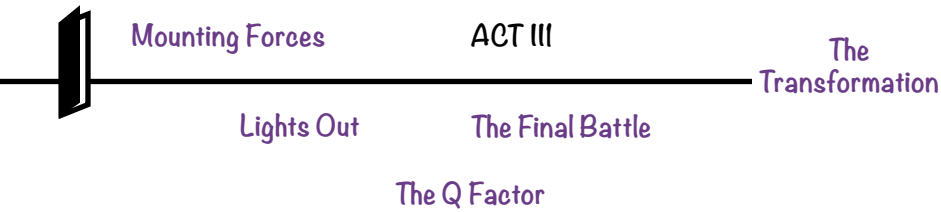
Exercise

Brainstorm a Q factor, either in your planning or as you pants your way through act 3. It will often give you an idea for another character or for a deeper relationship with one. Often, the Q factor is connected to the care package in act 1.

The Final Battle

Finally, we come to the final battle—the resolution of everything. It's a battle inside the character, outside in some physical form, or some combination of both.

In *Casablanca*, the final battle is inside Rick. He's spent the whole movie as an antihero, sticking his neck out for nobody. But then Ilsa comes back into his life, and there's all that intrigue, and now he has the chance to take her with him and leave Casablanca. Rick ends up winning the battle for his soul but losing Ilsa once more.



In Westerns, you'll often see a final gunfight. In romances, you'll see a final decision that leads to the lovers coming together. In mysteries, you'll see the final showdown with the killer, which can be done on the street or, in Agatha Christie fashion, with all the suspects together in one room as the sleuth proceeds to tell everyone how it went down and who the guilty one is.

And so, the big story question is answered. The lead's objective has been realized or has failed—or, in some cases, may be left ambiguous.

The Transformation

After the final battle, you need one more beat, a scene in which the readers see how the story has effected change in the character. You have to prove the transformation, meaning that the character is shown in a final scene doing something, saying something, or feeling something that demonstrates a real difference.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, the title character is a boy growing up in 1940s Missouri. He sets off on a raft with a runaway slave named Jim, and most of the book takes place on the Mississippi River and thereabouts.

Throughout the book, Huck's heart has a battle with his cultural values, which Huck dramatizes as a battle between two voices: The voice of his culture has been drummed into him by his most immediate authorities and whatever church learning has been drummed into him. And those values have told him that he must do the right things or go to hell. And the right thing in 1840 is to turn in a runaway slave. But Huck's heart fights against this.

This is a battle against psychological death—a death of the spirit. Late in act 3 comes his transformation, from a simple country boy who has been told what to think and believe into his own personhood, when he decides not to turn Jim in. The last line of the book proves the transformation:

> But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.

He can't stay in "civilization" and retain his humanity. So, he lights out for the territory.

Transformations can also be negative. In *The Godfather*, Michael, the good son, moves all the way to ruthless head of a crime family—so ruthless that he orders the assassination of his sister's husband, who has betrayed the family.

Resonance

Resonance is that last, perfect note that's played in a great piece of music that leaves the audience not just satisfied but moved. It's important, because often it's what takes a novel from merely good to unforgettable.

In *The Woman in the Window*, a best-selling thriller by A. J. Finn, the lead character is Dr. Anna Fox, who was a prominent child psychologist. Now she lives alone, suffering from a harsh case of agoraphobia, the fear of going outside, due to a trauma she suffered a year earlier. In a plot reminiscent of the great Hitchcock movie *Rear Window*, Anna sees something disturbing in a neighbor's window, and the suspense builds from there.

After everything happens and it's all wrapped up, we're still left wondering if Anna is ever going to get over her current condition. At the very end, her friend and physical therapist, Bina, is trying to coax Anna to step outside. Here are the last lines:

> She releases my hand and walks into the garden, tracking footprints in the snow. She turns, beckons me.
>
> "Come *on*."
>
> I close my eyes.
>
> And open them.
>
> And step into the light.

Often in a thriller, the last-line resonance is, most of the time, something to do with the inner life of the character—as it should be. There is a transformation here, a gaining of strength.

Exercise

When you finish your last page, let it rest for a day. Then, come back and rework it, and rework it, and rework it again. Read it out loud, listening to the tempo, like a poem. Try different last lines.

You'll feel it when it's right. And when you feel it, you can be pretty sure your readers will, too.

Suggested Reading

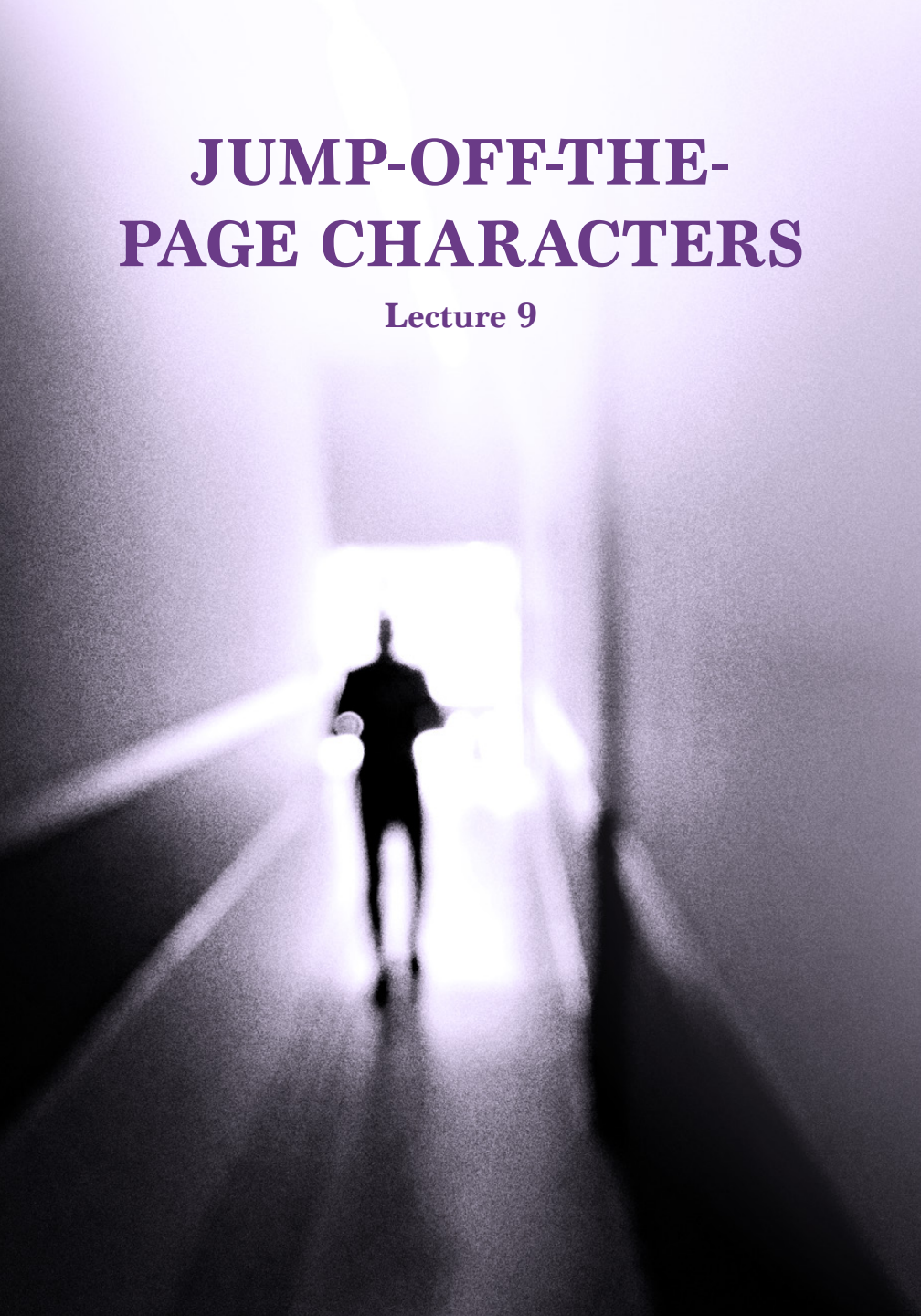
Bell, *Plot & Structure.*
Kernan, *Building Better Plots.*

Exercise

Using your mirror moment from act 2, describe the transformation of the lead. Will he or she fundamentally change? Or will he or she remain basically the same person, only stronger? Once you know this, go back into act 1 and create a scene with the argument against transformation.

JUMP-OFF-THE-PAGE CHARACTERS

Lecture 9



A novel is the record of how a character, through strength of will, fights against impending death. That death may be physical, professional, or psychological. So, a character, to be truly memorable, has to fight. As Lajos Egri states in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*:

> A weak character cannot carry the burden of protracted conflict in a play. He cannot support a play. We are forced, then, to discard such a character as a protagonist ... the dramatist needs not only characters who are willing to put up a fight for their convictions. He needs characters who have the strength, the stamina, to carry this fight to its logical conclusion.

What Makes Characters Memorable

What truly makes lead characters, or protagonists, memorable?

The word *protagonist* is a compound of two Greek words and means *first combatant*—which is another way of saying *first to fight.* That means our first job as a writer is to get the reader to care about the lead. Some ways to do that were covered in lecture 4 on the LOCK system. But to dig deeper, how can we create protagonists who jump off the page?

The following are the characteristics that, in some combination, make lead characters truly memorable.

- First is unpredictability. Predictability always leads to boredom for the reader. If a reader can guess what will happen next, and it does, that takes away one of the main pleasures in the reading experience. So, create a lead character who has more than one emotion going on inside, who can sometimes surprise us with his or her actions. It doesn't mean doing the most outrageous thing in every chapter, but even subtle things can be surprising.

Exercise

Close your eyes and start a movie in your mind. See your character walking down the street. Then, ask the movie to show you this character doing something you'd never expect. When it happens, write it down.

Put the character in another scene, maybe an office, and do the same thing. Let the scene unfold. It's almost like letting the characters improvise.

Do this several times and you'll start to feel the roundness of the character coming to life.

Use some of this material in your book. It will delight readers.

- A second characteristic of great characters is that they have passion about something. They care. Their blood gets pumping. This is one of the marks of Michael Connelly's popular detective, Harry Bosch. He is absolutely driven to solve the murders of forgotten victims.

- Next, memorable characters often carry a wound from their past. This wound can be physical or psychological, but either way, it affects them in the present. This is what is often referred to as the ghost that haunts the character. It gives the character a rich undertone when you hide that wound for a while. Atticus Finch is wounded both physically and psychologically: His eyesight, which is not good and requires glasses, makes him unable to do some of the rough-and-tumble stuff his son wishes he could do; and he's a widower raising his two young children on his own. Brainstorm a wound from your character's past. It can play a big part in the plot or simply add richness and sympathy, as with Atticus.

Exercise

Make a list of all the reasons a character—let's call him Trevor—is doing what he is doing: because it's his job, he's driven to helping victims, he has a personal stake, he wants to prove something to his boss, and so on.

Then, make a list of all the reasons he shouldn't be doing what he's doing: he might die, he might endanger someone else, he's tempted to break the law in pursuit of his idea of justice, etc.

Now choose the strongest feeling from the two lists and write a few pages where the character is forced to deal with this inner conflict. How does he feel about all this? Offer his inner thoughts and struggles. Later, edit that page and use the material in your book. Even if it's just one paragraph, it will elevate your character in the reader's mind.

- Inner conflict is another trait of memorable characters. That means there's a battle going on inside the character, who is not completely sure that what he or she is doing is right.

- Another mark of a memorable character is resourcefulness—when the chips are down and the character has to do something to get out of a terrible situation. Scarlett O'Hara, without funds but needing to appear prosperous to Rhett Butler, takes down the ornate curtain in the house and fashions a dress out of it.

- Gutsiness—or courage, or moxie—is an important aspect of a strength-of-will character. Katniss Everdeen demonstrates this trait throughout the *Hunger Games* trilogy. In the first book, when she's in the gymnasium showing her skill with the bow and arrow, many of the Gamemakers who should have been watching are about to dig into a banquet of roast pig with an apple in its mouth. With sudden anger, she shoots an arrow right through the apple, pinning it to the wall. The Gamemakers shout and stumble back and then look at Katniss. "Thank you for your consideration," she says, and then gives a little bow.

- Finally, many of the characters in great literature fight for a just cause. The readers relate because they cheer, endorse, and root for the character. Atticus Finch is a prime example. He is asked by a local judge to take on a case that everyone knows he cannot win. In the Deep South of the 1930s, an all-white jury is not going to acquit a black man accused of raping a white girl. Atticus knows this, but also knows that his commitment to law and justice demands that he take the case. You can even have both the lead and the opposition have just causes.

Crafting Villains and Secondary Characters

Remember, the opposition character does not have to be a bad guy, just somebody with an agenda opposed to the lead, as in the case of Deputy US Marshall Sam Gerard in *The Fugitive.*

But if you do have a villain, you have the opportunity to create great crosscurrents of emotion in the reader, and when you do that, you elevate the pleasure of the reading experience, because successful fiction is that which creates emotional response.

This does not mean that you, the author, approve of what the villain does. It does mean that you take pains to show the reader the complexity in good versus evil. How much time you take in this regard is up to you. Koontz, for example, will often give many scenes from the villain's point of view.

Exercise

Most villains believe that they are somehow justified in what they do.

When writing about villains, imagine they are on trial and giving their own argument to the jury about why they've done what they've done. They actually believe they can convince the jury to acquit them.

Secondary characters are the smaller parts and the bit players that many writers squander by making them unremarkable. That's because writers usually jump to a cliché. A whole host of occupations—bartenders, cab drivers, waitresses, cops, doormen, maids—spring up in fiction, and writers tend to focus on the standard models. While readers may not make a big deal out of this, their reading experience will be diminished unless writers add some spice.

Most novelists invent secondary characters as the need for them arises in the writing of the story. A scene involving the lead character, for example, will be imagined and then peopled with characters that must be present to make the scene work. When this happens, take some time to go against clichés.

Go wild with your minor characters. Make them as colorful and quirky and different and funny or as menacing as you want. You can always scale them back later. Note that when you invest time with a colorful minor character, the reader will be attracted to him or her and will expect that character to get more attention or have more than just a walk-on role. The master of this kind of characterization was Charles Dickens; *David Copperfield* can be read as a series of encounters with colorful characters.

Minor characters can also provide a very important function when it comes time to rework your first draft. Inevitably, you will find plot problems that need fixing. Your minor characters can do the fixing.

Some common problems are characters in the book who are unaccounted for at the end, or a climactic scene seems to happen too fast or lacks good motivation. Maybe some areas in the middle of the book read a bit thin.

In her book *Dynamic Characters*, Nancy Kress counsels that for these problems, you work backward through your secondary characters.

Let's say you've written a mystery with lots of clues and red herrings. At the end of the book, the detective or sleuth reveals the answers, except for something that happened to a character earlier in the book. He or she doesn't have the means to know that information. What do you do?

You can have a minor character make an appearance and deliver the information. Or you could just create a new minor character in the climactic scene and then go back in the plot and plant that character in a scene or two just so that he or she can come in and clean up the plot thread at the end.

Creating a Series Character

A series character is one you will want to write about in book after book. Sherlock Holmes is perhaps the most famous example of the hit series character.

Sherlock Holmes was so popular that his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, couldn't get out from under him. At one point, Doyle killed off his detective, but the public demanded he be brought back. His resurrection was by way of the novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. When it was first published in *The Strand Magazine*, the circulation of that periodical increased by about 30,000. In other words, Doyle, though feeling a bit trapped, took that feeling all the way to the bank.

There are five qualities that make a great series character. If you can pack these in at the start, your task in creating a hit series is half done.

1. The first quality is a point of uniqueness—a quirk or style that sets a character apart from everybody else. Two of the most enduring series characters in all of literature were created by the incomparable Agatha Christie. When Christie began writing her mysteries, the genre was dominated by male detectives, such as Perry Mason, Sam Spade, Nick Charles, and the soon-to-come Philip Marlowe. Christie very cleverly created two characters who are precisely the opposite of these paradigmatic figures: Hercule Poirot, who is unlike the hard-boiled detectives in virtually every aspect, and Miss Jane Marple, a little old lady who lives in a small village.

2. The series character needs to have a skill at which he or she is very, very good. Katniss Everdeen is killer with the bow and arrow.

3. The series hero ought to be a bit of a rebel. He or she rubs up against authority, even if it's in a quiet way, like Miss Marple muttering "Oh, dear" at the local constabulary.

4. Give the series character a vulnerable spot or character flaw. Sherlock Holmes has a drug habit. A character flaw humanizes the series hero so that he or she is not just a cartoon.

5. The memorable series character has a likable quality. Philip Marlowe has some of the greatest quips in the history of crime fiction. We like them because Marlowe is also vulnerable—to getting beat up, drugged, or otherwise manhandled by forces larger than himself. Wit is one of the great likability factors; another is caring for others besides oneself.

Great spice can often be added to your writing by way of a sidekick, who can be the conscience of a character or bring out aspects of the character's personality that otherwise would remain hidden.

Suggested Reading

Kress, *Dynamic Characters.*
Peck, *Fiction Is Folks.*

Exercise

Brainstorm answers to the following questions: What is one thing your lead can do that is unpredictable? What is he or she most passionate about? What wound from the past haunts his or her present? What cause is he or she willing to die for?

BRINGING CHARACTERS TO LIFE

Lecture 10

There are two basic ways to bring your characters to life: the dossier method and the discovery method.

- With a dossier, the writer wants to construct a thorough background of the character before the actual writing begins. To do this, you can create a list of questions for your characters or adapt ones you find online. Alternatively, some writers like to create a background for the character in the form of a story or a first-person account. You can create a biography for all of your main characters. The goal is to come up with something subjective; you want to feel as if you know that person.

- The discovery method starts with a minimum of information about a character—just enough to catch a feeling and get to the writing. Along the way, as things happen in the plot and the character is forced into interactions with other characters, the writer adds a little bit more to the character's background and behaviors.

Just like with the plotter and pantser model, try a bit of the dossier method and a bit of the discovery method and see what feels right.

You can be flexible. Maybe you start out with discovery, and after a few chapters, you do extensive background before moving on. Or maybe you've done an extensive biography and something happens in the plot that makes you rethink the character.

This is fine. Do it—just like you would change the course of an outlined plot if some unanticipated twist occurred to you in the writing.

What You Need to Know about Your Characters

There are some things you need to know before you start writing about your major characters.

First, what do they look like? You need to know their age, physique, and hair and eye color. Go online and search Google Images until you find a headshot that feels like the character. For example, you might search for *MMA fighter*. This brings up pages of faces. Sometimes, as you look over images, a face will jump out at you and suggest that this is the character you're looking for.

Save that image and put it on a digital corkboard in the writing program Scrivener, discussed in lecture 3. Eventually, you can see all your major and secondary characters side by side, which is a big advantage when you're mapping out scenes.

In addition to the visual side, you need to hear the character in his or her own voice. You might want to make a voice journal for each character. This is a free-form document where you just let the character talk to you. You might prompt him or her with questions, as if you're doing an interview: "Tell me about your home growing up" or "What's your philosophy of life?"

You want the character to begin talking to you in a voice that is not yours. Keep up this free-form writing until that voice emerges. And though you're doing this mainly for the sound of the voice, you also end up with background material the character shares with you, some of which you might end up using in the novel.

Next, construct a timeline for your characters. This is a list of key years in the character's life.

Naturally, start with the year of the character's birth. Then, brainstorm what happened in some key years. For example, you might include the year the character turned 16, the hot spot of adolescence. Take the year the character turned 16 and do some research on what was happening in the culture. What music, TV shows, and movies were popular? What was your character's favorite in these arenas?

Often, you'll have a scene where two characters talk about the past, maybe the things they had in common when they were kids. If they were 10 years old in 1995, what TV shows might they have loved? A simple Google search reveals some ideas, such as *Pinky and the Brain* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.* The two characters can talk about real cultural references, which adds authenticity to their background.

Continue to put down key years as they occur to you, such as the year the character first fell in love or got his or her first job. Another key year might be a year when the character went through some emotional trauma. This can be the wound discussed in the previous lecture.

Next, research a bit about this character's profession or vocation. What the character does for a living or part-time work is a valuable source of originality and *what if?* possibilities. When that work is something we've all seen before, such as a police detective or lawyer, it's essential to add originality to the portrayal—something that hasn't been seen before.

How do you find those things? One way is to interview people in that line of work. If you can find such a person near you, buy that person lunch and put his or her name in the acknowledgements. Most people like to talk about what they do. You can interview people on the phone or by email.

Encouraging Diversity in Your Characters

When you assemble your cast of characters, you want to orchestrate. Just like in a symphony, you don't want all the same instruments playing the same notes. The pleasing effect comes from the arrangement of different instruments.

As you begin assembling your cast, look for differences. These will be the things that create conflict, which is the lifeblood of your novel.

So don't have all your characters looking alike or sounding alike or having similar backgrounds. When you orchestrate your cast, you automatically create areas for tension, mystery, and suspense.

It's helpful to create a simple character grid with the names of your characters across the top and down the side. In every square where one character intersects with another, write down a possible conflict or relationship. This is just another way to brainstorm possibilities for your plot arising out of character conflict.

	John	Mary	Ralph	Ignatz
John		John is still in love with Mary.	John finds out Ralph was the one who planted lies in Mary's head.	
Mary	Mary loved John 10 years ago but went into a slide after a terrible breakup.			Mary is drawn to Ignatz but doesn't know why.
Ralph		Ralph murdered Mary's mother 20 years ago.		Ralph begins to bring Ignatz under his spell, to do his dirty work, like kill John.
Ignatz	Ignatz is really John's long-lost brother.	Ignatz secretly hates Mary because he doesn't trust her but keeps quiet for John's sake.		

Add Spice with Secondary Characters

Secondary characters can add so much color and spice to your novel that you ought to take just as much care with their creation as you take with any other aspect of your story.

You can have secondary characters who recur throughout the novel, as either allies or irritants.

> An example of an ally is Han Solo in *Star Wars*. He is there to help Luke Skywalker. He is therefore a secondary character, although he's given a lot of screen time; he could very easily be a major character in another movie.
>
> Irritants, on the other hand, get in the lead's way. They may actually be allies of the villain or simply people in the story who make the attainment of the hero's goal more difficult. In the *Star Wars* trilogy, Jabba the Hut is a major irritant.

But then you also have small roles, called cogs and wheels. These are characters who are required in order to move the story along. They can be simple or complex, depending on the need. All of your characters exist on a sort of story continuum, with stark simplicity on one side and a fair amount of complexity on the other. Where they fall depends on what they do in your story.

No matter who your minor characters are, though, you can add pleasure and spice to your stories by making sure each one is individualized. And you do that by giving them character tags.

A tag is something the character does or says that distinguishes the character from the rest of the cast. Tags include patterns of speech, dress, physical appearance, mannerisms, tics, eccentricities, and so forth. These set characters apart. And because there is an almost infinite variety of tags, you can make each of your characters a unique individual. Tags will also help you avoid the mistake of writing secondary characters as clichés.

Another use of a secondary character is apt for thrillers: comedy relief. The use of this device is powerful. It's a way to give a moment of rest in the midst of heavy-duty suspense, until you're suddenly deeper into the trouble. It actually intensifies the tension that comes after it.

Alfred Hitchcock, the master of suspense, has comic relief in almost all his movies. But comic relief goes back at least as far as Shakespeare. Remember the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet*?

In *Star Wars*, we're delighted by the moments when C3PO and R2D2 break in. The former is a fussy valet; the latter is his squealing sidekick. They break the tension of the story and make it richer.

Each time you have to come up with a minor character, ask yourself these questions:

What is his or her purpose in the story?

What tags can I attach to him or her?

How can I make each tag unique or memorable?

Naming Your Characters

Names are important, especially for your lead character. This is the character the readers are going to spend most of their time with, and it matters because a name can create a visual impression all by itself.

Genre also matters. Characters in fantasy novels will have different names than those in a romance or a thriller. You're not going to have a hard-drinking New York cop named Bilbo Baggins looking over witnesses. At the same time, you're not going to have a brave warrior in some dark, fantastic forest named Bob—unless you're going for a comedic touch.

The original name Margaret Mitchell had for her heroine was Pansy O'Hara. A novel about a gutsy Southern Belle named Pansy doesn't have the same spark that Scarlett has.

Keep a careful list of the names you use in your novels, because you don't want to repeat. A simple spreadsheet can be used for this purpose, recording first names and last names.

Don't have similar-sounding names for characters in the same book, and don't have character names beginning with the same letter. This is to keep the reader from mixing up your characters.

One method some authors use is to come up with an unusual first name and a rather plain last name, or vice versa. Alternatively, you can go looking for character names—for example, by going to baby name sites on the internet, which give not only the name but the meaning and background.

Describing Your Characters

When it comes to main characters, there are two schools of thought with regard to describing them. One is that you provide the reader with a full description of the main character. This comes directly from the author and is not as favored these days. Today, readers want to be inside the lead character's head, and because we don't usually think about our own appearance, how can we have the lead character let us know what he or she looks like?

> For a long time, the first name Jack was popular for thrillers: Jack Reacher, Jack Ryan, Jack Bauer. There is something in the hard K that sounds like a punch in the face. The sound of a character's name matters.

Let your readers create the picture. They will. That's because we're all visual thinkers today, and our minds immediately come up with a picture of a character, even if the character is not described. We form an image based on what the character is doing and saying.

Still, there are some details you want the reader to know.

One method for dropping in some description has become such a cliché that it's rarely used: having the lead character look at him- or herself in a mirror. Another way to slip in some descriptive information is through dialogue, instead of narrating.

But when it comes to characters other than the lead, you can be more descriptive because that's how the lead character experiences them.

When coming to these types of descriptions, first ask yourself how you want the reader to feel about the character—suspicious, disgusted, attracted, enthralled, etc. Then, create physical features that are consistent with the feeling you want.

Play around with your descriptions. Have fun. Character creation is one of the great joys of fiction writing. Your characters begin to come alive. It's a wonderful symbiosis of the writer's imagination and the feeling that the character is shaping into a real person.

Suggested Reading

Maass, *The Emotional Craft of Fiction.*
Swain, *Creating Characters.*

Exercise

Create a timeline for your lead character. Start with the year of birth. Then, select the following key years and write a few paragraphs about what happened: when the character first went to school, when he or she was sixteen, his or her first job, his or her first love, and a major tragedy.

POINT OF VIEW

Lecture 11

Think of point of view as being about intimacy with a character. It helps the readers bond with the character and keeps that bond as strong as possible. There is a range of intimacy in point of view, which comes in three basic forms: first person, third person, and omniscient.

First person is where the narration comes directly from the lead and the reader gets the closest-possible connection to the thoughts, feelings, and observations of the protagonist.

The omniscient point of view can roam freely, go into any character's head, and take a wider view of the story world than any one character can.

Third-person point of view comes in two forms: limited and open. Limited means you stick with one point of view throughout the book; open means you can switch point of view to another character in another scene.

Omniscient Point of View

Think of the omniscient narrator as godlike—all knowing, all seeing. You, as the writer, have the freedom to go anywhere you choose—inside any character or outside to describe the big canvas of the story world. You also have a choice as to how much of your own voice you want to inject.

When the novel first started as a form, it was common, even expected, that the author's voice would be just as much a part of the experience as the story itself.

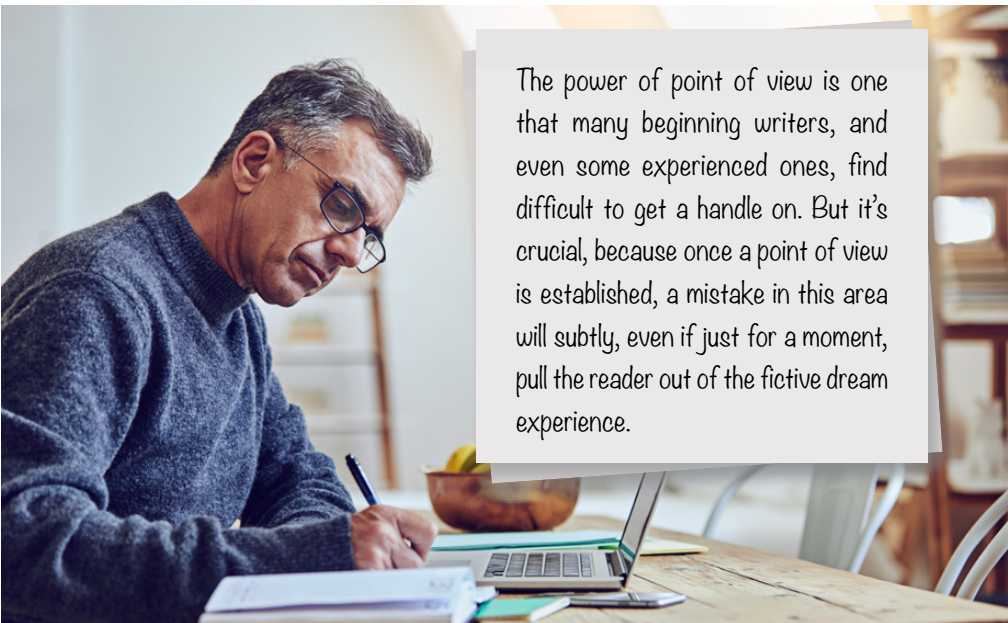
The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, one of the earliest novels in English, was written by Henry Fielding and was published in 1749. Throughout the novel, there are passages like this:

> Reader, I think it proper, before we proceed any farther together, to acquaint thee that I intend to digress, through this whole history, as often as I see occasion, of which I am myself a better judge than any pitiful critic whatever.

This type of omniscience can be labeled as intrusive. The author is not hesitant at all to put himself right into the narrative so that the reader notices him. You hardly ever see this done today, except perhaps in comic novels where it's obvious that having fun with the prose is as much a part of the experience as telling the story.

As time went on, authors began to stop directly addressing the reader while still retaining the option to comment on events. Consider the famous opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness ....



The power of point of view is one that many beginning writers, and even some experienced ones, find difficult to get a handle on. But it's crucial, because once a point of view is established, a mistake in this area will subtly, even if just for a moment, pull the reader out of the fictive dream experience.

When we get to the 20th century, the authorial voice was pulled back even more. When omniscience was used, it was usually done to deliver story information only. In this excerpt from *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo, notice that it is the author who is giving us the information:

> Don Vito Corleone was a man to whom everybody came for help, and never were they disappointed. He made no empty promises, nor the craven excuse that his hands were tied by more powerful forces in the world than himself. It was not necessary that he be your friend, it was not even important that you had no means with which to repay him. Only one thing was required. That you, you yourself, proclaim your friendship.

With the omniscient point of view, the author is free to go wide and then come down to tell us what's going on inside any character. It's good to get back to a character soon after going wide because that's how readers connect to a story.

Today, the omniscient point of view is usually reserved for historical epics, large-scale fantasy, and science fiction, where world-building is essential.

First-Person Point of View

At the other end of the spectrum is first-person point of view, which is marked by the personal pronoun *I*, who is the narrator. The only material we get in the story is what this narrator has experienced him- or herself.

And because this is going to be in the voice of the character, it's important that you give that voice an attitude. The reader should feel, from the very start, that the narrator is someone interesting and worth listening to and is not a cliché rendering of a type.

Let's look at perhaps the most famous opening in American literature, from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*:

> Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.

Notice how Ishmael, the narrator, is speaking directly to us, and with attitude. He tells us "never mind how long." That's attitude.

Find attitude in your first-person narrators. This is where the voice journal, covered in the previous lecture, will prove of great value to you.

Usually, the first-person novel has one narrator throughout. But that's not always the case. It is possible to write a novel using two or more first-person voices. Novels like this usually give the character name as the chapter title.

The key is to make sure each of these voices is unique, not sounding like the others. This is not easy to do. You have to create a whole life for each of these narrators and keep them consistent. That's why you're more likely to see this attempted in literary fiction.

There's a further nuance with first-person point of view. Instead of the narrator being the central character, he or she can operate as the observer of the events. This is the strategy used by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby.* The narrator is Nick Carraway, who describes the action and, especially, his interaction with the mysterious Jay Gatsby. Similarly, the Sherlock Holmes stories are narrated by Dr. Watson.

When the first-person narrator is not the lead, the description of the lead's emotions and thoughts is limited. It has to come out of dialogue or the narrator's opinion based on his or her observations.

This makes us one step removed from the direct experience and feelings of the lead. Because of that once-removed feeling, this form of first person is best left to literary or mystery fiction, whereas in a thriller, you want to have the sense of direct and immediate experience.

With a first-person narrator, there is often a temptation for the narrator to talk too much about irrelevant things. Stick to what's relevant: the recounting of the plot and how that makes the character think and feel.

Occasionally, asides from a first-person narrator can work if, and only if, the readers are fully engaged with the voice. But this takes practice and confidence.

There is one more option in first person, and that's present-tense narration. Traditionally, fiction has been told in the past tense. In other words, the story has already taken place and the narrator is recounting the events for the reader.

But then, in the late 20th century, writers began to test the present-tense form of first person. The idea is that the story is being told beat by beat as if it's happening now, giving the story a sense of immediacy and suspense, because the narrator him- or herself doesn't know what's going to happen next.

Young adult fiction in recent years has popularized this form of first person. The prime example is *The Hunger Games*, which is narrated by Katniss Everdeen.

Second-person point of view uses you and is extremely rare. The narration is like this:

> You walk into the party like you are walking onto a yacht. You're so vain.

Avoid using second person as your novel's point of view.

There is one fiction technique that is lost when you use present tense. That's the *If I'd only known what was about to happen* move. When you use past tense, you can end a chapter with a line like this: "I never should have opened that door." Then, when the reader turns the page to find out what happened, the narrator can skip ahead in time after the event behind the door and recount some other scene. This leaves the reader wanting to keep turning the pages until the narrator finally reveals what was behind the door.

Third-Person Point of View

In between omniscient and first person is what is probably the most common point of view in best-selling commercial fiction: third person. It's tried and true, and many successful writers have used only this form their entire careers.

Instead of the pronoun *I*, as in first person, it's *he* or *she*. This point of view can be limited to one character so that all the action is viewed through that one character's mind. That makes it very close to first person in intimacy. We are seeing the story from one perspective and strongly bonding with one character.

Third person can be open, too, with different scenes being from different characters' points of view. The great value of the open point of view for thrillers and mysteries is that you can cut away from one scene at a moment of high tension or suspense and flip to another character's scene, leaving the reader panting to know what's going to happen with the previous scene.

Whether you use a limited or open third person, there is one rule you should always observe: one point of view per scene. That means that the perceptions of the scene are filtered through one character and any internal thoughts or feelings that are expressed come out of that character. You do this so that readers don't get confused about which character to relate to.

An error that editors call head hopping involves hopping from one character's head into another's in the middle of a scene. This causes readers to lose some of the intimacy they've been building up with the first character.

It can be very subtle, but whenever you find yourself slipping into another character's head, you need to excise that text and put in something that can only be perceived from the point-of-view character.

Let's suppose you are writing in an open third-person point of view, meaning that two characters have scenes where they are the primary character. On some occasions, perhaps you'll want to switch from one character to the other. The way you do that is by putting in an extra space—white space, sometimes called a double return—and then making the switch. The reader will know that you have gone into another character's head. Usually you're going to switch locations when you do that—in other words, go to a different scene.

There's one other refinement that's become popular in recent years, due in large part to one of the most successful thriller authors of all time, James Patterson. And that is using a mix of first person and third person.

First person is used to establish identification with the lead character. By cutting away to a third-person scene, usually involving the villain, you can create that sense of cliff-hanging that keeps readers turning pages.

It takes great skill to do this, however. So, if you're just starting out on the fiction writing journey, first learn third-person limited point of view. This will teach you how to stay in one character's head throughout a story. It forces you to focus. Later, you can expand to an open third person.

Next, get a handle on first-person past tense.

Most successful commercial writers use only these forms of narration. They have stood the test of time. Once you're secure in these, you can experiment if you like.

Exercise

Deciding which point of view to adopt for your novel is a matter of feel and emphasis.

Take any scene from your manuscript and rewrite it in another point of view. If you're in third person, write it in first person—or vice versa.

You'll probably find that when you write in third person and switch to first person, you often create a more intimate feel. Now go back and rewrite the scene in third person again, but retaining the intimacy you just created.

What about when you switch from first to third? You may find that you want to excise extraneous talk from the narrator, which is very often a good thing. When you go back to first person, it's a little leaner, with a better pace.

The hard work you put in studying and mastering point of view will pay off. It goes a long way toward keeping your readers deep inside the fictive dream, which is exactly where they want to be.

Suggested Reading

Browne and King, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers.*
Stein, *Stein on Writing.*

Exercise

Select a scene from your manuscript—or write a scene from whole cloth. Write it in the first-person point of view. Go through the scene, making sure you keep point of view consistent. Next, write the scene in third-person point of view. Try to achieve the same level of intimacy in third person as you did in first person.

THE ESSENTIALS OF DAZZLING DIALOGUE

Lecture 12

Dialogue is the fastest way to improve your manuscript. Agents, editors, and readers make special note of dialogue. If it's bulky, bloated, uninteresting, and sounds pretty much the same no matter which character is speaking, it's an immediate turnoff. Very often an agent who is considering a manuscript will go immediately to the first section that contains dialogue just to see how it's being handled. On the other hand, if the dialogue is crisp, if it characterizes, and if the characters don't all sound the same, it immediately gives readers confidence in the author. It tells them that the author knows what he or she is doing.

You are going to present a portion of your manuscript, usually the first three chapters, to an agent or editor for evaluation. Start with a scene with dialogue on the first page, because that means you're in a scene, with real possibilities for conflict.

Dialogue in Fiction and in Real Life

The American playwright and screenwriter John Howard Lawson defined dramatic dialogue as a "compression and extension of action."

Speaking is a physical act. And in a story, the characters should be moving toward a goal, in every scene and throughout the book.

Dialogue, Lawson explains, "comes from energy and not from inertia."

Dialogue, then, is another tool—or even a weapon—for the character to use to try to get his or her way, or to prevent someone else from getting his or her way. Therefore, fictional dialogue is not something we often do in real life, like making small talk or killing time.

But what if your character is into small talk? What if your character is just killing time? Then you have to know why your character is killing time. Is he or she nervous about something? Hiding a secret? Trying to avoid the truth? It has to be something, or the dialogue is just taking up space.

Every word that comes out of a character's mouth is uttered because the character hopes it will further a purpose. The character has, in short, an agenda.

The first secret of dazzling dialogue is to give your characters clear agendas in every scene and then put those agendas in opposition. Before you write, take a moment to jot down what each character in the scene wants, even if (as Kurt Vonnegut once said) it is only a glass of water.

What Dialogue Can Do for Your Novel

Dialogue in fiction has five functions. One or more of the following must always be at work, or you're just taking up space:

1. It advances the plot by revealing story information.
2. It reveals character.
3. It sets a tone.
4. It sets the scene.
5. It reveals theme.

Advancing the plot through story information, also called exposition, is necessary in fiction. Exposition is whatever information is essential for the reader to understand what's going on in the story. There are two ways to deliver this information: through narrative or through dialogue. Narrative is sometimes employed because it's best to get the information out of the way and move on with the story. Dialogue is sometimes the more artful way to reveal story information. But here's the key: Readers must never catch you simply feeding them exposition. It has to sound like it's really coming from one character to another. One technique for accomplishing this is to set story information within confrontational dialogue—in other words, have an argument.

In *Add Flesh to the Fire* by Orrie Hitt, a man's ex-wife returns to him, but he wants nothing to do with her. He speaks first:

> "What you came here for, baby, you could pick up in any bar."
>
> "Shut up."
>
> "I won't shut up. What do you think I am? Nuts? You run off with my own brother, get a divorce, he was better than I was, you said, and two years later you show up. You want me to roll out the red carpet? You want me to stand on my head?"
>
> "I don't blame you for being bitter."
>
> "Bitter doesn't describe it."

This is where we get the backstory information about why the wife left. It's natural, because the man is throwing it back in her face in an argument.

Great dialogue should also reveal character. When this is done well, a reader almost doesn't need any physical descriptions to get a sense of your characters. When revealing character through dialogue, consider the following:

- **VOCABULARY**. What is the educational background of your characters? What words would they know that correspond to that background? What if you have a character of limited education attempting to use big words to build him- or herself up? This is also an indicator of character. Or it may be that the character is striving, in all good conscience, to better his or her station in life.

- **SYNTAX**. When a character does not speak English as a first language, syntax—the order of words—is the best way to indicate that. For example, a Bosnian new to America might say, "Can you tell me please where is bathroom?" Syntax can also be part of a character's attempt to speak in a heightened way. The character Joel Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon* says, "No, no. Our private conversations have not been such that I am anxious to continue them. Forgive me for speaking so bluntly, but it is the truth."

- **REGIONALISMS**. What part of the country does your character come from? How do people talk there?

- **PEER GROUPS**. Groups that band together around a specialty—law, medicine, surfing, skateboarding—have pet phrases they toss around. These are great additions to authenticity. The best way to find them is to interview people from such a group and just ask them.

Dialogue also sets a tone, or gives the readers a way to relate to the genre. Remember, readers have certain expectations about a genre, which you need to meet.

A third thing dialogue can help you with is setting the scene. As long as it sounds natural to the character, you could have something like this: "Man, this place is creepy. What's with all the hanging vines?"

Dialogue is also the most natural way to reveal theme, or meaning. That's because you can hide the message within a natural exchange so as not to sound preachy. For example, the theme of the movie *On the Waterfront*, starring Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint, is this: What is the best, most human way to live? The writer, Budd Schulberg, wisely knew that this is best turned into an argument over what is supposed to be a friendly drink at a local saloon. Conflict is what makes dialogue gripping, even if the conflict is relatively small.

Using the Fear Factor

The dullest exchanges are those between two people on the same wavelength, with nothing gripping to talk about. Watch out for these so-called sitting-down-for-coffee scenes. If you do have two friends or allies sitting down to talk, don't make it just about feeding the reader information. Make some trouble.

Something that will help you always find trouble is the fear factor. Every character in every scene can feel some fear, because fear is a continuum—from simple worry to outright terror. Even when two people are friends, one can be worried about revealing too much or that the friend might not understand. Tension in the dialogue will manifest itself naturally.

Charles Webb's novel *The Graduate*—which became the basis of the famous movie starring Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft—is about a recent college graduate who is confused about his future. Young Benjamin Braddock has decided accept an older woman's invitation to have an affair. To make it even more nerve-wracking, the woman is Mrs. Robinson, the wife of his father's law partner, someone he's known since he was a kid. He must now secure a room at a hotel.

But inside, he is full of fear that he'll be found out, that someone will see him, or that the desk clerk will know exactly what's going on. The fear factor and all the attendant tension come out beautifully in a scene that is almost all dialogue:

> The clerk's hand went under the counter and brought up a key. "Do you have any luggage?" he said.
>
> "What?"
>
> "Do you have any luggage?"
>
> "Luggage?" Benjamin said. "Yes. Yes I do."
>
> "Where is it?"
>
> "What?"
>
> "Where is your luggage?"
>
> "Well it's in the car," Benjamin said. He pointed across the lobby. "It's out there in the car."
>
> "Very good, sir," the clerk said. He held the key up in the air and looked around the lobby. "I'll have a porter bring it in."
>
> "Oh no," Benjamin said.
>
> "Sir?"
>
> "I mean I—I'd rather not go to the trouble of bringing it all in. I just have a toothbrush."

A simple checking-into-a-hotel scene is full of tension just because one of the characters is fearful.

Exercise

Lecture 10, on bringing characters to life, mentioned the concept of orchestration—that is, creating characters that are different from each other in order to develop areas for conflict. The same dynamic is true for great dialogue.

Here's a simple exercise for your cast:

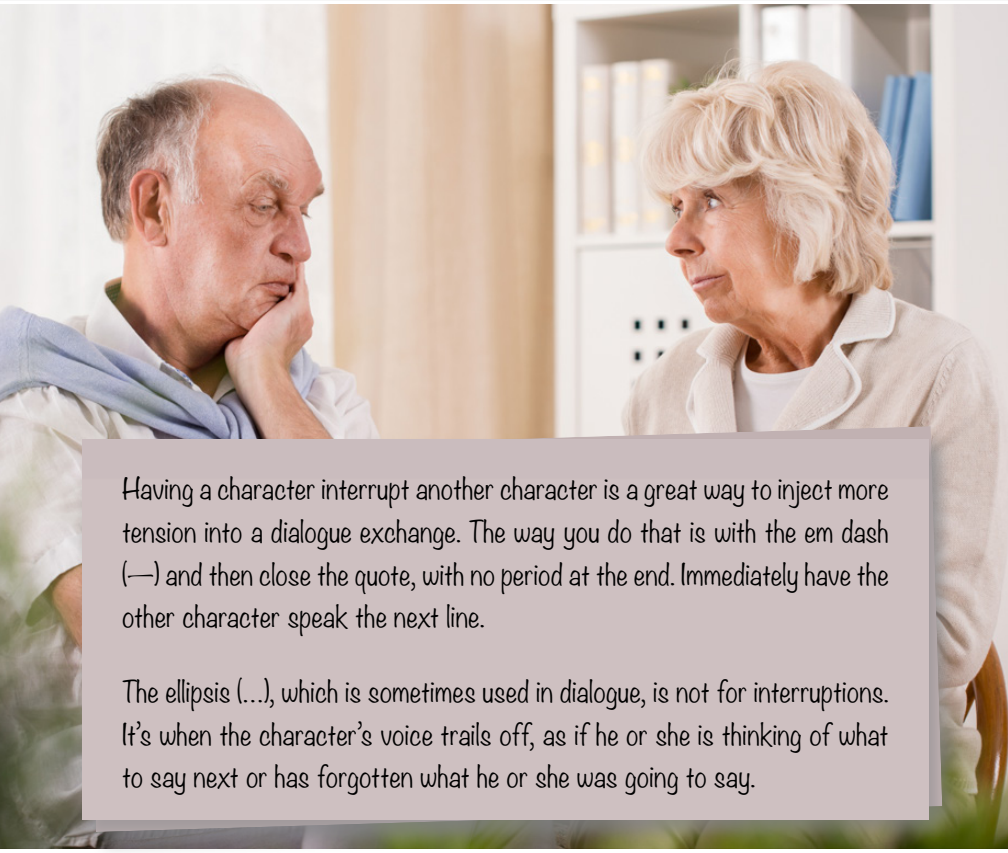
1. Make a list of your cast. Give each character a one-line description.
2. Step back and make sure the descriptions are sufficiently different from each other.
3. Give each character one quirk. Make each character irritating to at least two other characters.
4. Write a few practice scenes, pairing two of the characters at random. Write the scenes exclusively in dialogue.

This is a great warm-up exercise for your writing, and it may generate actual plot ideas and twists.

Dialogue and Subtext

Another mark of great dialogue is subtext. Think of your dialogue as having a surface and an underneath, like an iceberg. We only see about 10 to 25 percent of an iceberg on top. What's going on under the waterline?

Let's take an example from *Casablanca*. In the following scene, a Nazi officer, Strasser, has come to Casablanca to capture Victor Laszlo, the underground fighter. It is rumored he will be showing up in Rick Blaine's saloon. Blaine is allowed to operate by the local French police captain, Louis Renault, because Rick takes no sides. He "sticks his neck out for no one." Strasser wants to find out for himself where Rick stands, so Louis invites Rick to join him and Strasser at a table.



Having a character interrupt another character is a great way to inject more tension into a dialogue exchange. The way you do that is with the em dash (—) and then close the quote, with no period at the end. Immediately have the other character speak the next line.

The ellipsis (...), which is sometimes used in dialogue, is not for interruptions. It's when the character's voice trails off, as if he or she is thinking of what to say next or has forgotten what he or she was going to say.

Even before Rick enters the conversation, the positioning begins. Strasser corrects Louis on a minor point to emphasize the dominance of the Nazi regime. Louis lets it be known that his agenda is to "take what comes." That's because (we will find out later) he has a nice little setup here at Rick's. It's where he is allowed to win at the gaming tables and also where he selects distressed young women to dally with as payment for getting them and their husbands out of Casablanca. He doesn't want to upset this applecart. So, in a friendly voice, Strasser begins:

STRASSER Do you mind if I ask you a few questions? Unofficially of course.

RICK Make it official if you like.

STRASSER What is your nationality?

RICK I'm a drunkard.

LOUIS That makes Rick a citizen of the world.

RICK I was born in New York City if that'll help you any.

Rick's reply is sharp. Louis knows this immediately and injects a line to deflate the impending tension.

Rick's agenda is clear now: Don't be a patsy for strong-arm questions. Louis's agenda is to keep Rick's from being closed down.

STRASSER I understand that you came here from Paris at the time of the occupation.

RICK There seems to be no secret about that.

STRASSER Are you one of those people who cannot imagine the Germans in their beloved Paris?

RICK It's not particularly my beloved Paris.

There is the subtext. Why does Rick say that? We don't find out until later that Paris is where he was betrayed, so he thinks, by the woman he thought he was going to marry—a past relationship that will become the entire driver of the plot.

Exercise

You can weave subtext naturally into your dialogue scenes by knowing things that the reader doesn't and/or the other character doesn't, such as the following:

secrets

past relationships

shocking experiences

vivid memories

deep fears

great hopes

persistent yearnings

As an exercise, brainstorm this list for each of your main characters. Select the strongest item, which means the one that strikes you most forcefully on an emotional level. That's what makes subtext strong—emotion. Then, write a dialogue scene where your character speaks with this item under the surface.

For example, what if the character has a deep fear of enclosed spaces, maybe from a childhood trauma? You could have this character being shown to a booth in a restaurant, one that is substantially enclosed.

"No," she said.

"I'm sorry?" the hostess said.

"I don't want it."

"The table?"

"Booth."

"This is all that's available at the—"

"I said no."

Suggested Reading

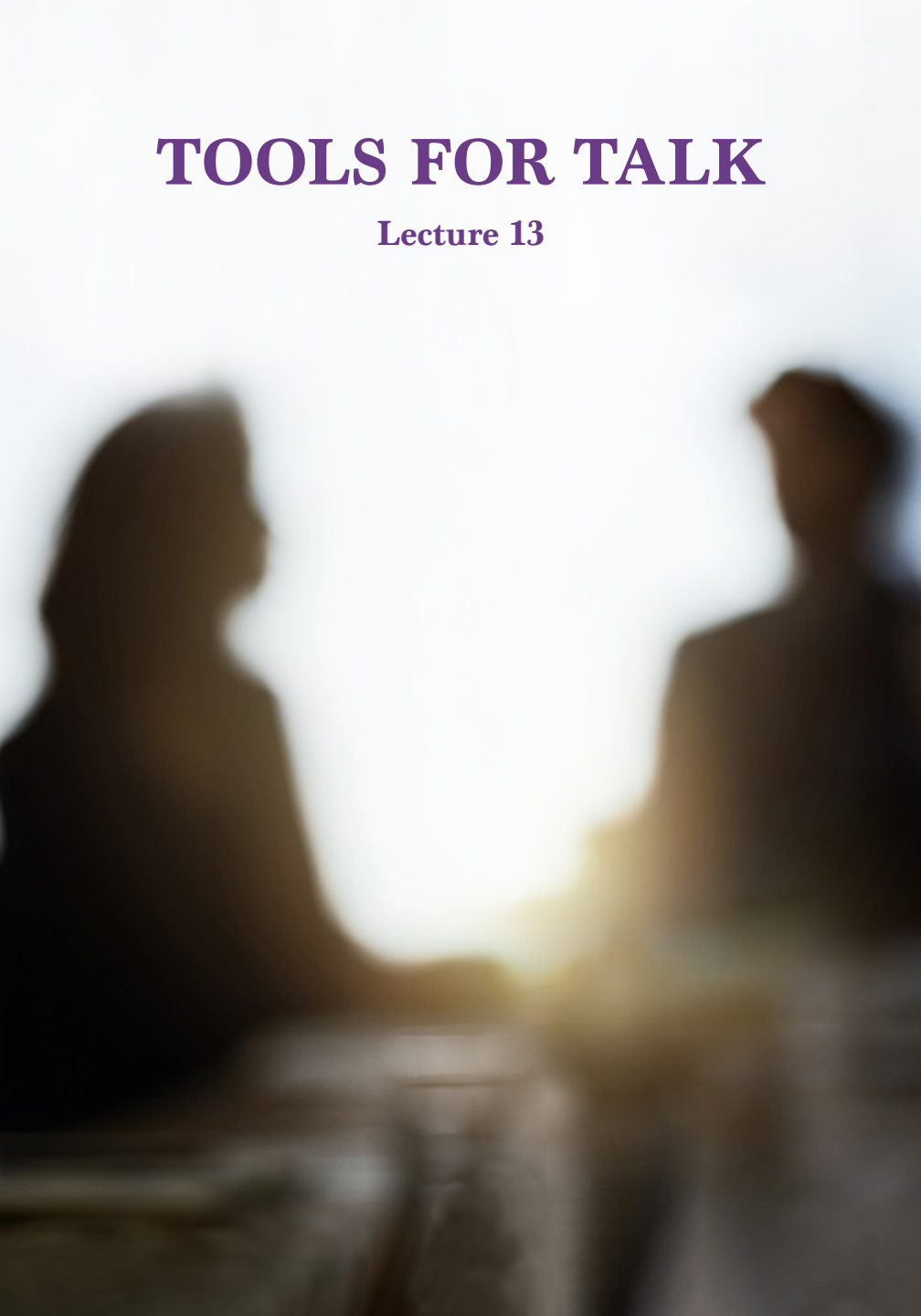
Bell, *How to Write Dazzling Dialogue.*

Exercise

Select a scene from your novel with a lot of dialogue. Ratchet up the tension by 10 percent by inserting more conflict, opposing agendas, the fear factor, and subtext.

TOOLS FOR TALK

Lecture 13



Great dialogue keeps the reader wanting to know what the characters will say next. It's not boring and predictable. Doing the side step, saying the opposite, and curving the language are just some ways to make dialogue unpredictable. And that is a big key to best-selling fiction. If you give dialogue the attention it deserves, readers will pay attention to your stories.

Parent, Adult, Child

In the 1960s, a book was published called *Games People Play* by Dr. Eric Berne. In it, Dr. Berne called his psychological method transactional analysis. Put simply, the idea in transactional analysis is that we tend to relate to each other by the roles we see ourselves in. These roles fall into one of three categories: the parent, the adult, or the child.

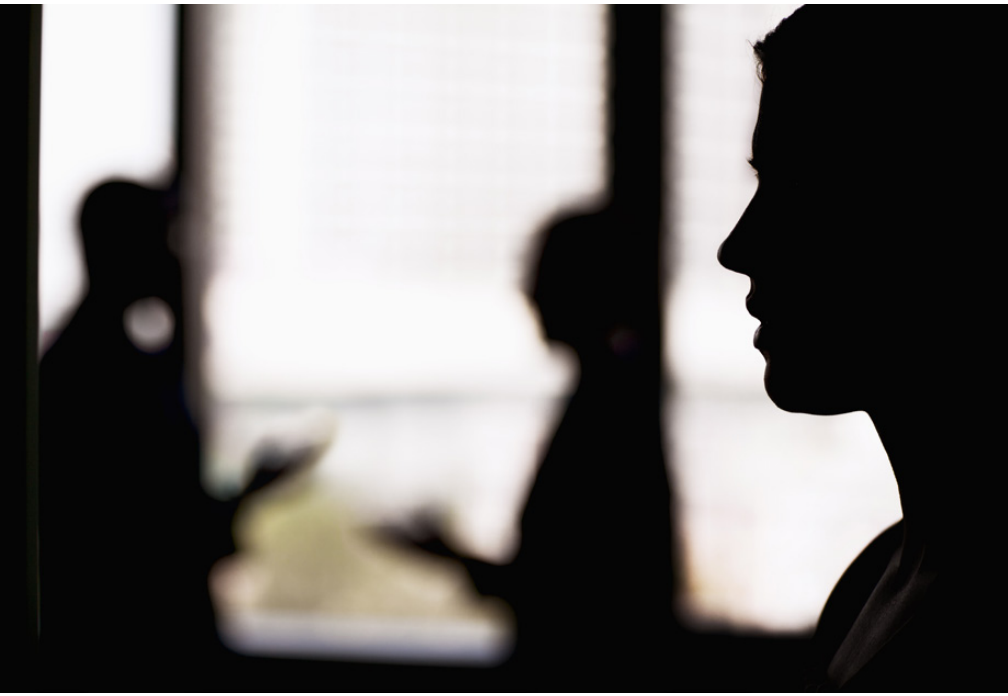
Parent: This is the role of full authority. The parent can lay down the law and enforce it. The parent is the final word. If there's an argument, the parent pulls rank.

Adult: This is the even-minded, even-tempered role. The adult is balanced, rational, and analytical—the type of person you want in charge in a crisis.

Child: This is the emotional, irrational, selfish, whiny, trusting, innocent, tantrum-throwing, pouting role.

Before you start writing a scene, jot down what roles your characters think they're playing. From there, you can figure out natural points of conflict.

Whatever it is, you'll immediately have a stronger scene. The only transaction to watch for is adult versus adult. If they are both operating as they should, being calm and rational, then they would not have much conflict between them.



But you can add tension by using the fear factor for one of the characters, as discussed in the previous lecture. Give one of the characters a fear or a secret, something keeping him or her from full engagement.

You can also have the characters switch roles midstream to further an agenda. There's a great argument scene in the movie and play *The Odd Couple* by Neil Simon. Oscar has had it with Felix's compulsive neatness. After a poker game breaks up, Felix analyzes what's going on like a rational adult. Oscar acts like a child, throwing cigarettes on the floor. The argument escalates until Felix suddenly switches from adult to child. He starts pouting. And Oscar calls him on it: "Don't pout! Fighting, I win. Pouting, you win."

Dialogue is a weapon, a means to an end.

Dialogue Attributions

Dialogue attributions are how you clue the reader in to who is speaking.

The most common way is to use *said*. That simple word does its work and politely leaves. For readers, it is practically invisible and keeps them from being confused as to who is speaking. Make *said* your default attribution.

If the character asks a question, you can use *said* or *asked*. If a character whispers, then use *whispered* instead of *said*. These days, editors like to avoid more colorful attributions, such as *he growled*. Make it clear from the dialogue itself, or what a character is doing in the scene, that it's a growl.

While *said* is used so the reader isn't confused about who is speaking, it's not necessary to use it for every line of dialogue. You don't want readers to feel as if *said* is forced on them for no reason. Leave out the attribution altogether when it's obvious who is speaking.

Most of the time, you do not need an adverb, such as *emphatically* or *indignantly*, after a dialogue attribution. It should be clear from the scene who the characters are, how they speak, and—especially from the dialogue itself—how something is being said.

When there's an exclamation point, we know the line is emphatic.

An alternative to using *said* or any other attribution is an action beat: You clue the reader in to who is speaking by an action the character takes.

For example, instead of *"Put that down!" Charles said*, you use an action before or after the dialogue, like this: *Charles pounded his fist on the table. "Put that down!"* Because the action beat and dialogue are in the same line, we don't need *said* to know who is speaking. The action can come after the dialogue, too: *"Put that down!" Charles pounded his fist on the table.*

The Side Step

On-the-nose dialogue—a derogatory term in Hollywood screenwriting—refers to an unsurprising and direct response to what is being said, as in the following:

> "Let's go to the store, Al."
> "Okay, Bill, that's a fine idea."
> "I always have fine ideas, don't I?"
> "Not always. I remember the time you wanted to build a rocket."
> "That was a hoot, building that rocket."
> "Yes, rocket building is always a hoot."
> "Does anyone say 'hoot' anymore?"
> "We certainly do!"

It's not that we don't talk this way sometimes. After all, if there were never any on-the-nose talk, we'd all be confused about what was going on. But mix in a healthy dose of the side step in your dialogue and instantly the interest level will pick up.

> "Let's go to the store, Al."
> "Your wife called me yesterday."

That's a totally off-kilter response. The reader has a subconscious nudge, asking him- or herself why Al said that. What's the meaning behind it? In other words, there's more interest.

> "Let's go to the store, Al."
> "Why don't you shut your fat face?"

This response introduces conflict.

Answering a question with a question is a good side step.

> "Want to go to the store, Al?"
> "Want to change your tone of voice, Bill?"

Saying the Opposite of What's Expected

On occasion, have a character say the exact opposite of what's expected.

The movie *Moonstruck*, written by John Patrick Shanley, is filled with opposite dialogue. When Loretta, played by Cher, tells her mother, Rose, played by Olympia Dukakis, that she's going to marry the nice but dull man Johnny Cammareri, Rose asks, "Do you love him?" Cher says, "No." Rose says, "Good."

These are two answers we did not expect. You'd expect the bride to say she loves her fiancé. And if she didn't, you'd expect her mother to be disappointed. But the opposite has happened. Why?

Rose goes on to explain: "When you love 'em they drive you crazy, 'cause they know they can."

Later, as Loretta's tortured love interest Ronny Cammareri, played by Nicolas Cage, tries to convince Loretta to commit herself to him, he suddenly spouts:

> Loretta, I love you. Not like they told you love is. And I didn't know this either. But love don't make things nice. It ruins everything. It breaks your heart. It makes things a mess. We aren't here to make things perfect. The snowflakes are perfect. The stars are perfect. Not us. We are here to ruin ourselves ... and to break our hearts ... and love the wrong people ... and die.

That's not exactly Romeo wooing Juliet, but it stands out and is unforgettable. Most important, though, it is perfectly consistent with Ronny's character.

Curving the Language

Sometimes you want a line of dialogue to be a sparkling gem. There's a tool for that called curving the language, a term coined by Danny Simon, who wrote during the golden age of TV comedy. Here's where the term came from.

The joke writers on the old *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson were trying to come up with a joke about the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York—the one with the big balloons of cartoon characters and the like. The writers first laid out a premise for the joke:

> There was a tragedy at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. One of those big balloons got loose and popped.

That's not funny—yet. So, they curved the language. They played with the basic premise. They thought about how the balloon would pop. The next version was this:

> There was a tragedy at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. One of those big balloons got loose and popped on the Chrysler building.

This is better, but still not a joke worthy of Johnny Carson. Finally, they finished with this:

> There was a tragedy at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. The Snoopy balloon got loose … and was neutered by the Chrysler building.

That's how you curve the language. You write out a line as it comes to you but later go back and figure out a way to spice it up.

Rules for Punctuation

The rules of punctuation should become second nature to you, because a reader, and especially an agent or editor, will notice when you're off. That creates an unnecessary speed bump in the fictive dream.

Punctuation always goes inside the closing quotation mark.

> "Where are we going?" he asked.
>
> NOT: "Where are we going"? he asked.

And there's always punctuation.

> "That's a nice dress," she said.
>
> NOT: "That's a nice dress" she said.

The punctuation marks for dialogue are commas, periods, question marks, exclamation points, em dashes, and ellipses.

Never capitalize the pronoun when it's a dialogue attribution.

> "Get out of this house!" he said.
>
> NOT: "Get out of this house!" He said.

But do capitalize when it's an action beat.

> "Get out of this house!" He picked up the gun.
>
> NOT: "Get out of this house!" he picked up the gun.

Put a comma after an attribution when it comes at the beginning.

> Mary said, "I wish you would go away and never return."

If there are two or more sentences and you need a speaker attribution, put it before or after the first complete phrase.

> Morton said, "Now let me tell you a thing or two. I am not going to stand for this. Not ever."
>
> OR
>
> "Now let me tell you a thing or two," Morton said. "I am not going to stand for this. Not ever."
>
> NOT: "Now let me tell you a thing or two. I am not going to stand for this. Not ever," Morton said.

Sometimes, for variation, you'll want to put the speaker attribution in the middle of a complete sentence as opposed to the beginning or the end. In that case, a comma goes after it, and you don't capitalize the next word.

> "I wish you would go away," Mary said, "and never return."

Use semicolons in nonfiction, never in fiction—and, most especially, never in dialogue. People don't talk like college essays, even when they sound like it.

> Never this: "I don't believe that's the proper course of action; if I did, I would say so."

Fiction is about emotion. You don't want readers to feel like they're reading a textbook, especially when your characters are speaking.

Finally, use exclamation points sparingly. The exclamation point is a loud partygoer, demanding attention. Overdone, it can be annoying. Be judicious.

Compressing Dialogue

Another tool for dialogue is compression: cutting dialogue. You will be amazed at how much better and crisper dialogue is when you cut out fluff.

You can often cut words at the beginning of lines. Often, we let our own speech begin with words like *well*, *like*, *yes*, and *no*. Or we'll offer an on-the-nose starter that is based on what the previous speaker said:

> "You're always doing that."
>
> "Yes. You're right. But I am an optimist."

The beginning of the response is fluff. It's not needed. This is better:

> "You're always doing that."
>
> "I'm an optimist."

If you have a reason for a character to use fluff words, perhaps because he or she is trying to avoid direct talk, then it's OK to use them. It all comes down to knowing exactly why the characters choose the words they do. But when in doubt, cut.

Exercise

Try this with one of your dialogue scenes: Make a copy of it and then try cutting the dialogue to the bone. Compare the two versions and incorporate the cuts that work. This exercise is virtually guaranteed to dazzle up your dialogue.

Do this exercise with all of your dialogue scenes.

Using Silence, White Space, and Inner Monologue

Another tremendous tool is silence. Sometimes the most dramatic response won't be with words at all.

In this excerpt from Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills like White Elephants," a man and a woman are having a drink at a train station in Spain. The man speaks first:

> "Should we have another drink?"
>
> "All right."
>
> The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.
>
> "The beer's nice and cool," the man said.
>
> "It's lovely," the girl said.
>
> "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."
>
> The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.
>
> "I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."
>
> The girl did not say anything.

In this story, the man is trying to convince the girl to have an abortion—a word that does not appear anywhere in the text. How does she feel about it? Hemingway doesn't need to tell us. He shows us through her dialogue and her silences.

By using a combination of side step, silence, and action, Hemingway gets the point across through a brief, compelling exchange.

Look for places in your dialogue scenes where the emotion is intense. Change some lines to silence. Show the character doing a little action that conveys the emotion.

You can also use dialogue to control the pace of a scene. A simple rule of thumb is that if you want to slow down the pace of your story, increase the description between the dialogue and decrease the white space on the page. If you need to speed things up, decrease the description and increase the white space.

With a lot of white space and no pausing for descriptive elements, the strategy is to move the outer story along at a brisk pace. This strategy can be used to create subtext so that the reader is left to fill in the blanks of what's going on. Alternatively, if you want to go deeper than subtext and enlarge the inner life of a character, use minimal white space.

What strategy you use at any given time in your dialogue is up to you, of course. Just be intentional about it.

Sometimes you'll have a character alone. He or she should only talk out loud rarely, just like in life. But you can take what the character might have said and turn it into inner dialogue—or, to be technically precise, monologue. This is narrative:

> He wondered if his mother was right. That he was born bad and had just gotten worse over the years. Since he was now a cold-blooded killer, perhaps that meant his character was fixed and could not be changed.

Now let's switch to inner monologue:

> Mom was right. You're no good. You were born no good and you've just gotten worse. Cold-blooded killer, that's you. So what? That's the way of this big bad world, and you kill or you get killed. So you're a big man now, you kill, how's it feel? She was right, she was right all along, she knew.

Suggested Reading

Stein, *Stein on Writing.*

Exercise

Find a scene in your novel with three or more characters present. Assign each character in the scene the role he or she is trying to assert: parent, adult, or child. Go through the scene and make sure every line of dialogue reflects the character's perceived role. (Note: Characters can change their role within a scene for tactical reasons.)

VOICE AND STYLE

Lecture 14

Voice is crucial in today's fiction marketplace, which is sometimes described as a tsunami of content. It takes you from skillful, competent, literate, and forgettable to the kind of book we all love to find—unputdownable. Still, industry professionals have difficulty telling us what voice is, even as they say that's what they're always looking for: a fresh voice. When you get a real handle on voice, through the character and author connection and by continuing to master your craft, it will show up on the page. There is so much plain-vanilla writing out there that a confident and true voice will shine through.

What Is Voice?

Most publishing professionals say that voice in fiction defies definition, but we all seem to know it when we see it. Is voice something that can be developed? Or is it something you're just born with?

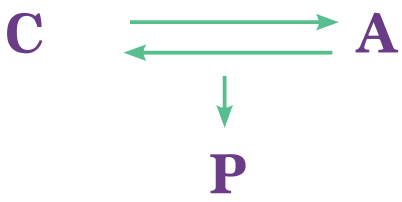
There is a misconception that voice is the voice of the author. Voice, used in the sense of elevating a novel, is actually a combination of three things: your characters, you, and your craft.

According to Marian Lizzi, a respected acquisitions editor, one of the biggest reasons a submitted book gets turned down by a publishing company is that the book is not remarkable, surprising, or unputdownable enough. She said:

> This one is the most difficult to articulate – and yet in many ways it's the most important hurdle to clear. Does the proposal get people excited? Will sales reps and buyers be eager to read it – and then eager to talk it up themselves?
>
> As my first boss used to warn us green editorial assistants two decades ago, the type of submission that's the toughest to spot – and the most essential to avoid – is the one that is "skillful, competent, literate, and ultimately forgettable."

This is called the CAP method: character, author, page. There should be a symbiotic relationship between your characters and you. You render that relationship on the page with knowledge of craft.

The transaction looks like this:



Voice and Attitude

One of the most important tools in the process of creating characters that jump off the page is the voice journal. You want to know how the character sounds, because translating that sound to the page is what produces the voice of the book.

This is crucially important when you're writing in first-person point of view. As discussed in lecture 11, attitude is all important, because that's what distinguishes the narrator.

Suppose your novel is about a woman who begins working for a bail bond office, helping to bring in people who have skipped out on their bail. In first person, the narrator might say this:

> When I was a little girl I liked to pretend I could do things that people couldn't see. That's what I do now, in a way. I'm a bail enforcement agent. I go after those who have skipped out on their bail and bring them back to face justice. I try to, at least. It's sort of like when I was a little girl. I try to figure out how not to be seen most of the time.

There's nothing technically wrong with that paragraph. It's grammatical. But it's also dull. An attitude is missing.

Let's see what the same paragraph looks like in the hands of Janet Evanovich in her Stephanie Plum novel *High Five*:

> When I was a little girl I used to dress Barbie up without underpants. On the outside, she'd look like the perfect lady. Tasteful plastic heels, tailored suit. But underneath, she was naked. I'm a bail enforcement agent now—also known as a fugitive apprehension agent, also known as a bounty hunter. I bring 'em back dead or alive. At least I try. And being a bail enforcement agent is a little like being bare-bottom Barbie. It's about having a secret. And it's about wearing a lot of bravado on the outside when you're really operating without underpants.

That's attitude. That's voice.

If you're writing in third person instead of first, the same idea holds. You strive to render the narrative portions in a way that sounds like the character.

Getting into Character

The idea is not to show off the author's voice, but the character's. But this does not mean that you, the author, are absent from the equation. Remember, it's a symbiosis of character and author. This means that you should do something the best actors do: get into character.

In Uta Hagen's book *Respect for Acting*, she talks a lot about the principle of substitution. In brief, you research the character you're going to play and then find ways to put your own emotional and sense memories into the part.

According to Hagen, every emotion any character feels in a play you have also felt to one degree or another. The essence of the actor's art is to go back into his or her own life and find similar feelings, and then magnify them and appropriate them for the role. That's symbiosis.

Exercise

Define your character with five key emotions and two life-altering events.

Key emotions might include playful, fearful, angry, lost, suspicious, and loving. Use both positive and negative emotions. You want your character to be complex.

A life-altering event is something you dream up for your character. Use an age-16 incident (discussed in lecture 10). Then, create another key moment, such as the first time the character fell in love or got his or her first job.

Next, go over each keyword and find in your own past a moment when you felt the same thing. Relive that past moment by remembering the sights, sounds, touches, and smells. Dwell on them until you feel the emotions afresh.

If you take your time with this exercise, you will be amazed at how the emotions come back to you.

Next, write a paragraph describing your thoughts about each of those memories.

Then, identify with each of the two life-altering events. Think back to a time when you felt the same way the character must have. Recreate those emotions using the same memory exercise as above. Write a page about how you felt at each of those times.

At the end of this process, you will practically be the character—in an actor's sense—and the voice that emerges will be strong, true, complex, and unique. That's the power of symbiosis.

There is a type of fiction where the author's own voice does take center stage. This is almost exclusively in comic fiction, such as Douglas Adams's multivolume *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. That kind of performance requires great skill and more than a little daring, but it's there for you if you ever want to try it. A short story might be the best venue because very few comic novels become best sellers.

As a general rule, then, strive for symbiosis.

Showing or Telling?

The third part of the CAP formula for voice is the page—meaning the style and craft you bring to the actual writing of the words.

One of the issues that faces every fiction writer at almost every stage of the writing is showing versus telling.

- Showing is like watching a scene in a movie. All you have is what is on the screen before you. What the characters do or say reveals who they are and what they're feeling.

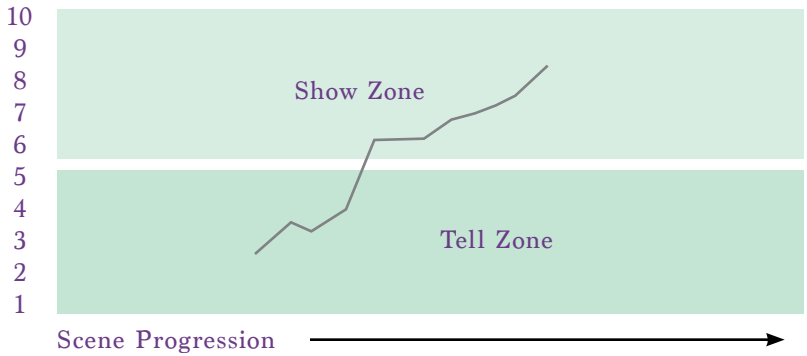
- Telling, on the other hand, merely explains what is going on in the scene or inside the characters. It's like you are recounting the movie to a friend. Another term used for telling is narrative summary; it's where you, the narrator/author, just tell the reader what happened.

> As the great Russian writer Anton Chekov put it, "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."

An example of showing is this: "Mark's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. He tried to take a breath, but breath did not come." The reader feels the emotions right along with the character. That is so much better than telling, which would be this: "Mark was stunned and frightened." Too much telling is lazy writing.

A good default setting is to show, not tell, but you can't show everything. A novel that tried to show every single beat would end up being 1,000 pages, most of it boring. The rule is this: the more intense the moment, the more showing you do.

The intensity scale is a tool that can help you decide when to show and when to tell.



Every scene varies in emotional intensity, or heat. Some scenes are hotter than others. Some scenes start at low heat and build; other scenes pick up really hot where a previous scene left off.

Think of intensity on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 being very low and 10 being almost over the top. Most of your scenes are going to dwell in the 2 to 9 range because 1 is dull and 10 cannot be sustained for too long.

When the intensity of your scene is 5 or below, you can do more telling. That's because you're heading up to the over-5 level, where you do more showing, because you want to render more emotion in a beat-by-beat fashion.

Exercise

Make a list of the 10 most intense scenes (most emotion, conflict, etc.) in your novel. Read them one by one, moment by moment, assessing them with the intensity scale. When you get above a 5, convert any "tell" passages to "show" passages.

Writing Great Descriptions

A great description is like the secret sauce they put on In-N-Out burgers in California—just the right amount, too. You don't want to overdo it, but you also don't want to leave it out. A great description doesn't jump out at you; it doesn't show off. Yet it also is more than plain vanilla. This is the part of the craft where fundamentals, or so-called rules, don't apply.

With descriptions of a setting, here is the most important thing to remember: You describe a scene not so the reader can see it, but so the reader can feel it. And the way the reader feels it is by knowing how the point-of-view character feels about it.

The following is a five-step checklist for writing a setting description.

1. **HOW DO YOU WANT YOUR CHARACTER TO FEEL ABOUT THE SETTING?** This is the crucial first step, and it's a strategic one. You know where you are in your story and what the character's attitudes and emotional landscape are. You know what's going to happen in the scene, or you at least have some idea. Now you're going to set the scene through the character's perceptions about it. Your decision can be as simple as this: I want my character to feel intimidated. Note that you don't have to name the emotion when you write the scene. In fact, it's better not to. Let the setting itself create the feeling.

2. **USING THE SENSE OF SIGHT, DESCRIBE THE THINGS THE CHARACTER NOTICES.** The items that come into your mind will now be filtered through the point-of-view character. If you want to locate a picture via the internet, go ahead. But as you look at it, pretend you are the character and try to feel what he or she feels. Make a list of the items your character doesn't just see, but notices. This is a crucial distinction. We focus on different things depending on our mood. If you're unhappy and you walk into a sunny hotel foyer, you might ignore the fancy art and notice instead a droopy plant. Do a little voice journaling. Have the character talk to you in his or her own voice, expressing his or her feelings about what he or she notices.

3. **USE THE OTHER SENSES TO ADD TO THE FEELING.** Imagine what the character might hear, smell, touch, or even taste. Make a list.

4. **LOOK AT THE ITEMS FROM STEPS 2 AND 3 AND HIGHLIGHT THE ONES THAT WORK BEST.**

5. **WHAT IS THE CHARACTER'S PERSONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE PLACE?** When you do this, you not only create a sense of place for the reader but also deepen the character.

The Telling Detail

The telling detail is the perfect detail that captures a moment. It stands alone.

In *White Butterfly* by Walter Mosley, Easy Rawlins is asked by the LAPD to visit a murder scene in the heart of Watts. He's taken to an empty lot where a crowd has started to gather, in addition to half a dozen white policemen. This is what Rawlins notices:

> The lot itself was decorated with two rusted-out Buicks that were hunkered down on broken axles in the weeds. A knotty oak had died toward the back end of the lot.

The mood of the scene, the sense of place, and the portent of bad things to come are all captured by the telling details here.

The great editor and writing teacher Sol Stein uses the formula 1 + 1 = 1/2 as a caution to writers that when you use two descriptions for the same thing, it doesn't add to the effect—it detracts from it.

If you write, "The hills were like white elephants, like a series of vanilla ice-cream cones," you're bumping two images up against each other. It's always better to choose one.

Often, the best time to find the telling detail is when you revise a scene. You know more about it once it's finished—what you want to emphasize and even symbolize.

Suggested Reading

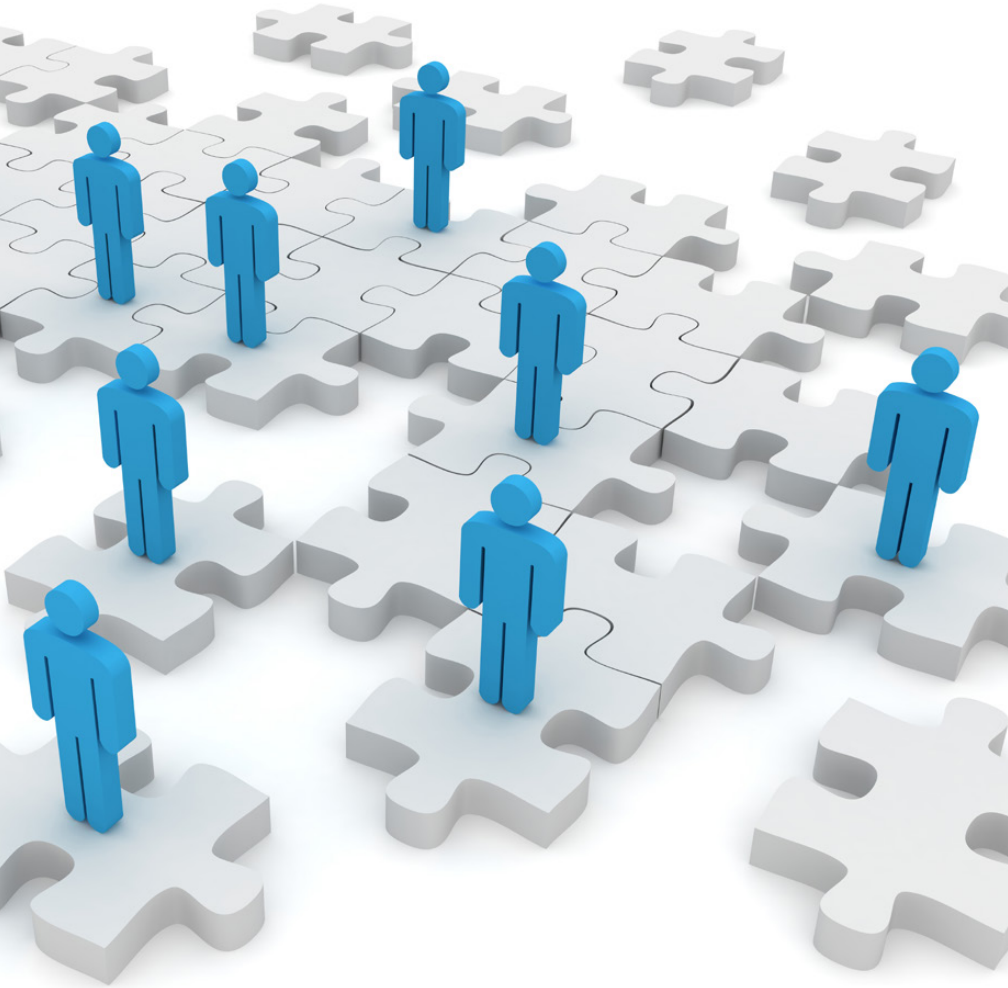
Bell, *Voice.*
Bradbury, *Zen and the Art of Writing.*
Ueland, *If You Want to Write.*

Exercise

Begin a voice journal for your lead character. Write for 10 minutes without stopping, letting your character speak to you in first-person point of view. Begin with this: When I was a [girl/boy], I used to _____. Prompt the character with questions like these: What makes you mad? What makes you sad? What is your philosophy of life?

MAKE A SCENE

Lecture 15



Good fiction is all about disturbance—to characters' inner and outer lives. Scenes are what writers use to illustrate and dramatize those disturbances. Scenes are the building blocks of your novels. You can lay out the plans and know the overall structure of your plot, but it is scene by scene that the readers get into and stay in your story.

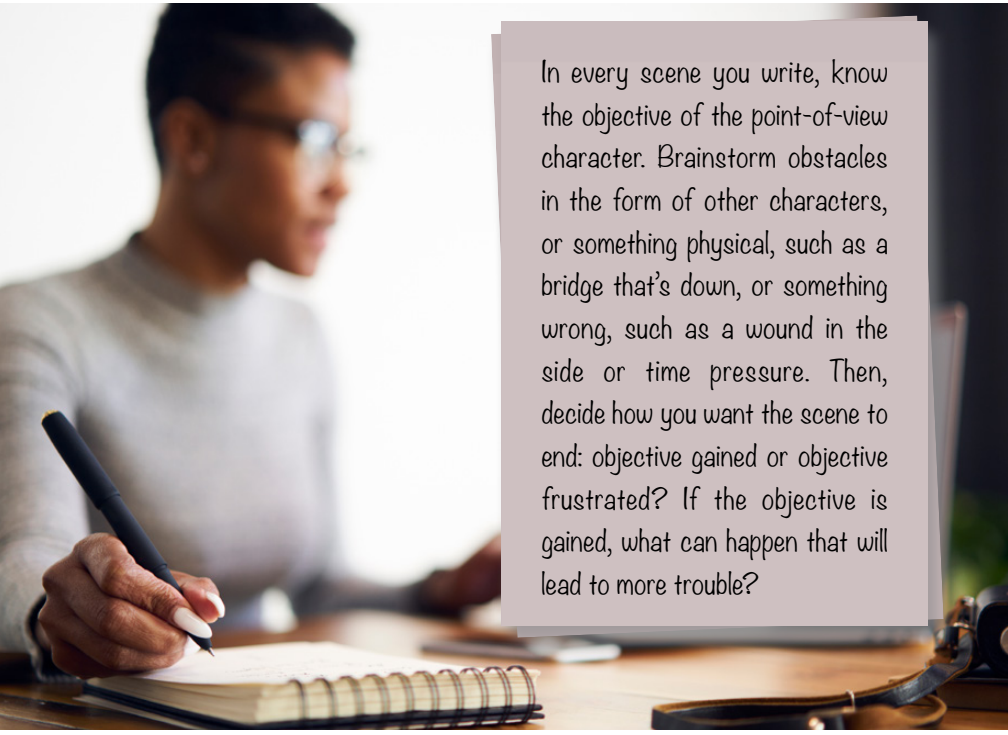
What Makes a Scene?

Just like a good novel has structure, so does a good, solid scene. A scene is a unit of action consisting of the three Os: objective, obstacles, and outcome.

> A point-of-view character has a scene goal. The character wants something—he or she has to, or there is no momentum. A scene without momentum is a point at which the reader may put the book down.
>
> Next, there need to be obstacles to the goal, because that's where conflict comes from, and conflict is the lifeblood of fiction. Without conflict, there is no blood at all—another reason for readers to abandon the book.
>
> And, of course, a scene must end. And the way it ends is crucial. You want it to end so the reader is compelled to turn to the next scene.

What this means as a practical matter is that the scene ending must generally mean that things are getting worse for the lead or it must look like more trouble is coming.

Think of two general ways a scene can end: either the character realizes the objective or does not. If the character does realize the objective—does get the thing he or she wants—it's always a good idea to attach a cost to that. In other words, the temporary victory is going to lead to more trouble.



In every scene you write, know the objective of the point-of-view character. Brainstorm obstacles in the form of other characters, or something physical, such as a bridge that's down, or something wrong, such as a wound in the side or time pressure. Then, decide how you want the scene to end: objective gained or objective frustrated? If the objective is gained, what can happen that will lead to more trouble?

The Emotional Beat

The structure of an emotional beat is emotion, analysis, and decision.

There is a scene, but then a sequel, which is how the character reacts to what has just happened. This is called an emotional beat, because it can be short or long, explicit or implied. It's really just a logical human extension of what's happened in the scene.

A character is going to react, especially if there's a setback. The first part of that reaction is purely emotional. Then, there's going to be a part with reflection and analysis, because the character has to decide what he or she is going to do next. And once decided, the character then takes action toward another objective, which is the next scene.

You can write the parts of an emotional beat in different ways. For the emotional part, you can summarize it, putting it in narrative form, or you can put it in the character's actual thoughts, using the character's interior thoughts, or you can use a combination of these options. The same goes for the analytical part. Then, when the decision is made, we see that on the page.

All of this could take place in a paragraph, especially if your character is under time pressure. But sometimes there's a longer section of reaction, where a character takes more fictional time to figure out what to do next.

And that's how you control the pace of a novel. You can speed things up by keeping reactions short or skipping them altogether. You move right to the next action scene. Or you can give the readers a breather by extending the reaction beat. That slows things down, but not in a boring way. The reader is invested in the character and will go along with it.

Give the reader the full conflict of a scene. Modulate the emotional beats—short or long or skipped—to control the pace.

The Hook

Getting into a scene is called the hook. What is it that will hook the reader from the start?

Here's where a writer can sometimes trip up by starting with the setting. This is a logical choice. We think in a linear fashion and figure we have to get the readers seeing the location, and then the characters in the location, before we can get to the good stuff, like action and dialogue.

You will sometimes start a scene this way in order to control the pace, but don't make that your default. Readers don't care about the logical order if they are intrigued. You have a number of options to choose from to make that happen.

Here is an example of the logical way:

> We were back in his office. I sat in the armchair in front of Pistillo's desk. His chair, I noticed this time, was set a little higher than mine, probably for reasons of intimidation. Claudia Fisher, the agent who'd visited me at Covenant House, stood behind me with her arms crossed.
>
> "What happened to your nose?" Pistillo asked me.

Notice how it begins with the setting, the office, and then some more description, and then, finally, the action of the scene, which starts with dialogue.

But here's how Harlan Coben does it in his novel *Gone for Good*:

> "What happened to your nose?" Pistillo asked me.
>
> We were back in his office. I sat in the armchair in front of Pistillo's desk.

Dialogue is the stronger hook here. It starts off the scene with a question and makes the reader want to know what the narrator is going to answer. Coben then drops in one paragraph of setting and gets back to the action.

Another hooking technique is the teaser. This is a subtle promise to the reader that a tense scene is about to occur. Coben begins another *Gone for Good* chapter in this way:

> I fell into such a deep sleep that I never heard him sneak up on me.

Who is he? What happened after he snuck up on the narrator? Coben teases first, delaying the answers.

Still another hook is action, pure and simple. Coben again writes:

> Claudia Fisher burst into the office of Joseph Pistillo.

This raises the question of why Claudia burst into the office instead of knocking or strolling. We read to find out.

You can certainly begin a scene with a description of the setting, but when you do, have the description do double duty: Not only create a picture for the reader, but also set the mood of the scene.

Work hard to grab the readers at the start of every scene. Try different opening paragraphs. Vary your methods. Alternate dialogue and action, description and teaser. You'll find the hook that feels right.

Ending a Scene with a Prompt

How do you end a scene so that the reader will be compelled to turn the page?

Read-on-prompts are last paragraphs and lines that makes the reader want to find out what happens next. Here are some great prompts to end scenes with:

- ✍ a terrible thing that happens, or might happen
- ✍ a mysterious line of dialogue
- ✍ an image that is full of portent (such as the fog rolling in or a distant sound)
- ✍ a secret suddenly revealed
- ✍ a major decision or vow
- ✍ announcement of a shattering event
- ✍ reversal or surprise (new information that turns the story around)
- ✍ a question left hanging in the air

If a scene seems to sputter to a close and you're not sure what to do, try cutting the last paragraph or two. You don't have to write every scene to its logical conclusion; in fact, it's often the best choice not to. Cutting creates interest, a feeling of something left hanging—and that makes readers want to find out why.

Building Tension in Scenes

In between your scene opening and scene ending, you've got the scene itself.

Your scenes are going to vary in intensity. You vary the pace this way, but the overall feel you want is that as the story progresses, the scenes get more intense for the lead character. Things are getting worse, not better.

It all leads up to the final battle (covered in lectures 5 through 8). If you have less intensity as you move along, the reader loses interest because it seems the trouble is already well on the way to being resolved.

Remember to increase the emotional intensity, too. Even scenes with allies—two characters who agree on a goal—should have tension. Otherwise, you'll end up with dull exchanges of informational dialogue.

This is how the best buddy movies work. *Lethal Weapon* partnered a straight-arrow, soon-to-retire cop (Danny Glover) with a suicidal wild man (Mel Gibson). The tension in their scenes elevates the movie above the standard cop thriller.

Always go over the scenes you've written with an eye for intensity level. If it isn't strong enough, ratchet it up. Even a relatively quiet scene (which you use to modulate the pace of your novel) can give the reader the thoughts of the viewpoint character, showing the reader his or her worries or anxieties.

If a scene still doesn't provide adequate intensity, use the writer's next best friend: the delete key.

There are two types of scenes you should be cautious about. The first are scenes with a character alone, thinking. Because there's no other character in the scene for conflict, you have to be really careful about how and why you have a scene like this.

If it's a chance for the character to assess what's going on and analyze feelings, as discussed in the reaction beat, then you need to make it active. Try to have the character doing something—any kind of action that keeps him or her from being passive. Even if the character is sitting in a chair, he or she could be reading or trying to eat some food.

You can also use inner conflict. Show the reader a real emotional battle going on inside the character who is alone. Think of this interior clash as being an argument between two sides, raging inside the character.

Like the little angel and little devil that sit on opposite shoulders in a cartoon, these sides vie for supremacy. For inner conflict to work, however, each side must have a good argument.

Exercise

Make a list of all the reasons your lead character must continue to fight for the objective. Then, make a list of all the reasons the character should abandon the fight—the forces are too strong, his or her fear is too great, he or she lost an ally, time is too short, etc.

All of that material is fodder for inner conflict. Use it to enliven your character-alone scenes.

The other kind of scene to be careful of is the eating scene, or the sitting-down-for-coffee scene. This is a scene between friends or allies, people on the same side in the conflict. Just as in life, they have a friendly dinner or coffee together. But we don't want real life in our novels. We want heightened life with conflict.

If you are going to do a quiet scene like this, the trick is to have something going on that gives off a vibration of tension. Here are three tips to help you:

1. Find some form of tension between the allies. This causes the reader to want to keep reading to see how the tension plays out.

2. Make the food or the coffee itself a source of discomfort.

3. Use the server to interrupt at a crucial moment. This suspends the conversation and thus creates suspense.

Exercise

Before you write any scene, take a few minutes to write these things down:

1. your viewpoint character and what he or she wants in the scene
2. the other characters in the scene (Note: Try not to have too many scenes with multiple characters; two-character scenes are best for creating conflict)
3. the agenda of the other character in the scene (make it oppositional in some way)
4. how the characters see themselves regarding their parent-adult-child role
5. a list of other possible obstacles (choose the best ones)
6. three to four possible endings to the scene and how they can make the character's situation worse.

Plotters can use this system to create an outline; pantsers can use this to write any scene that comes along.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *Conflict & Suspense.*
Obstfeld, *Novelist's Essential Guide to Crafting Scenes.*

Exercise

Watch a random scene from the middle of a movie. Write down what the objective in the scene is (who wants what?). Then, identify all of the obstacles put in the way of that goal. Obstacles may be physical or emotional, may involve a setting or another character, or may be some combination of these. Finally, what is the outcome of the scene? Was the objective realized?

SUBPLOTS AND PARALLEL PLOTS

Lecture 16

Novelists talk about a problem called the sagging middle. It's a long way from that great opening line to the last paragraph, and you, as the author, have to fill all that space with compelling story material. One of the ways you can do that is to create a subplot or a parallel plot. But that's where your work really begins, because you can't toss in another plotline just to expand the book. Every time you add a plotline, you have to do all the work you've been learning about in this course to make that plotline readable in and of itself.

Jim Butcher, author of the best-selling Harry Dresden series, calls this the GSM, or Great Swampy Middle. He says:

> The Great Swampy Middle knows no fear, no mercy, no regret. It doesn't come after you. It darned well knows that you're going to come to it. It knows that you're going to be charging along, sending up the spinning plates, ripping out the strong character introductions, planting cool bits into your story for the future, and generally feeling high on life. And just then, as you get all that fun opening-story stuff done, it pounces. And suddenly, you're staring at a blank word processor screen trying to figure out how to get your story through the next paragraph. And it laughs at you. It laughs and dances on the ashes of your enthusiasm.

Subplots versus Parallel Plots

A subplot is a plotline that interacts with the main plot in some way. Usually, it complicates things—adds another layer of trouble or complexity to the main character's life.

Gone with the Wind's main plot centers on Scarlett O'Hara trying to save her ancestral home, Tara, after the Civil War. She also has designs on winning the love of Ashley Wilkes, even though he is married to Melanie Hamilton. Those two goals get combined in Scarlett's life. We can say that her objectives in the novel are to save Tara and win Ashley.

What happens to complicate all of this? The rogue Rhett Butler decides that Scarlett is the woman for him, so he keeps showing up to remind Scarlett that she doesn't really want Ashley. But Scarlett fights against him. And this back-and-forth makes up the subplot of *Gone with the Wind*. We would call this a romantic subplot. Margaret Mitchell uses an omniscient point of view but keeps her focus on Scarlett. Everything that happens is filtered through Scarlett.

You can switch viewpoints in a novel. Usually that's done in third-person point of view. You can therefore have a subplot character who gets his or her own scenes.

Unlike a subplot, a parallel plot does not immediately interact with the main plot; instead, it runs alongside it. The characters in each plotline usually don't have any idea about the characters in another plotline. But then, later in the novel—in the middle or in act 3—the parallel lines start to come together. They usually coalesce around an event or series of events with which all the characters are involved.

An example is Stephen King's thriller *The Stand*. It has a large cast and several parallel plots, which all center around a killer flu that has been unleashed, and is also pulling the characters toward a larger plot about good versus evil. Eventually, the characters converge over this central plot point and begin to band together and take sides.

One or more parallel plots usually only happen in epic-sized books. It's helpful to think of each parallel plot as a little novel in and of itself. That's how you have to view it, because you have to make each one able to stand alone.

In *Writing the Breakout Novel,* Donald Maass says that one of the most difficult tricks to pull off "involves creating story lines for two characters who at first have no connection whatsoever, then merging those plotlines." He adds:

> For some reason, this structure is particularly attractive to beginning novelists. While such a feat can be pulled off, again and again I find that novices fail to bring their plotlines together quickly enough. Beginners often feel the need to present scenes from each plotline in strict rotation, whether or not there is a necessity for them. The result is a manuscript laden with low-tension action.

Managing Multiple Parallel Plots

If you eventually want to write an epic with parallel plots, then go through the LOCK system for each plot, give each of the characters a mirror moment, and shape the plotline structurally. Each plotline must be as compelling as you can make it; it can't just fill space. Everything you've learned about bonding readers to characters, making the stakes death, and so on, must apply to each line.

Consider the openings of the first three chapters of Dean Koontz's *Strangers.*

Chapter 1

> Dominic Corvaisis went to sleep under a light wool blanket and a crisp white sheet, sprawled alone in his bed, but he woke up elsewhere—in the darkness at the back of the large foyer closet, behind concealing coats and jackets. He was curled in a fetal position.

Chapter 2

> Dr. Ginger Marie Weiss never expected trouble in Bernstein's Delicatessen, but that was where it started, with the incident of the black gloves.

Chapter 3

> Ernie Block was afraid of the dark. Indoor darkness was bad, but the darkness of the outdoors, the vast blackness of night here in northern Nevada, was what most terrified Ernie.

Koontz then alternates scenes between these plotlines before adding more characters and parallel plots. Each has a compelling opening. And Koontz doesn't let up in any of the plotlines as these characters move relentlessly toward a mystery that has been affecting their behavior. They begin to connect and find commonality in their plights.

If you decide to write a book with one or more parallel plots, make a grid. On the left side of the grid, put the name of the lead character for each plot. Then, across the top, put the 14 signpost-scene labels, covered in lectures 5 through 8.

Here's what the first part of the grid for act 1 would look like:

	Disturbance	Care Package	Trouble Brewing	Argument against Trans-formation	Doorway of No Return #1
Dominic					
Ginger					
Ernie					

How many subplots is too many?

Try to project how long, approximately, your novel is going to be. Then, refer to this formula for the maximum number of subplots to include:

For a novel of 60,000 words, 1 or 2 subplots.

For 70,000 or 80,000, 2 or 3.

For 90,000 to 100,000, 3 or 4.

More than 100,000, you're getting into the realm of multiple subplots and parallel plots. You're on your own here. Use whatever you need.

If you have more subplots than suggested above, they will tend to overwhelm or even detract from the main plot.

Next, brainstorm what could go in those boxes, keeping in mind the special importance of the mirror moment.

Once you have all or most of the boxes filled in, you can easily manage the parallel plotlines and keep track of where you are in each.

The Personal Subplot

Generally, there are three types of subplots that interact with the main plot and complicate life for the lead character: the personal, the romantic, and the thematic.

A personal subplot means the character—in addition to dealing with all the problems of the main plot—also has a personal relationship that demands his or her attention. This is almost always a relationship that is in place before the novel begins. Many times, it involves a family member or an ex-spouse or ex-friend, someone the lead already knows. Often, there is a wound of some sort involved in that relationship, and the personal subplot issue is whether that will be healed.

Give your personal subplots resonance. Make them moments that readers will be blown away by.

The Romantic Subplot

A romantic subplot happens when, during the course of the main plot, the lead character begins to fall for another character.

Don't confuse this with the romance genre—books that center on the relationship between two characters. In a genre romance, the romance is the main plot. The romance characters may each have a subplot going on, and in fact that's a good thing in a romance.

But here we're talking about another plot of any kind—be it a detective novel, a mystery, a thriller, etc.—and we have a main character, and the plot gets rolling, and the obstacles are building. Now another complication comes along, this time in the form of another character with whom the lead may get involved romantically.

Quite often, a romantic subplot is a classic love triangle, which is an added layer of complication.

A romantic subplot should begin with friction. Later, that friction will evolve into a spark. That spark is romance. In *Gone with the Wind*, the first meeting between Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler takes place in the library, where she tells him he's no gentleman and he tells her she's no lady. That's friction. But for Rhett, it's a spark. And it's a spark for the readers, too—and for viewers of the movie.

Work friction and spark into your romantic subplot at the beginning. Then, you'll have the readers on a double hook: the main plot and the romance. Everyone wants to believe in love; that's why the romantic subplot works so well.

The Thematic Subplot

The thematic subplot involves the character in a relationship that forces him or her to deal with a moral question. Often, this subplot is carried by a character who operates as the conscience of the lead or at least forces the lead to deal with an inner moral lack or need to grow.

The thematic subplot is used to illuminate the deeper meaning of the plot. One of the classic ways to create this subplot is to introduce a character in the role of a mentor, or moral conscience, for the lead. This character functions to teach or remind the lead of his or her main purpose in life, not just the plot. Think of Yoda in *Star Wars* and Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

To create a memorable mentor character, make him or her the opposite of, or at least quite different from, your main character. This gives you the added element of conflict. A mentor or conscience character is often the one to make the lead character look in the mirror, creating that mirror moment you've learned about.

Exercise

Take a simple children's story, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, and make up a subplot for Red's story. Who is the subplot character going to be? Write a little backstory for that character. How will this subplot interact with and complicate the simple main plot?

Then, for fun, write this story from the point of view of the Wolf. What subplot can you add to his plotline?

Suggested Reading

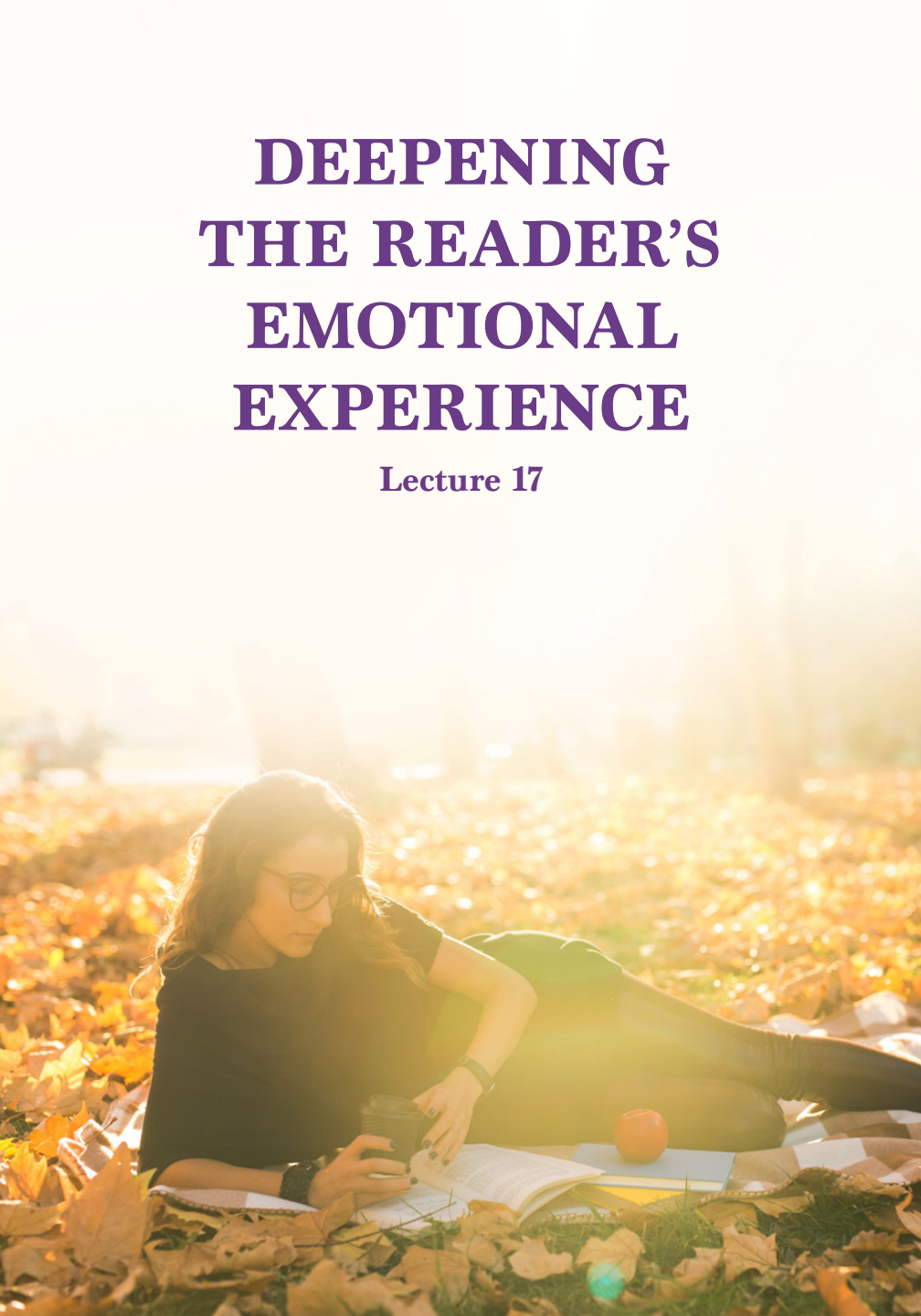
Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel.*

Exercise

Brainstorm three possible subplot characters who can interact with your lead. Start with a personal relationship that predates the opening of the novel. How can this character make the lead's life more problematic? Then, think of a potential romantic involvement that might occur during the course of the plot. Finally, what character can challenge the lead morally? Often, this is a trusted friend who can tell the lead something he or she may not want to hear.

DEEPENING THE READER'S EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Lecture 17



A novel is primarily an emotional experience, and the more vivid you can make that experience, the more memorable the novel will be. At the same time, you need to avoid melodrama and making it seem like you're trying to manipulate the reader. In truth, an author is definitely trying to move the reader emotionally. You just don't want to get caught doing it. And that is the delicate balance that a knowledge of the craft helps you achieve. There are two primary ways to move the reader: through the heart, by rendering emotion, and through the head, using theme or meaning.

Emotion in Fiction

The least effective way to get emotion onto the page is to name it.

> Ann was so furious she thought she would burst!

While this gives us the information, it doesn't really grip us on the inside. That's because it's communicating through telling, not showing (covered in lecture 14). Unless it's a moment of low intensity, you, the author, want to show rather than tell.

And the first way to show rather than tell is through what a character does. That causes readers' brains to form a picture, which triggers the limbic system in the brain, producing emotion.

> Ann picked up the paperweight and threw it at the window.

When the reader pictures this, he or she shares the experience and emotion right along with Ann.

Notice that you haven't gone inside Ann yet to see what she feels or thinks; you are staying outside and just describing the action. The style of writing that stays outside is called minimalism. It means you are describing only what someone could see if he or she were viewing the scene.

Ernest Hemingway was the master at this type of writing. He called his method the iceberg or the theory of omission. It's what's under the surface—what is not shown but what the reader senses—that carries the power. Hemingway often does that through dialogue.

Going Inside the Character

Another way to create or deepen emotion is to go inside a character. We can be given both the physical and mental aspects of someone in an emotional moment.

Stephen King's short story "1408" is about a writer who decides to spend the night in a hotel room that is supposed to be haunted. Naturally, he gets a lot of creepy feelings, like this:

> He was aware that his stomach was now so nauseated that it seemed to be swinging in its own greasy hammock. He could feel the air crowding against his ears in soft, coagulating clots, and it made him think of how fudge was when it reached the soft-ball stage.

That's showing us what he's feeling, physically, inside.

The other way to get inside is by way of what the character is thinking. The most direct way is to offer the thoughts in present tense. A common way of doing that is with italics.

> Ann stormed out of the office. *I'm not going to let him get the best of me. No way. He'll see. I'll make sure of it.*

Or you can do this without italics but in a narrative style.

> Ann stormed out of the office. She wasn't going to let him get the best of her. No way. He'd see. She would make sure of it.

In *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, Donald Maass writes, "Light an unexpected match ... and readers will ignite their own feelings."

Using Inner Conflict to Deepen Emotion

A further level you can reach in scenes of high emotion is the level of inner conflict.

Think of this as an argument between two sides that is raging inside the character—like the little angel and the little devil that sit on opposite shoulders in a cartoon. For inner conflict to work, however, each side must have a strong argument. Put that argument into emotional terms.

In John Harvey's crime novel *Ash & Bone*, Frank Elder is a retired inspector coming back to help on the murder of a woman he was once intimate with. Complicating that is his teenage daughter, who is on a downward spiral Elder can't seem to stop. She won't let him get close to her, which tears him up inside. When he gets the news that his daughter has been arrested for selling heroin, he's at the limit. He calls his ex-wife:

> "How is she?"
>
> "She's all right. I mean, I suppose she's all right. It's difficult, Frank, you don't ..."
>
> "I'm driving up, leaving now. I just wanted you to know."
>
> "Don't, Frank."
>
> "What else d'you expect?"
>
> "She won't talk to you, you know."

> Elder wanted to hurl the phone into the far-flung reaches of the car park. Instead, he pocketed it carefully and made himself stand for some moments, perfectly still, controlling his breathing, before reaching for his keys.

Elder has won his fight for control. But will it last?

Exercise

Imagine a scene where your lead feels intense emotion. Define it in one word.

Next, imagine an action the character would take as a result.

Now, what is a competing emotion this character feels?

Write a scene, and put both emotions into it. For example:

> John exploded with rage. He picked up the hammer and started smashing the furniture. Every stick that reminded him of Mary he whacked.

That could be converted to something like this:

> John exploded with rage. He picked up the hammer. He raised it over the coffee table that had been their first purchase together. And froze. Smashing it would be like smashing the part of his life that had once been good. Killing the memory of love. A memory that was keeping him sane. His gut turned over like a pig on a spit. And then he brought the hammer down with all his might.

That's the power of inner conflict.

Using Metaphor to Deepen Emotion

Another way to deepen an emotional moment is by using a metaphor: an image that represents in a symbolic way the thing being described.

> She was pretty as a picture.
>
> He was big as a house.

But these metaphors are clichés; they don't work because we've seen them so many times it doesn't form a fresh picture. How can you come up with a metaphor when needed? How do you make it fresh?

You make a list. You write down a whole bunch of nouns and analyze them later.

Let's say you have a scene with a detective and a very large man—a man with a hand big enough to sit in. That's how Raymond Chandler describes Moose Malloy in *Farewell, My Lovely.* At one point, Moose points to his own chest to make a point. Moose has very large hands and fingers. What are some nouns that can be used for a little exaggeration? A sausage? A piece of pipe? A cigar? A tube of toothpaste?

Keep going. Make your list. Then, choose the noun that goes with the voice of the character. In *Farewell, My Lovely,* it came out like this: He prodded his chest with a forefinger like a banana.

How Details, Memories, and Dreams Deepen Emotion

You can also deepen emotional moments through details, memories, and dreams.

The telling detail—the perfect detail that captures a moment—was covered in lecture 14. Use the details to tell the reader what's going on inside a character. Stephen King's short story "All That You Love Will Be Carried Away" is about a traveling salesman checking into a motel room. What is he feeling when he looks at the room?

> There were twin double beds, each covered with bright gold spreads that had been tucked under the pillows and then pulled over them, so the pillows looked like small covered corpses. There was a table between the beds with a Gideon Bible, a TV-channel guide, and a flesh-colored phone on it. Beyond the second bed was the door to the bathroom. When you turned on the light in there, the fan would go on, too. If you wanted the light, you got the fan, too. There was no way around it. The light itself would be fluorescent, with the ghosts of dead flies inside.

Using details like *corpses*, *ghosts*, and *dead flies*, this man is contemplating suicide. And that's what the story is about: whether this man will finally do himself in.

A past memory, vividly recalled, is a very effective way of extending an emotional moment. One of the masters of this technique was John D. MacDonald, who wrote paperback originals in the 1950s and then a mystery series featuring a character named Travis McGee.

And then there are dreams. Unless a dream is a recurring plot element, use a dream only once in a novel and then, like the past memory, to deepen a moment of great emotion.

Theme in Fiction

Theme doesn't feel like fun to most writers. Most want to write a really gripping story and not worry about the meaning of it. But every story is going to have a meaning. It's going to have a message, whether that message is subtle, as in a Hemingway novel, or hits us over the head, like an Ayn Rand novel. What both these authors had in common was a burning desire to say something in their books.

Other writers see themselves as entertainers, coming up with twisting, turning plots—or mysteries, or romances. There's nothing wrong with that. But the story will have some kind of meaning nonetheless.

A category romance meaning might be that true love can really happen for a few outsiders. A mystery solved always tells us that crime doesn't pay.

Do you need to know your theme before you write, or can you just write and discover the theme as you go?

Either way is perfectly fine. An author might have a strong desire to write about a social issue. That was the impetus behind *The Grapes of Wrath*. In a letter written in 1939, John Steinbeck said his goal was "to rip a reader's nerves to rags" over the plight of migrants coming into California.

If you want to write this way—with a message—be careful not to write a novel where the characters feel thin and the tone feels preachy. In other words, you have to make sure that you're not just creating a cast to be mouthpieces for your message. There has to be a real plot and real characters.

And that brings us to the other side of meaning: If you have that plot and those characters, and especially if you create a lead character who is memorable in trying to overcome the fight with death, you will have a message at the end of the book. You can't help it. And the place you find it is right in your chest, the place where you feel the heat—the place where you get worked up and care—which you then transfer to your lead character.

Exercise

Your theme is what you passionately believe. It's what Donald Maass calls "the fire in fiction." Where is your fire?

Make a list of terms that describe what you care about most—words like *justice or love or helping others or defending the weak*. Go for a list of at least 10. When you come to drafting a new novel, which one of those terms seems primary for your main character? Give him or her that same fire you feel.

The best way to think about theme or meaning is that when it becomes apparent to you the kind of story you're writing, you can weave in dialogue and symbolism as a way to deepen the feel of the story to the reader.

Suggested Reading

Ballon, *Breathing Life into Your Characters.*
Maass, *The Emotional Craft of Fiction.*

Exercise

Pick a scene in your manuscript and find the spot where emotions are running high. Open a new document and write a page about what the viewpoint character is feeling. Don't stop to edit; just let the emotional content flow. Give it a day to rest. Then, find at least one line that strikes you as most vivid and work it into the scene. Repeat this exercise with 10 different scenes.

FIRST PAGES THAT GRAB THE READER

Lecture 18

The opening pages of your novel are your big introduction. They are what an agent will read with most interest to see if you can write. Studies on how browsers in bookstores and online decide to take a chance on a new author have shown that they are attracted by the cover and the title. They look at the dust jacket or, if they're online, the book description. If they're still interested, they'll read the first few pages of the book. Those first pages have to grab browsers so they decide to give your book a chance.

Prologues, Disturbances, Mood Setting

A prologue is a scene that happens sometime before the main plot begins. The idea is that you create immediate action, raise some mystery, and then end the scene and have the reader flipping to chapter one to find out what the prologue means.

Sometimes a prologue will present a villain doing villainous things or a victim of the unseen villain being victimized. Then, readers go to chapter 1 to get introduced to the main character. The hugely popular Mary Higgins Clark has used this type of prologue many times, including in *Where Are the Children?* and *You Belong to Me.* Or a prologue might give readers the main character in a tense encounter, and then chapter 1 will open sometime later, even years later.

If you think you want to use a prologue, note that it has to be a scene—a real scene with characters and structure. If it's just half a page of narrative, then it's not a prologue; it's some sort of teaser. And teasers are for advertising, not for a book.

There seems to be a bit of pushback by acquisitions editors on the use of prologues—maybe because they've seen so many manuscripts that have done them poorly. Even readers may now be tempted to skip the prologue. You can do two things: Call the prologue chapter 1, or don't use a heading at all.

If you do a scene from the antagonist's point of view—or some other character besides the lead—the first chapter, the one right after the prologue, must introduce the reader to the main character. Otherwise, the reader is going to be confused about whose story this is, and one way to lose readers is to confuse them.

Consider opening your book with a first chapter that introduces the lead character. This is an option that will never fail, so when in doubt, choose this way.

To do this, you start with a disturbance and with a character in action toward a scene goal.

The opening page of a novel should draw the reader in with an indication of trouble to come. Do that by disturbing your characters from the very start.

The disturbance was covered in depth in lecture 6, and it's overwhelmingly the best option. But you can also consider opening with a mood-setting style. However, note that this takes great skill to pull off.

One opening of this type is from Ken Kesey's best seller *Sometimes a Great Notion*:

> Along the western slopes of the Oregon Coastal Range ... come look: the hysterical crashing of tributaries as they merge into the Wakonda Auga River ...
>
> The first little washes flashing like thick rushing winds through sheep sorrel and clover, ghost fern and nettle, sheering, cutting ... forming branches. Then, through bear-berry and salmonberry, blueberry and blackberry, the branches crashing into creeks, into streams. Finally, in the foothills, through tamarack and sugar pine, shittim bark and silver spruce—and the green and blue mosaic of Douglas fir—the actual river falls five hundred feet ... and look: opens out upon the fields.
>
> Metallic at first, seen from the highway down through the trees, like an aluminum rainbow, like a slice of alloy moon.

You can hear the sound—the audacity—of addressing the reader with *look*, and you can picture the stunning images, such as *alloy moon*.

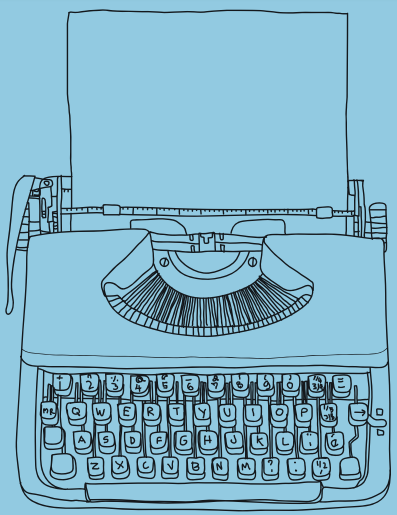
Less audacious but still poetic is a stylistic opening in the voice of the character. Michael Connelly does this in one of his later Harry Bosch books, *The Narrows*:

> I think maybe I only know one thing in this world. One thing for sure. And that is that the truth does not set you free. Not like I have heard it said and not like I have said it myself the countless times I sat in small rooms and jail cells and urged ragged men to confess their sins to me. I lied to them, tricked them. The truth does not salvage you or make you whole again. It does not allow you to rise above the burden of lies and secrets and wounds to the heart.

Connelly concludes the opening page this way:

> And still I went, not being ready for the moment when evil would come from its waiting place. When it would grab at me like an animal and take me down into the black water.

It can be a great exercise for you as a writer to write such a page and then not necessarily use it. By stretching your style, you are exercising your writing muscles in a productive way, and this exercise might also give you insights into your character or plot that bubble up from your subconscious. While you might not use this material in the opening, you might find a place inside your novel where it could be placed.



It's not just the first page and paragraph that you need to focus on; of course, there are many pages that come after that to make up a novel. So, keep grabbing your readers, because the more you do this, the more invested they become, which increases the odds of them reading on.

Remember the other beats from lecture 6: the care package, the argument against transformation, and trouble brewing. Those are the things you need to consider in your novel's crucial opening pages.

Common Opening Mistakes

Perhaps the biggest mistake to avoid in your opening is the exposition dump: a lot of explanatory material about the scene, the story world, and the lead character that the author thinks the reader needs to know to understand what's going on.

In truth, readers need to know very little to get into the story. They will wait a long time for explanations if the action is gripping, essential, tense, or disturbing. So, follow this rule: Act first and explain later.

One form of exposition is backstory, in which the author or narrator tells information about the past.

> When Laurie Miller was in high school, her English teacher told her she would never amount to anything. She believed it, especially when she failed to make the cheerleading squad. Two years of community college didn't change Laurie's mind. Nor did the three years she spent working at Starbucks ...

That's just telling; it's not action taking place on the page. This is much better:

> Officer Laurie Miller pulled her .38 from the holster at the sound of the first shot.
>
> "Bedroom window!" Pete Jackson, her partner, shouted. Great. Her first week on the street and already somebody was trying to kill her.

Hold back on backstory. When you do that, you create immediate mystery, and readers love mystery, regardless of the book's genre. They like being strung along, wondering why people are acting this way.

Exercise

Go through the first 5,000 words of your manuscript and highlight all the material that is explanatory in nature—that tells things about the character's past.

Then, step back and find a way to withhold the most important information. Readers need a bit of backstory up front to help them bond with a character, but you don't need to give them an entire life history. It's a judgment call, but that's what this writing craft is all about.

For example, let's say you've written a line like this on the opening page:

> Rachel had never been the same since her daughter, Tessie, died at age three.

Obviously, this is a major piece of information about Rachel's emotional state. But there's no mystery about it.

The better strategy is to show the reader an action that indicates some emotional wound but not yet reveal the source. So, let's open with Rachel and her friend Mary having just been served tea at a restaurant:

> Rachel reached for the teapot. And froze. The tea cozy had a flower pattern on it, the same one—
>
> "What is it?" Mary asked.
>
> Rachel opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She noticed her hand trembling in mid-air. She withdrew it to her lap. "I'm sorry," she said. "Would you mind pouring?"

Only later will it be revealed that the last time Rachel was with Tessie, they'd had tea with a set that looked exactly like what is on the table at the restaurant.

Another big opening mistake is CATF: character alone, thinking or feeling. In such an opening, readers don't get a character in motion toward a scene goal. Instead, they get the ruminations of the character as he or she reflects on something that just happened, or the state of his or her life at the moment, or some strong emotion. The author, in a mistaken attempt to establish reader sympathy with the character, gave readers static information.

> Marge Inersha tried to mix the pancake batter, but thoughts of Carl kept swirling in her head, taking her mind off breakfast and back to Tuesday, horrible Tuesday when the sheriff had served her with the divorce papers. Tears fell into the batter, but Marge was powerless to stop them. She put the mixing bowl on the counter and wiped her eyes. How much more could she take? With two kids sleeping upstairs?

Marge is certainly hurting. But your readers won't care. The mistake writers make is in thinking that readers will have immediate sympathy for a person who is upset. But they won't.

Another opening mistake is to write a gripping scene only to reveal at the end that it was just a dream. Agents and editors hate it when you open with a dream—and so do most readers, because if they get invested in a cool opening and then discover it's all been a dream, they feel cheated. So, you may have a gripping first few pages, but you'll ruin the effect when the character awakens.

There are a few best-selling authors that have opened their books with dreams. When you start selling a gazillion copies, you can do this, too. Until then, you can't.

Another complaint you'll hear from editors and agents is about weather openings. This is a catch-all phrase for generic description. Chip MacGregor, an agent, described this as follows:

> The [adjective] [adjective] sun rose in the [adjective] [adjective] sky, shedding its [adjective] light across the [adjective] [adjective] [adjective] land.

The weather here has no connection with character. This is not to say you can't open with weather, but make sure it helps establish the character and mood.

Another error is point-of-view confusion. Readers need to know from the start whose scene this is—whose perspective. Unless you have a strong reason to use an omniscient point of view, as discussed in lecture 11, focus on one character. This is how readers connect to a character. Don't give them amorphous description.

Cop an Attitude

Attitude is a certain something that energizes opening pages, and it is especially crucial if you're writing in first person.

You'll see this often in old-school, hard-boiled fiction, such as Mickey Spillane's *The Big Kill*:

> It was one of those nights when the sky came down and wrapped itself around the world. The rain clawed at the windows of the bar like an angry cat and tried to sneak in every time some drunk lurched in the door. The place reeked of stale beer and soggy men with enough cheap perfume thrown in to make you sick.

Third-person point of view also needs attitude. When you write in third person, it's tempting to write from a distant, rather objective place—almost like a reporter. But when you do that, you're wasting the first opportunity to get your reader involved with the character.

The Chapter 2 Switcheroo

Look for opportunities to keep readers wondering what the heck is going on—in plot, in character emotions, and in the world of the story itself.

One great move you'll want to try from time to time is the chapter 2 switcheroo. You simply chuck chapter 1 and start with chapter 2. You'll be amazed how often this works wonders.

If you have essential information from chapter 1, you can sprinkle it in throughout the novel. Be ruthless about leaving out any information that didn't absolutely have to be there.

Chapter 2 is sometimes better than chapter 1 because something is happening. There is action. There are characters. And a disturbance should soon follow.

Exercise

Go to a library or bookstore and pull some random novels from different genres. Then, open them to chapter 2 and read. You'll notice how you don't need backstory to get into what's going on. You'll be hooked by the action.

Try to get that feeling on your own opening page.

Suggested Reading

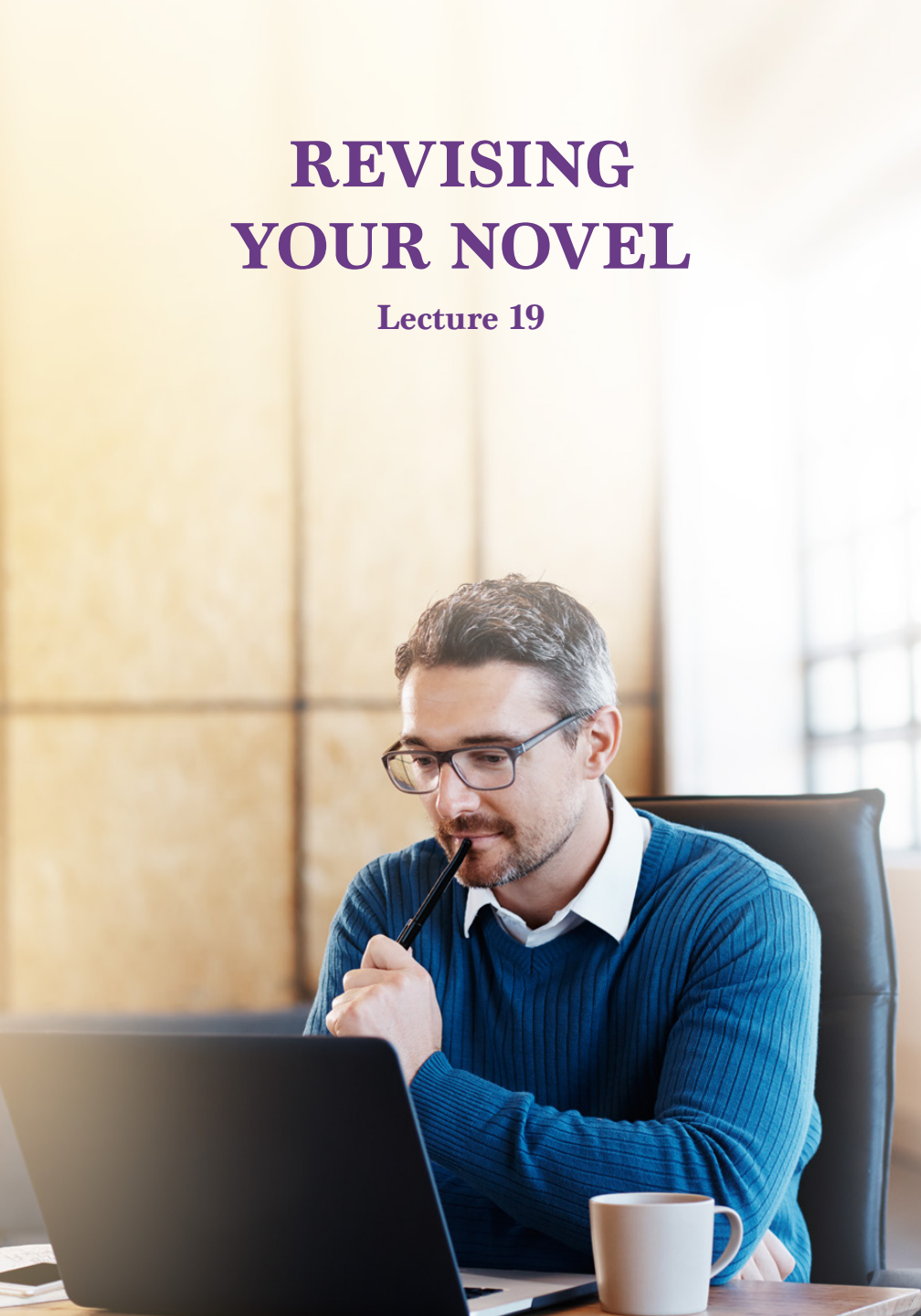
Edgerton, *Hooked*.
Lukeman, *The First Five Pages*.

Exercise

Select five novels at random from your bookshelf and read the opening pages. Analyze them. Do they work? If so, why? If not, why not? How would you do it differently? Next, take the same five novels and open up to chapter 2 and imagine that this is where the books actually start. Notice how often, nothing is lost, and indeed, it may even be more of a grabber. Consider starting your own manuscript with chapter 2.

REVISING YOUR NOVEL

Lecture 19



The discipline of completing a novel is extremely important. It's easy to start out on the journey. Usually, first ideas are exciting, and the first few chapters are joyful. But then you start to hit some challenges, and if they persist, you may be tempted to ditch the manuscript altogether. This is almost always a mistake. Plowing through to the end teaches you a lot. Applying the craft of fiction to fix your novel teaches you even more. Then, the next time you set out to write a novel, you will have more confidence and more skill. You will become better and stronger each time.

How much should you revise your novel as you go along?

A process that might work for you is to revise your previous day's pages and then go on to your writing quota for the day. Repeat the same process the next day. Don't go further back than the previous day. You're not looking at major structural changes at this point—just cleaning up the sentences and making sure you're writing coherently. You may end up adding some material, but that's it.

Write your first draft hot and revise it cool.

Write like you're in love; edit like you're in charge.

First Pass

What do you do after you've finished your first draft? You pop a nice bottle of champagne and take the love of your life out to dinner, or you take your dog for a nice walk, or maybe you just hit the sack.

Then, you wake up the next day, and what's the first thing you do? You forget. You forget all about your novel—completely and utterly. You set it aside for four to six weeks, and you work on your next project.

The reason is you want a cooling-off period so you can come back to the manuscript fresh, without a lot of preconceived ideas and swirling thoughts you may have had as you were writing it. You want to try to read it as if for the first time.

Some writers print out a hard copy of the manuscript and put it in a binder. Other writers load it on their e-reader or phone. It's up to you.

Now you're ready to read the book as fast as you comfortably can—not speed reading, but as someone who enjoys fiction. Sit in a comfortable chair and mute your phone. Multitasking, checking email or social media, will hurt you at this point. Concentrate.

A trick some authors use to create the feeling that they're reading a real book is designing a mock cover and putting a made-up blurb on it. There is no need to be modest here; only you will see it. So, write it as you'd like to see it. Make it your motivation to write the best book you can.

Also resist the urge to make copious notes on the page. Your goal is to get an overall sense of the plot, the structure, the characters—a bird's-eye view of the story. You don't want to interrupt the flow. Instead, use marks that will help you identify places you'll need to take a closer look at after the first read-through is done.

Put a check mark in the margin in places where you feel the story is starting to drag. Don't analyze why.

If you read a sentence that's confusing or a metaphor that doesn't work, put parentheses around that sentence. Don't correct it then; wait until you're ready to revise.

Use a circle in the margin where you feel material needs to be added. For example, you may want to add more emotional depth.

Use a question mark for a larger section of a scene where something doesn't make sense—for example, there's a plot hole of some kind or something a character does that doesn't ring true.

Other than these four marks, keep reading until you're finished.

Digging Deeper

Now it's time to do some in-depth analysis. Get a yellow legal pad and start making notes.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Does the overall story make sense? Does the plot resolve in a satisfying way? Are there lingering plot questions that haven't been answered?
- Are the death stakes high? Have I made sure that tension runs throughout the novel?

Sometimes the middle of the book can feel thin. A few things can be done about that. You can add another layer of complication. If you still need more, you can consider adding a subplot, covered in lecture 16. Think of it this way: If you add just one more character, you increase your plot possibilities in a significant way. Jot down any ideas.

Next, consider the individual scenes, asking yourself questions like this:

- ✍ Is there conflict or tension in every scene?
- ✍ Do I establish a viewpoint character?
- ✍ If the scene is action, is the objective clear?
- ✍ If the scene is reaction, is the emotion clear?

If you need to speed up a scene, dialogue is one way to do it. Short exchanges with few beats leave a lot of white space on the page and give a feeling of movement. To slow the pace of a scene, you can add action beats, thoughts, description, and elongated speeches.

Also, look for places where you can stretch good tension. Show every beat, using all the tools at your disposal: thoughts, actions, dialogue, description. Mix these up.

Consider the settings of your scenes. Usually, the main settings of your plot are going to remain as they are because they're essential—such as a courtroom in a legal thriller. But you'll have scenes at other locations, many of them places we've all seen before, such as restaurants, dining rooms, offices, cars, and so on.

Look at each instance of a location and see if you can't find a fresher venue. For example, instead of a restaurant scene, what if the characters were outside eating hot dogs on a pier or at a carnival where there's too much noise? You don't have to move every scene, but if you do stay with a familiar scene, remember to put something unexpected in there.

This is also a good time to consider areas where you can do more research. Some writers like to do extensive research before they start writing. This seems to be advisable for writers of historical novels. But when it comes to contemporary areas, many writers prefer to get a first draft down on paper and only then go back and fill in the holes.

After these plot matters, turn your attention to the main character. Here are some key questions to ask yourself:

- ✍ Is my lead worth following for a whole novel? Why?
- ✍ How can I make my lead jump off the page more?
- ✍ Will readers bond to my lead by
  - 🗍 caring for someone other than him- or herself?
  - 🗍 being funny, irreverent, or a rebel with a cause?
  - 🗍 having competence in something?
  - 🗍 being an underdog facing long odds and not giving up?
  - 🗍 having a dream or desire readers can relate to?
  - 🗍 having undeserved misfortune but not whining about it?
  - 🗍 being in jeopardy or danger?

After that, look at the other main characters, seeing if there is enough conflict and contrast among them.

Then, consider your antagonist to make sure that he or she is stronger than the lead and is operating at peak level throughout the story. If the reader ever feels like the villain or the opposing character is not a consummate threat to the lead, the entertainment value of the book goes away.

Then, consider your minor characters.

- ✍ Are they just fillers?
- ✍ How can I add spice if they are?
- ✍ Can I give them a more colorful way of talking?

Once you've addressed plot and characters, think about the emotional level of the story.

- ✍ Is there enough of it in there?
- ✍ Does the book hit me on a gut level?
- ✍ Have I grabbed not only the attention but the heart of the reader?
- ✍ Can I add to the heat or ratchet up the tension of the scenes with the strongest emotional content?

Identify five big moments in your manuscript. Read them over one at a time. After each moment, make a list of five ways you can heighten that moment and make it more intense. Then, sit back and decide which one feels the best. Try rewriting that moment in just that way. Repeat this for the other big moments.

Next, think about theme, or meaning.

- ✍ Now that I've written the book, does it have the meaning I intended?
- ✍ If I wasn't really thinking about it, does it manifest itself now?

At the end of a book, there will be some kind of meaning to it that can be discerned. This will allow you to weave some things in on the second draft that relate to whatever you've determined to be the meaning.

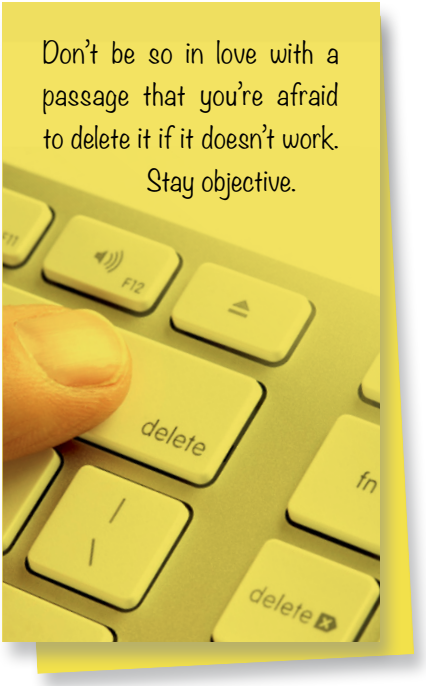
Look at your mirror moment and the transformation that occurs. If you've done your first draft with that in mind, it should help you firm up exactly what you're going for. If you haven't provided an argument against transformation yet, you can now go back and find an early scene in which to do that. This was covered in lectures 5 through 8.

Now that you have a big pile of notes, write yourself a memo, sort of like what a good book editor would do if you were working with one at a publishing house. Be as objective as possible, and not only analyze the problem, but suggest possible answers.

After you consider all of these changes, do a revised elevator pitch, covered in lecture 3, to reflect the improvements. You want a stronger story hook in this revised pitch.

Writing and Polishing the Second Draft

Then, it's time to do a second draft. What a second draft looks like varies from writer to writer and from book to book. For some, it might mean going through the first draft and touching things up here and there; for others, it might mean starting at page 1 and redoing the whole thing. Or it might be something in between.



This is a decision you have to make for yourself. Try it different ways. With all the information you've gathered from the first read-through and your notes and your memo, you'll get a sense of what the best way forward is.

After the second draft, it's time to do one more pass, called the polish. You're not looking to make any more major changes. Instead, look at a few key areas. Go through the manuscript, reading all the chapter openings, and ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I begin the scene a little further in?
- Does the opening of the scene grab?
- Do most of my chapters begin the same way? (If they do, vary them.)

Look at every chapter ending. See if you can find a place to end the chapter earlier—perhaps a few paragraphs earlier. Experiment. What you want is to leave the reader with a sense of momentum.

You can also add momentum by adding something that would make the chapter end with more of a portent or prompt, such as the following:

- ✍ a line of moody description
- ✍ an introspection of fear or worry
- ✍ a moment of decision or intention
- ✍ a line of dialogue that snaps or sings

Or your ending may be fine just the way it is. If that's the case, don't touch it! It's actually OK not to change things if they work the first time.

Next, you want to polish the dialogue. Ask yourself these questions:

- ✍ Is there plenty of white space in my dialogue exchanges?
- ✍ Is my default attribution *said*?
- ✍ Do I vary these with action beats?
- ✍ Do I have too many action beats? (Remember, *said* doesn't make the reader work.)
- ✍ Can I do any cutting of words to make the dialogue tighter?
- ✍ Is there a line I can curve to make it slightly more memorable?

Start to keep track of words and phrases you tend to overuse. Ask beta readers and editors to alert you to words or phrases you tend to repeat. If you pick up on a repetition, do a word search and you'll usually pick up more of the same. Modify those words.

Throughout the revision process, look at a list of reminders to yourself. Feel free to use this one, but also try to create your own according to your own vision.

> Conflict rules. If you can find any way to increase conflict in a scene, do it.
>
> Look at character relationships. Can you increase the web of relations?
>
> Give each major character a secret, even if it never comes out in the story. It will give emotional color.
>
> Don't let your lead character be all good or your opposition all bad.
>
> Always write lists of possibilities. Search for originality.
>
> Use at least one sense impression (hear, taste, see, feel, smell) on every page.
>
> Don't ever let a coincidence help a main character get out of trouble.
>
> "So much of successful fiction hinges on one simple ploy: discomfort." (Robert Newton Peck)

Don't think about any of this when you write. Stay loose. Get the scene down. Revise later.

Getting Feedback

Once you have a second draft, the next step is to get another set of eyes on it. Many writers have benefited by hiring a good freelance editor, called a developmental or macro editor. This person should have extensive experience analyzing an entire novel and be able to give you detailed feedback. Often, this type of editor has a background in traditional publishing. The best way to find such a person is to get a recommendation from another author. But you can also research these editors online; look for client testimonials on their website as well as their background.

Be aware that this type of editing is not cheap. If it doesn't fit your budget, there's an alternative: beta readers. The term comes from the software world, where an app or program in development is given a limited release to people to play with to find any obvious problems. That's what you want in a group of beta readers.

You want people who are good readers and who will be completely honest with you. It could be people in your critique group, or people you meet at a writing conference, or just people you know who like books. Give them an incentive, such as a free lunch or gift card or an offer to put them in the acknowledgements of your book.

Help your beta readers by preparing a sheet with key questions covering the main points of revision from this lecture. You don't want to overwhelm them, but you do want them to be specific in their feedback.

Questions for your Beta Readers

- ☐ Did the book hold your interest from beginning to end? If not, where were the slow parts?
- ☐ Did you bond with the main character? If not, why not?
- ☐ Were there any parts of the plot that confused you? Please be specific.
- ☐ Were there any characters you did not believe or thought were weak? If so, why?
- ☐ Overall, do you have any suggestions for improvement?

When you get the notes back, if two or more of the beta readers tag the same problem, you know you need to take a close look at that and fix it.

Make the adjustments you need to make, and now prepare a final draft. But before you send it to an agent, or publish it yourself, lay out the money for a good proofreader. Once again, get a recommendation if you can. You can also research the going rates and compare several proofreaders before choosing.

This is a lot of work, but that's what it takes to write best-selling fiction. And keep in mind that every time you go through this process, you become a better writer—a stronger writer who is more able to spot the things that need fixing and use the tools of the craft to fix them. That's what turns someone from an amateur into a professional.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *Revision & Self-Editing.*
Browne and King, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers.*

Exercise

Finish your novel. Set it aside for a few weeks and develop another project. Then, read through your manuscript as if you were a busy editor looking for a book to publish. Don't stop and edit this first time through. Keep asking yourself this question: When might a busy editor be tempted to set this book aside? Mark those passages for later assessment.

BLUNDERS AND BALONEY

Lecture 20

Agents and editors—those whose job it is to find authors and manuscripts of promise—see common errors in fiction all the time. And these errors, which are easily avoidable, will probably mean they pass on the manuscript. But readers notice these errors, too, only they do so subconsciously. Most readers aren't schooled in the craft of fiction, but they can feel if something is off. When that happens, there's a slight drop in reading pleasure. Don't let this happen to your readers. You want to put them into a fictive dream so that when they are reading the story, they're not even conscious of reading. They're only conscious of experiencing.

> One of the most common writing mistakes is head hopping, introduced in lecture 11. If readers are getting bonded to a character because they're inside that character's head and all of a sudden the writing pops over into another character's head, there's a little subconscious jolt there—a small one, yes, but why have any at all?

Happy People in Happy Land

The "happy people in Happy Land" blunder was discussed in lecture 6 in relation to the opening chapter. Sometimes a writer begins with a scene of normality, thinking that by showing nice people doing nice things, readers will care about these pleasant folks when they're finally hit with a problem. But in reality, the readers are going to be bored.

Readers engage with characters via trouble, threat, change, or challenge. The opening disturbance, also covered in lecture 6, can be stunning, as in Jodi Picoult's *Lone Wolf*, which begins like this:

> Seconds before our truck slams into the tree, I remember the first time I tried to save a life.

Or it can be something quieter, a single thing that is off-kilter, as in the opening of Sarah Pekkanen's *The Opposite of Me*:

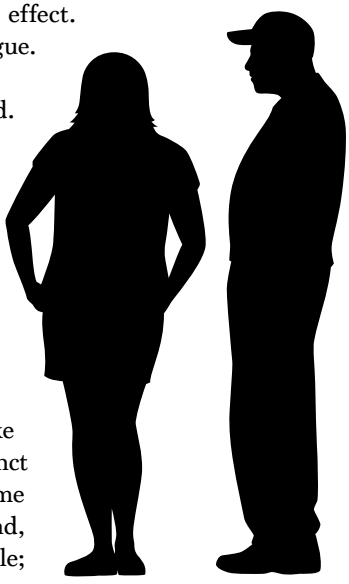
> As I pulled open the heavy glass door of Richards, Dunne & Krantz and walked down the long hallway toward the executive offices, I noticed a light was on up ahead.
>
> Lights were never on this early.

But it's not just in the beginning that you want to avoid the "happy people in Happy Land" blunder. Throughout the book, you want to remember what Raymond Chandler said: "Trouble is my business." It's your business, too—so look for ways to make more of it. Adding a little bit of tension can make a scene much more interesting.

Look at your individual scenes. Find places where there's too much happiness. Your job is to be a big meanie to your characters. Make a list of potential problems than can arise; even a little problem is better than no problems.

Marshmallow Dialogue

As previously mentioned, dialogue is the fastest way to improve a manuscript. It's also the fastest way to sink it. When an agent, editor, or reader sees crisp, tension-filled dialogue, he or she gains immediate confidence in the writer's ability. But when the dialogue is sodden and undistinguished, it has the opposite effect. This type of dialogue is marshmallow dialogue.



- Professional dialogue is compressed. Marshmallow dialogue is puffy.
- Professional dialogue has tension. Marshmallow dialogue is too sweet.
- Professional dialogue sounds different for each character. Marshmallow dialogue sounds the same.

Fortunately, the fixes are easy. First, make sure you can "hear" every character in a distinct voice; use the voice journal that has come up several times in these lectures. Second, compress your dialogue as much as possible; cut words, and sometimes even lines.

The previous lecture discussed the polish, which comes after the second draft. That's a great time to get rid of all marshmallow dialogue.

Clumsy Flashbacks

Another area that writers often have problems with is flashbacks. Most writing teachers warn about using flashbacks, but many novelists successfully utilize flashbacks. You can, too, if you do it with great care.

The first thing to consider about a flashback scene is whether it is necessary. Be firm about this. Does the story information have to come in this fashion?

A flashback is almost always used to explain why characters act a certain way in the present story. If such information can be dropped in during a present-moment scene, that's usually the better choice.

And be wary of starting your novel in the present and going too soon to a flashback. If the flashback is important, you should consider starting with that scene as a prologue or first chapter.

These are guidelines. In the hands of a good writer, a gripping first chapter followed by a compelling flashback can work—for example, see the first two chapters of Lee Child's *Persuader.* But your baseline instinct should be to hold off on flashbacks for as long as possible.

If you've decided that a flashback is necessary, make sure it works as a scene—immediate, confrontational. Write it as a unit of dramatic action and not as an information dump. In other words, don't write it as a narrative summary, which is just a telling, not a showing, of something from the past.

You also need to learn both how to get into and out of a flashback. Here's one way that works every time: In the scene you're writing, when you're about to go to a flashback, put in a strong sensory detail that triggers the memory in the point-of-view character.

> Wendy looked at the wall and saw an ugly, black spider making its way up toward a web where a fly struggled. Legs creeping, moving slowly toward its prey. The way Lester had moved on Wendy all those years ago.
>
> She was sixteen and Lester was the big man on campus. "Hey," he called to her one day by the lockers. "You want to go see a movie?"

We are now in the flashback. Write it out as a dramatic scene.

Then, to get out of the flashback and return to the present, go back to the sensory detail:

> Lester made his move in the back of the car. Wendy was helpless. It was all over in five minutes.
>
> The spider was at the web now. Waves of nausea washed over Wendy as she watched. But she could not look away.

Watch out for the word *had* in your flashback scenes. You can use one or two *hads* to get in, but once you are in, they are usually unnecessary. An easy fix that makes your text much more readable is to use past tense after the first *had*.

> Marvin had been good at basketball. He tried out for the team, and the coach said how good he was.
>
> "I think I'll make you my starting point guard," Coach told him right after tryouts.
>
> Marvin was thrilled.

There's an alternative to a whole flashback scene. You often don't need a whole scene to get the crucial story information across. Instead, you can use back flashes—short bits in which you drop information about the past into the present moment. The two primary methods are dialogue and thoughts.

Here's a dialogue example:

> "Hey, don't I know you?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Yeah, yeah. You were in the newspapers, what, ten years ago? The kid who killed his parents in that cabin."
>
> "You're wrong."
>
> "Chester A. Arthur! You were named after the president. I remember that in the story."

Here, Chester's troubled background has come out in a flash of dialogue. This is also a good way for shocking information from the past or a dark secret to be revealed at a tense moment in the story.

Now let's look at character thoughts:

> "Hey, don't I know you?"
>
> "No." Did he? Did the guy recognize him? Would everybody in town find out he was Chet Arthur, killer of parents?
>
> "Yeah, yeah. You were in the newspapers, what, ten years ago?"
>
> It was twelve years ago, and this guy had him pegged. Lousy press, saying he killed his parents because he was high on drugs. They didn't care about the abuse, did they? And this guy wouldn't, either.

We are in Chester's head for this one, as he reflects on his past.

The skillful handling of flashback material is one mark of a good writer. Using back flashes as an alternative is usually the mark of a wise writer.

Predictability

One of the biggest blunders you can make as a writer is also one of the easiest to fall prey to, and that is predictability.

Remember, readers like to worry about characters in crisis. They want to tremble about what's around the next corner (emotional or physical). If a reader knows what's coming, and it does, the worry factor is blown. Your novel no longer conveys a fictive dream.

The fix is to put something unexpected in every scene. Doing this one thing keeps the reader on edge.

To come up with the unexpected, you make lists. You pause and ask yourself what might happen next and then make a list of possibilities. Don't settle for the first thing that comes to your mind; you usually jump to clichés. Force yourself to list at least five or more possibilities. Make lists around three primary areas: description, action, and dialogue.

- ✍ Dump generic description for something unique to the character's perceptions. How might he or she see a room where someone died? What's one surprising thing about the wallpaper? The bed? The closet? How can you make it surprising?

- ✍ Close your eyes and watch your scene unfold. Let the characters improvise. What are some things they do that are far out? If something is really far out, don't reject it—justify it! Readers will love that.

- ✍ Don't always use on-the-nose exchanges. How might characters say things that put other characters (and thus, the reader) off-balance?

Try things. Play around. If you get surprised, your reader definitely will be.

Rendering Character Thoughts

Another blunder that always seems to confuse new writers is how to render character thoughts on the page.

> John walked into the room and saw Mary by the window. I wonder what she's doing here, he thought.

Here, the writer gives John's thought in a first-person point-of-view fashion, as well as the attribution for it: *he thought*. You can also do this in a third-person style:

> John walked into the room and saw Mary by the window. What was she doing here, he thought.

Now here's a little nuance: Where you have established a point of view, you really don't need the attribution.

> John walked into the room and saw Mary by the window. What was she doing here?

Another way to render thoughts that many authors use is to italicize it.

> John walked into the room and saw Mary by the window. *I wonder what she's doing here?*

Notice that when the thought is italicized, you again don't need *he thought*.

Be on the lookout in every novel you read how the author handles character thoughts. When you get the hang of it, it will be a major step forward for you as a writer.

It's become something of a meme among writers and writing groups that italics are out of date. But that's mainly because italics can be abused. Avoid a lot of italics for thoughts; save them for short, emotional moments.

Here's another nuance: Some thoughts in second-person point of view can be very effective. Even though, as mentioned in lecture 11, you should avoid using the second-person point of view for an entire novel, it can often be stylistically powerful for a character thought.

He walked over to the window and looked at the street.

Well, this isn't exactly what you wanted, is it? You wanted fame and fortune, and you got a cheap room in a crummy hotel, and you know you deserve it. Welcome to reality, pal. You done good, real good.

BALONEY WRITING ADVICE

Here are some writing "rules" you should ignore.

"Don't ever start your novel with dialogue." That's baloney, and here's why. Dialogue creates instant conflict, which is what most unpublished manuscripts lack on the first pages. Sometimes this rule is stated as "Don't start with unattributed dialogue." That's double baloney on rye with mustard. Readers have imaginations that are patient and malleable. If they are hooked by dialogue, they will wait several lines before they find out who's talking and lose nothing in the process.

"Absolutely no backstory in the first 50 pages!" This is also baloney. Remember, backstory is anything that happens before your novel begins. And many times, writers include too much of this in the opening pages because they think the readers need it to understand what's going on. But remember this axiom: Act first, explain later.

Readers will wait a long time for essential backstory information if a scene is unfolding in front of them. On the other hand, a bit of backstory expertly helps the reader bond to the character. A simple guideline is to use three sentences of backstory in your first 10 pages. You may use the sentences together or space them out. Then, in the next 10 pages, you can have three paragraphs of backstory, together or apart.

"Write what you know." This baloney is one of the most famous writing bromides, and it can restrict you if you stick too closely to it. The idea behind this is that to write authentically, accurately, and with convincing detail, you need to stick with your own life experience, for that is obviously what you know best. Writing what you know is not a bad thing; just don't feel like you're stuck there. Let your imagination guide you. But be prepared to do the necessary research.

"Don't ever follow anybody else's writing advice." If this overstatement were true, then your investment in this course would be a complete waste of time. But it's not true. It's baloney. In fact, it's moldy baloney. Every writer who ever lived has benefited from writing advice from experienced professionals. Certain fundamental techniques have worked over the course of years, and as writers learn how to use them—how to integrate them with the story they feel in their heart—the better that story can be. This doesn't mean you can't play around to see if something works. If it doesn't work, you can always return to the fundamentals, which will never let you down.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *27 Fiction Writing Blunders.*

Exercise

Pick a random scene in your manuscript. Read the first few paragraphs. Then, ask yourself what a typical reader would expect to happen in the scene. If this does happen, the scene is predictable. Brainstorm a way the scene can include something surprising. Repeat this exercise for all of your scenes.

GETTING PUBLISHED

Lecture 21

Once you've written your novel, you have two options when it comes to publishing it. You can partner with a publishing company, whereby you grant them the right to publish your book and get it into bookstores, in return for which they give you a royalty share on all sales. The publishing company edits your manuscript, takes care of all the production and design matters, and then distributes your book to both brick-and-mortar bookstores and online venues. They'll do some marketing, but they'll also expect you to do a lot of it. The other option is self-publishing, which is covered in the next lecture.

Pros and Cons of Traditional Publishing

On the pro side of traditional publishing, you will be dealing with a company that has experience in the entire process, from editing a manuscript to cover design to sales. All those details you can be involved with, though the final decisions are almost always made by the company.

The publisher pays you an advance against royalties, meaning you get money up front as soon as you sign a contract.

Getting a printed book into bookstores on a wide scale requires a publisher and sales team, so you get that benefit.

And when it comes to foreign rights—getting your book into other languages and countries—most authors are not prepared to deal with that. It's something that can be learned, but the curve is pretty high.

On the con side, it usually takes a year to 18 months for your completed manuscript to get to bookstores.

The norm is to get royalty statements every six months, as well as any money owing to you. However, many royalty statements read like World War II submarine codes.

And should a traditional publisher decide not to do another deal with you, they may retain the rights to your books well beyond your sojourn on this earth.

Many authors want the validation of a traditional contract and also the chance to hit the jackpot by becoming an A-list asset for the company. Hitting the A-list means you can make millions of dollars as an author. But understandably, those slots are few and highly competitive. So, go into this without rose-colored glasses. You're going to need to have thick skin, persistence, and the ability to take feedback from an agent or editor when it's offered. A chip on your shoulder won't help you get published.

Writing the Query

As a new author, how do you go about landing a traditional book contract? You put together a proposal that will make an acquisitions editor believe that your book—and you, as an author—can make a profit over time. Acquisitions editors are not looking for one-book wonders; they want to know and trust that an author can keep producing good books. That's why, as a new author, you will have to be prepared to send in a completed manuscript before you start the query process.

How do you get your proposal to an editor? The top publishing houses say they will consider projects only if they come by way of an agent. There are some minor exceptions. If you meet an editor at a conference, for example, you might get an invitation to send the proposal directly.

The traditional novel proposal has three parts: the query, the synopsis, and the sample chapters.

The query is a one-page sales pitch. It must contain the information that makes the editor hear the distant sound of a cash register. The query is about commercial potential and an introduction to you, the author, as a professional writer.

Interestingly, the synopsis is not what is usually looked at next. It's the sample chapters, especially the first few pages. Why? Because that tells the editor whether or not you can write. If you are not able to grab the editor with those first pages, he or she won't go on to read the rest of the proposal because he or she just doesn't have the time.

Some novelists read a book on proposal writing and mistakenly believe that the requirements of a fiction proposal are the same as a nonfiction book. But while nonfiction proposals need a chapter-by-chapter outline, your novel does not.

The following are some guidelines for writing a killer query. Most importantly, make sure you send your query to the right person, by name, and spell the name correctly.

- ✍ For the first paragraph, get right to the plot. Why? Because that is what agents, editors, and readers are all looking for in the novel itself: an opening that grabs. Show the reader of your query that you understand this by writing a grabber opening paragraph. Here you can use your elevator pitch, covered in lecture 3.

- The second paragraph of the query contains the title, genre, and word count of your manuscript as well as something about your background, such as writing credits and experience in the field you're writing about. If you don't have any writing credits yet, use whatever is relevant about your writing efforts.

- The third paragraph is the shortest: *Thank you for your consideration*. Then sign your name.

Writers used to send proposals on paper by mail, but the overwhelming majority of proposals are now sent by email. If an editor has invited you to submit your proposal, follow the instructions he or she gives you.

Getting an Agent

Your proposal is also what you send out when looking for an agent. When it comes to traditional publishing, the way in is almost always by way of an agent. A competent agent has industry knowledge and relationships with editors, and publishing houses prefer to work with agents rather than writers directly.

How do you get an agent? You have a famous author plead with his or her agent to take you on. If you don't have that, then you can go to a writers conference, where you can meet agents face-to-face and impress one or more of them with your pitch. Many conferences have pitch slams, which is like speed dating, with several agents face-to-face in a big room stuffed with a bunch of nervous writers like you.

You can also do research and find agencies that invite submissions. But be prepared to do some research on the backgrounds of the agents, because there is an ironclad law: Having no agent is better than having a bad agent. Agents don't have to be licensed. A good agent will have a website with a list of clients, information on his or her recent book deals, and instructions about submitting to him or her.

Make sure the agent you query is looking for the kind of book you write. A good place to start is with a guide, such as *Guide to Literary Agents*, published by Writer's Digest Books. *Writer's Digest* magazine also regularly profiles agents and what they're looking for.

Compile a list of a dozen agents who would be right for your kind of novel. Prioritize that list. Query six agents at a time according to their guidelines.

Avoid agents who charge reading fees or any other costs mandated before signing a representation agreement. Say no to any agency that has some sweetheart deal with an editing service. In other words, if an agent tells you he or she will reconsider your manuscript if you go through a particular service, which costs money, walk away. You are expected to act professionally, and you should require no less of the agents you submit to.

What is the mark of a professional?

When you're at a conference, be sure to look professional; dress sharply though unpretentiously.

Have a modicum of industry knowledge. Professionals spend time reading blogs and books about their profession.

Don't waste an agent's time. A professional has the ability to focus on what the other person will find valuable and, most important, can deliver that in a concise and persuasive manner.

Use common courtesy. If you have an appointment with an agent at a conference, be there five minutes early. When you're done, thank him or her. Follow up with a short and appropriate email. Don't call the agent unless you've been invited to. Don't get angry or petulant, even if there's a reason for it. Burning bridges is never a good career move.

Getting an agent is always a thrill for a new writer. It means someone believes enough in your work that he or she thinks he or she can sell it to a publisher and make both of you some money. In return for representation, the agent receives 15 percent of your advance and the royalties owing to you from the publishing house.

A written agency agreement protects both you and the agent and provides a professional means of termination should the relationship not work out. A standard termination clause allows either party to end the contract upon 30 days' prior written notice. The agent, of course, is still entitled to any commission from any publishing contract that's been entered into.

Usually, the publisher sends royalties to the agent, and the agent sends payment, less 15 percent, to the author. Try to negotiate a split—meaning that the publisher sends the agent the 15 percent and the rest to you. Some agents may resist that, because there is an element of trust involved. But there have also been some infamous examples of fraud hitting authors hard, so you need to be aware.

Chuck Palahniuk, author of *Fight Club*, lost almost all of his income due to an accountant who embezzled from his literary agency.

Part of that is knowing what a good agent should be and also what a good client—you—should be.

- A good agent should be a good communicator, planner, and professional coach. The agent should help you see two, three, or five years ahead and guide your choices. A good agent should know the pulse of the industry and where your books have the best chance at success. After all, your success is theirs as well.

- A good client should understand that while you have only one agent, the agent has many clients. So, don't expect to be contacted every day. Don't inundate your agent with emails, texts, and phone calls. Don't expect your agent to be your psychoanalyst. On the other hand, when you have a real concern about your book or your career or some matter arising at a publishing company, tell your agent about it. Your agent is your professional partner and should address real concerns with you.

Sometimes an agent and client will disagree over career direction, or maybe things just aren't clicking on a personal level. When it comes time to break up, just like with love, it's hard to be objective. But try to stay professional; don't burn bridges with anger and spite.

Negotiating the Publishing Contract

The details of publishing contracts are complicated. But there are three main areas to understand about them: the rights you are granting, the duties both you and the publisher owe each other, and how much you're going to get paid.

It is possible to get a publishing contract without an agent. It's been done—but usually it's not with one of the so-called big publishers: Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster. But there are midsized and small publishing companies out there, too, and sometimes authors get their material to them, such as when they meet an editor at a writers conference and successfully pitch a project.

Publishing contracts are complex, which is why you are going to need help reviewing one when it's offered to you. This is what a good agent can offer you. Or, if you do happen to land a contract without an agent, an intellectual property lawyer can review it with you, for a fee. The benefit there is that all of the royalty income comes to you.

There are also organizations for writers you can join that offer contractual help and advice. One of them is the Authors Guild, which, for a yearly membership fee, offers legal counsel and reviews contracts as well as provides a wealth of articles and reference guides on the publishing industry.

How much can you negotiate these terms? Keep in mind the concept of leverage. Most new authors have none. That doesn't mean you can't try to negotiate. Just know that in the real world, if you want to be published by a traditional company, you usually start off at the low end of the pecking order.

As far as rights, it is standard for the publisher to ask for the exclusive right to publish your work, in both print and electronic form, for the full term of the copyright—which is your life, plus 70 years after your death. Also, the copyright must be in your name. The company will take care of the paperwork, but be sure it's in the contract that you are specified as the copyright holder.

Each party has duties to uphold in a publishing contract: The publisher agrees to publish the book in both print and electronic form within a certain period of time (18 months should be the latest), and you agree to send the publisher the final manuscript by a certain date. As a new writer, you need to meet those deadlines. Your publisher has a schedule to keep, and to inspire confidence that you are an author worth keeping, meet your deadlines.

Douglas Adams, the author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, once said, "I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by."

You also have a duty known as noncompetition. Publishers deserve that. They are taking a risk with an author, putting up capital (in the form of advance and production costs) with the hope of return. A significant part of the return is from bookstores, who do not want to stock competing titles from the same author during the same season.

Thus, the standard noncompete clause was drafted to keep John Grisham from publishing *The Firm* with one publisher and *The Pelican Brief* with another and having them both come out at the same time. The books would cannibalize each other. One publisher—or, more likely, both publishers—would be harmed by this.

On the other hand, there have been some terrible noncompete clauses that prevent the author from publishing any similar "material"—which could mean anything from short stories to novellas, which many authors use to support their traditional work. Most publishers understand this now. Work with them on a strategy to support the published books. But don't go rogue and violate the noncompete clause.

A fair noncompete clause should be simple and time-limited and should specifically define the type of material covered in order to leave open the publishing of short-form work, which the publisher should encourage. This is how the writer attracts more readers, many of whom will then seek out the author's traditionally published books.

Finally, when it comes to royalties, publishers are all over the map in terms of how much the percentage is and how the amount is to be calculated. Will you be paid a percentage of the retail price of the book or on the net proceeds? There's a big difference in these numbers.

Publishers are pretty firm in what form of calculation they use, but they are not firm in the actual royalty rates. They're all over the map on that. Here's where you negotiate and try to get those percentages up a bit. If you're professional about it, you can always ask.

At the very least, the contract should include steps, meaning that you will get an increased percentage if you reach certain levels of sales. Any legitimate publisher will offer steps.

Any advance you've received will have to be earned back by the publisher before they begin sending you royalties. There are many times when a contract doesn't "earn out," but if a publisher believes in your long-term potential, you may get one more shot with them. Increasingly, though, that isn't the case.

If the traditional publishing route is your aim, do some research on publishing contracts. One helpful book is *The Writer's Legal Companion* by Brad Bunnin and Peter Beren.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *The Art of War for Writers.*

Exercise

Create a query for your novel as part of your official proposal. Use the principles of the elevator pitch, as described in lecture 3. How can you make the pitch commercial and irresistible? Show the query to some people and gauge their interest. Make any changes you need to make. Often, your new elevator pitch will suggest revision ideas for your novel.

THE SELF-PUBLISHING OPTION

Lecture 22

In 2007, when Amazon delivered the Kindle and began to allow authors to publish on that platform directly, writers who had never been published before suddenly started making serious money self-publishing their e-books. And something of a gold rush was on. And just like with the California gold rush, more and more people began to pour into self-publishing—sometimes referred to as indie (for independent) publishing. But as more content became available, things inevitably began to even out. There were fewer gold strikes. Getting rich quickly was not so common anymore. But there were and are thousands of writers who manage to make good money through self-publishing.

Pros and Cons of Self-Publishing

On the con side for self-publishing authors, everything is on your shoulders. All the things a big publisher does to produce your books, you now have to do, and do well. Plus, getting your books widely into bookstores and big-box stores like Costco and Walmart is nearly impossible. That's the distribution advantage—for printed books—that traditional publishers give you.

On the pro side, a much greater royalty share comes to you, and it comes to you monthly, as opposed to every six months with a traditional publisher. Keep in mind, too, that if you self-publish, you're not paying 15 percent of your income to an agent.

Another benefit is that your book comes out when you think it's ready, not a year or 18 months after you turn it in.

Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) platform set the e-book royalty rate at 70 percent of the retail price. That's a huge difference from the typical 25 percent royalty paid by traditional publishers on the e-book editions.

And you can't get fired. You can't have your contract canceled. In the old days, a number of new authors were given million-dollar advances, but when their books didn't sell as anticipated, they were dropped by the company and couldn't get another deal somewhere else. Dismal sales numbers followed them around like a bad smell. But self-publishers get to slap on aftershave or perfume and keep publishing.

The American humorist S. J. Perelman once said, "The dubious privilege of a freelance writer is he's given the freedom to starve anywhere."

As a self-published writer, you always have another chance. Plus, you keep the rights to your books, as does your estate after you've typed your final *THE END*. Traditional publishers may or may not return your rights.

Think like a Publisher

There are five unbreakable laws you need to follow if you want self-publishing success.

The first is this: You must think like a traditional publisher.

Publishers are in the business of making money off of books and authors. They want to know that an author they sign up and take a risk on is going to pay off over time. They want professionals who are dedicated to their craft and are productive.

Are you that kind of writer? If not, why would you hire yourself?

A publisher is constantly acquiring new books to produce and sell. How do they decide? They have meetings. These meetings are made up of a pub board—representatives from editorial and sales, along with an executive or two. At this meeting, the editors present projects they believe the house should buy and bring to market.

The editors have to convince the salespeople that the book is commercial enough to make significant money for the publisher, and therefore the author is one who deserves their investment.

While editors are always trying to find "a fresh voice," the sales team is always trying to find a sure thing.

So, in thinking like a publisher, put your projects through an analysis like a pub board would. Who is going to buy your book? Is there an audience for your genre? How popular is the genre? Who are some other authors doing well in this area? What are they doing in terms of marketing? What can you learn from them?

One advantage of e-books is that your back matter—what you see in the back of a book, such as an author's note and acknowledgments—can have hyperlinks. Many authors include links to their other books, their website, or the site where readers can opt in to an author newsletter.

The best way to research this is to get an e-book from authors you admire and who are doing well and see what they do in the back matter of their books. You can do the same.

Are you an author who can keep producing books? In the traditional publishing world, a best-selling author used to be held to a minimum of one book a year. These days, some publishers are pushing their A-list writers to do two books a year, supplemented by a short story or two for marketing purposes.

Write like a Pro

The second unbreakable law is this: You must write the best books you can every time.

When you self-publish, there is a temptation to put a book out there too quickly—to not give it adequate preparation. There's a point for every writer where writing too quickly impedes quality and writing too slowly impedes production. You need to find the right spot for you, a spot that's not complacent and not stressed out.

That's why a quota, introduced in lecture 1, is so important. Figure out how many words you can comfortably write in a standard week and increase that total by 10 percent. You need some slight pressure to become a prolific author, and 10 percent more isn't that much pressure.

Also, use the nifty 350 principle as your standard morning practice. That is, before you do anything else (except maybe make coffee), tap out 350 words of your daily goal. It's amazing how much easier the writing day gets after that. If you're pressed for time in the morning, aim for 250 words. Do not edit, spell-check, correct, or otherwise stop your flow until the 250 is done. Once you get to 250, you're probably going to want to keep going—so go!

You can also help your writing brain by stopping your writing in the middle of a scene. This lets your subconscious cook during the night, and when you sit down to write, you'll be back in the flow immediately.

Quality Control

The third unbreakable law of self-publishing success is this: Set up a system of quality controls.

Remember, you are in business, and you need a checklist for the essential quality factors for your book production. For self-publishers, this is the list.

1. **YOUR WRITING.** This is always job number one.

2. **EDITING.** You need your work edited and proofread, as emphasized in lecture 19.

3. **COVER DESIGN.** This is crucially important. Browsers and potential buyers make instantaneous decisions all the time based on cover design. If it's not like the genre or if it looks amateurish, it's a turnoff. Many, many are the tales of self-publishing authors trying to design their own covers, with disastrous consequences. Invest in a good cover designer.

Search the internet for freelance book cover designers. Go to his or her website and check out his or her portfolio and client list. Joanna Penn, a well-known indie writer and blogger, lists cover designer names at www.thecreativepenn.com/bookcoverdesign.

A good cover can run you 200 to 500 dollars, or more if it is artistically intense. For 299 dollars, a site called 99designs.com will generate several covers from various designers for you to choose from.

4. **MARKETING COPY.** This is what describes your book online. The elevator pitch, covered in lecture 3, works for this purpose. You can tweak it and play with it; just be sure to get feedback from a few people each time and have it proofread.

5. **FORMATTING.** You can learn how to format an e-book yourself, or you can find a freelance formatter to do the job, both for your e-book and print versions. For print, you want a pdf of your book, which is what you will use for print on demand—how most self-publishers have their print books done.

Scrivener has an output option for creating e-book versions that you can upload to online stores.

Kindle Direct Publishing offers print-on-demand services.

The fourth unbreakable law for self-publishing success is to develop and work a marketing plan. This is so important that the next lecture is all about this topic.

The fifth unbreakable law for self-publishing success is simply this: You must repeat the process over and over for the rest of your life. Self-publishing is a volume business. The more good work you put out there, the better you are going to do. And why would you ever quit? You're a writer. It's what you do. Don't stop.

The Business of Self-Publishing

There is simply no way to predict what kind of money you can expect to make in the self-publishing business. There are too many variables. You will have a side income of some amount. You might build to a very good income, or even to a wildly spectacular income. This is just like with any other business, only your overhead costs are next to zero—which means, again, you never have to stop.

Just be aware that it takes most professional authors several years and several books to get to a place where they might consider dropping the day job. Also know that there are thousands of writers who keep the day job and enjoy the income from self-publishing.

When it comes to distributing your work, there are two basic ways to go: You can set up accounts with the online booksellers yourself, or you can go through an aggregator—a service that will distribute your e-books for you, for a fee or a percentage of the income. One of oldest companies is Smashwords.

These days, it's very easy to set up your accounts directly. And when you've done it yourself, you have more flexibility with pricing and promotion. To publish on Kindle, for example, go to KDP.Amazon.com, and you will be walked through the setup process. For each of the steps you're asked to take, there are plenty of helpful articles and YouTube videos online. There's a learning curve, but once you go through this process a few times, it gets easier.

Kindle Direct Publishing Select allows authors who list their books exclusively with them to list a book for free for five days every quarter. You can use those promotional days all at once or spread them around. This is when you get the word out through social media to get readers to take a no-risk chance on your book.

One of the greatest advantages of self-publishing is that authors have been able to set lower price points for their e-books than the big publishers, making it possible to compete with them for sales. The current wisdom is that a price point ending in 99 is always best. Thus, $2.99, $3.99, and $4.99 are the most popular prices for book-length fiction. There's also a strategy involving offering your books for free on occasion.

The Successful Authorpreneur

If you're going to self-publish, this means you are an entrepreneur, or, as some are calling it, an authorpreneur. As such, you need to know some basic business principles. Many writers get nervous about thinking in a structured way about business, but anyone can learn the basics of authorpreneurship and still keep writing the focus—which is what is most important for long-term success.

The first thing to learn is the unique selling proposition (USP). A new business has to know what it is offering customers that they can't get anywhere else. The selling proposition needs to be unique in order to differentiate it in the marketplace.

As a writer, can you define what readers will get from you that only you can give them? And don't say it's your voice or your expertise. Define it as specifically as you can. Be bold about it. Talk yourself up.

This is a concept publishers call branding. A writer who delivers a certain kind of story to an audience who likes that kind of story begins to develop a brand.

Under the traditional system, this is crucial, because bookstores know that their customers search by brand. Thriller authors get shelved with the thrillers. But if the same author writes a tear-jerking love story, where does that go? The bookstore is confused, and likely so are the fans of the writer.

The way around this used to be by pen name. But now, with self-publishing, it's possible to write in more than one genre. That's because physical bookstores are not your main venue. Online, all your books are listed. But you need to distinguish your different genres by cover design and description so that readers know exactly what they're getting.

The wildly popular John Grisham was not allowed by his publisher to write a literary novel until he was so well known that it wouldn't hurt his thriller brand, which he returned to after the literary novel.

Write a USP for every genre of writing you are pursuing. Show them to other people. Tweak them until they start to excite you. Remember, a publishing house will only publish books they are excited about—and the same goes for you.

Next, every authorpreneur needs to understand the concept of return on investment (ROI). This applies both to finances and energy. As a small business, with ebbs and flows in how you are paid, you have to know how to manage your money. In the short term, know what fees are reasonable for the services you need, such as cover design and editing; you need to do research for this and know how to ask for things like samples of work from freelancers. In the long term, keep an eye on your finances and remember to set aside some of your income for taxes.

Authorpreneurs are also action-oriented. All the planning in the world doesn't mean anything unless it is acted upon. You must take some action daily, even if it's just a little thing. You'll begin to feel the rush of forward momentum when you do that.

Once a year, you should review all of your goals and plans. Go on a retreat, even it's just in your living room. Spend the day thinking about your writing business. Review your USPs. How do you see yourself spending the next year? What adjustments do you need to make to your quality controls?

Consider also going to a good writers conference once a year. Not only are there national conferences, such as those put on by Writer's Digest, but there are also local conferences. A quick internet search will tell you what's available near you.

Suggested Reading

Penn, *Successful Self-Publishing.*

Exercise

Before you decide to self-publish, go through the same exercise as you would when submitting to an agent or a publishing house. Do a proposal with a query, a synopsis, and sample chapters. Show this proposal to two or three trusted friends and get their feedback. Determine not to self-publish anything unless you get enthusiastic responses from at least two beta readers.

MARKETING YOUR WORK

Lecture 23

In the old days of publishing—stretching from 1450 and the Gutenberg press to 2007 and the Amazon Kindle—the publisher would do the lion's share of the marketing of a book. But now, the publisher expects the author to do most of the work. Of course, if you self-publish, you must do all of the marketing yourself, which can feel overwhelming. But you don't have to get sucked into the marketing vortex in order to sell books. The most important marketing tool you will ever wield is the one you already love. It's a tool you can sharpen every day without taking a single thing away from your writing—because it is your writing. It's your books, your stories, the way you connect with readers. This is the most important key to selling your work now and in the future.

> Because the most important marketing tool is the quality of your books, becoming the best writer you can be is job number one. This is where the majority of your time should be spent.

Finding New Customers

There are only two ways to grow a business: find new customers or sell more products to your existing customers. Book marketing is no different. You need to find ways to get new readers to sample your books, and then you need a way to keep in touch with your happy readers so you can inform them about your new works or deals on your backlist.

First, how can you attract potential readers, especially in these days of so much content and so many things that compete for our attention?

Book browsers online are usually attracted to a book cover. Then, they'll look at the book description. If that intrigues them, they may look at your author bio, but they will most likely sample the first few pages. In a store, they would open the book; on Amazon, there is a "look inside" feature that gives them the first several pages of the novel.

The importance of your book cover was covered in the previous lecture. On the cover is your title, and that title needs to be consistent with the genre and have just the right tone for the book. The only advice here is that you test several titles with friends. If you publish traditionally, there's a chance your publisher will change the title, so keep that in mind.

A survey commissioned by digital publisher Smashwords that asked how e-book buyers found the titles they eventually purchased found that 59 percent of responses related to some form of word of mouth.

Also know that titles are not subject to copyright. You can use a title someone has used before, unless that title has become so associated with an author or brand that it could confuse readers—such as *The Da Vinci Code*.

If you're traditionally published, your publisher will take care of the book description—or, as it used to be called, the cover copy or dust jacket copy. But you should be proactive and suggest your own description.

Obviously, you'll need to write your own book description if you self-publish. The good news is you've already done the job by way of the elevator pitch discussed in lecture 3. That's your book description. Now add a tagline—a short, pithy encapsulation of the feel of the story, like what you see on movie posters. The tagline is used at the top of your description; set it off by rendering the text in bold.

With regard to your author bio, the simple rule is to keep it consistent with your brand. If you're a thriller writer, there's no need to go on and on about your flower garden. In genres like romance and women's fiction, a more personal and relational bio is appropriate.

Write several author bios of different lengths and show them to people. Get feedback. Put your ego on hold. This is about attracting readers; make them the focus of your bio. Update your bio from time to time. Give it a touch-up with any new and relevant information, such as being nominated for, or winning, an award.

You need a home base for your marketing, and that starts with a website. You want to try to claim the domain for your name, such as jamesscottbell.com. If that's not available, there are other ways to go about this, such as using .net or adding *books* to the end, as in jacksmithbooks.com.

There are many ways to go about website development, from doing it yourself to hiring a designer. And there are companies in between that offer templates. Keep it simple. Fancy animation and lots of bells and whistles are not as important as an easy-to-navigate site.

You should also set up your free author page on Amazon. It's like a mini-website on the world's biggest online bookstore, and it's very easy to do. Go to authorcentral.amazon.com to find out how.

Marketing through Social Media

Many authors are confused about social media marketing. Writers feel pressure from their publishers to tweet this and Facebook that and blog the other thing—all of which takes time away from what they want to do most, which is write fiction.

This is a real concern, because too much stress and attention put on self-promotion and marketing can actually have an adverse effect on your writing, and even your personal life. On the other hand, an author does need to get in the game in some way. So, what's the balance?

First, understand that social media is not an effective way to sell books. In the early days of Twitter, there were authors who thought you could just tweet, retweet, and tweet some more with a variation of *buy my book now* messages. It just turned people off.

Social media is social—it's about relating to people in a real way. It's about not wasting their time and making them glad they follow you. That's how you build trust, so that when you do have a book come out, you can tell people about it without being irritating.

Think very hard about the brand you're trying to build. Remember that everything you put on social media is probably there forever.

Specialize. Don't try to be active on every possible platform. You'll end up diluting your effectiveness in each. Instead, choose one (or two) and get really good at it (or them).

Use the 90/10 rule. Spend 90 percent of your social media time being relational. Interact with people. Provide good content. Link to other sites and articles of value. Be personable. Make people glad they have you on their list of people to read. Use only 10 percent of the time to sell something. And even when you do, don't make it a generic *buy my stuff* message. Instead, always provide some sort of reason people should buy your book. Maybe it's the launch, which you can announce winsomely and with a little panache, or maybe you're doing a giveaway promotion. Or you can provide some proof of value, such as a portion of a review.

Another social media strategy is to get reviews on well-trafficked book review sites. To do that, first identify the best blogs for possible reviews of your books. A little research online will get you a list of good blogs. Go to them and read through several posts, learning what the blogs feel like. Approach these blogs with a personal email to the administrator. Pitch your book using the elevator pitch method.

You can also volunteer to be an interviewee for a popular blog that covers some of the subject matter in your book. Again, do a little research and think outside the box. At the very least, you could find blogs dedicated to the craft of writing and offer to be a guest blogger, talking about your process or some aspect of the writing craft that you were especially aware of.

Other forms of social media include podcasting, which is like blogging, only it involves more time-intensive preparation and production; and YouTube channels, which are easy to do, but you have to consider how comfortable you are in front of a camera and what you can offer that's worth watching. The return on these is also limited, but it's there for you to consider.

There's one social media platform that used to be hot but is not giving as much return these days, and that's blogging. Unless you have a specific subject matter you always cover in your books, blogging has a high degree of investment in time and very little in return. There are so many blogs now that it's hard to get a foothold in cyberspace, especially as more and more people turn to other outlets, such as Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. The challenge with blogging is that you have to provide constant and substantial content. This requires a lot of writing time, which could impede your creative book-writing efforts.

An alternative to solo blogging is to get together with a group of like-minded writers—perhaps those you meet at a writers conference—and start a group blog. This removes the burden of having to do everything on your own.

Instead of blogging, you can become a frequent and welcome contributor in the comments section of a popular blog or two. This is not a place for you to sell your books but to offer real interaction with the blogger and other commenters. If you do that, you earn trust. And then, when your book comes out, you can politely ask the blog for a possible interview or guest blog spot.

HOW TO SPEND YOUR MARKETING BUDGET

Advertising is not usually going to offer a huge return on your investment. If you break even, that's a bonus. What you want are new fans who will read your work and then want to read your other books and who will also sign up for your email list. Here are some good marketing investments:

Blog tours. You pay an outfit to put your content together with a network of blogs. Do your due diligence in researching these companies before you spend any money, and don't expect a huge number of sales. This is an incremental tool at best, but one you may want to try when you're starting out.

E-book deal promotion sites. Better (and therefore more expensive) than blog tours, such sites have a subscriber base, and they send out daily emails to their subscribers based on their reading interests. You pay a fee, and in return you get a number of new readers to give your book a try. Such sites include BookBub, Ereader News Today, The Fussy Librarian, and BookGorilla.

Amazon Advertising. This allows you to run ads on Amazon for your books. It offers cost-per-click ads, meaning you only pay when someone clicks on your ad. That click takes someone to your book sales page, where you hope for a sale. You have to get the hang of it and learn how to tweak and test ads.

Selling to Existing Customers

This brings us to the second way to grow a business: sell more to satisfied customers. This way offers by far the best return on investment. Once you have readers who have become fans, you nurture them with communication and more books.

This is where the email list comes in. All authors should have in place a way for happy readers to sign up to receive occasional updates on what the author is doing. You should have a sign-up form on your website and a link in the back matter of your books. Some authors offer a free book or story in return for signing up. You can easily find online articles on how to do this.

One company that offers a landing page for a free book giveaway in return for an email address is BookFunnel.

Sites that specialize in handling your email list include MailChimp, VerticalResponse, and Constant Contact.

Some authors send newsletters with graphics and pictures, while others send simple text-only emails. Whatever you decide, make your updates short, easy to read, and even a little fun. You should mail out a newsletter once a month maximum (or your readers may get annoyed with you) and once a quarter minimum (or they may forget you).

Using Short-Form Fiction as a Marketing Tool

You can support and enhance the attention given to your full-length books by putting out short-form fiction—anything shorter than a novel. The minimum word count for a novel varies, depending on whom you ask, but is usually tagged at 50,000 words.

A novella is usually between 20,000 and just under 50,000 words. These days, an e-novella can be sold with virtually no cost involved. That's why all the major publishers are pushing their big A-list writers to churn out a novella or short story in between their novels. It's a way to sell both a new book and the backlist. A novella works best when it has one main character and one main plot.

Not quite so well known as the novella is the novelette, between 70,000 and 20,000 words. It allows for a little more breathing space than a short story without requiring the fuller complexity of a novel. A novelette, like its beefier cousin the novella, is best when it's about one main character and story. Novelettes are perhaps best known in the sci-fi world.

The short story, between 1,000 and 7,000 words, is an enduring and ever-popular fiction form. It can pack an emotional punch as powerful as a novel.

Flash fiction is under 1,000 words and can be fun to write. There are many places online to publish free flash fiction, including your own website.

Your strategy is this: Write a great short work of fiction. Make it available for free or for 99 cents. Put links to your full-length books and your website at the back.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *Marketing for Writers Who Hate Marketing.*
Penn, *How to Market a Book.*

Exercise

If you haven't done so yet, create a website for your writing. Spend a few weeks looking at well-known authors' websites, noting what design elements you like. Reserve your domain name with a company like GoDaddy or Wix. Try for yourname.com or yournamebooks.com. Decide if you want to hire a designer or do it yourself. Wix, for example, offers free templates. If you already have a website, review it every year for possible design updates. Set yourself up with an email service like MailChimp, Constant Contact, or VerticalResponse and put a form on your website for sign-ups, as well as in the back of all your books.

CONQUERING THE MENTAL GAME OF WRITING

Lecture 24

The writing gig is rife with opportunities for disappointment. We construct hopes for ourselves and our work knowing that there are plenty of rocks and boulders ahead in the rushing waters of the marketplace. Mental habits are crucially important to success in any field, and how you think as a writer will affect your production every bit as much as your study of the craft.

Dealing with Writer's Block

Probably the most notorious of the challenges every writer faces is the dreaded writer's block—a mental block where you feel absolutely stuck.

In *Fire Up Your Writing Brain*, author Susan Reynolds suggests five reasons a writer experiences block:

1. you've lost your way
2. your passion has waned
3. your expectations are too high
4. you are burned out
5. you're too distracted

Another reason a writer experiences block is fear—fear of failure and fear of finishing. This happens when you're getting to the end of your novel or are working on a subsequent draft and you find ways to keep from writing because you're afraid that once you finish the thing, it won't be any good. Fear comes in many forms but is always a drag on your writing.

The first strategy is simply to fight it—by writing. Write anything: a journal entry, a poem, a jingle for a commercial, a letter to yourself, or even a letter to your main character. Do anything just to feel the act of writing again.

If you've committed to a quota, writer's block is less likely to occur. But if it does, and you've done some writing and the block still persists, take a day or two off. If you have a day job, do your job and come home and watch a movie or read a book; if you have a family to take care of, put all your attention there. Then, take out a novel that you really love—one you've already read. Open to a random page and start reading. The idea is that you'll get excited about writing again when you get caught up in a few pages of a novel you enjoy.

Sometimes you're in the middle of a book and it just feels like a drag. It may be that you simply don't know the best path for your book. If this is the case, you can use the idea of signpost scenes to get you to the next spot.

But sometimes you're feeling like you've hit a wall. Professional writers have echoed that they seem to hit a wall around the 30,000-word mark. At this point, they've done their first act and are getting into the second act, and they look ahead and see that there is a lot of book left to be written. If this happens to you, instead of writing the next scene, jump ahead to a scene you know you're going to write and you're excited about and write that scene. Then, you can work backward to get there.

When you write, try to forget everything else but getting into the emotion of the scene. If you're not writing with emotion, there won't be any blood pumping in the reader.

In his book *Confessions of a Story Writer*, Paul Gallico said,

> It is only when you open your veins and bleed onto the page a little that you establish contact with your reader. If you do not believe in the characters or the story you are doing at that moment with all your mind, strength, and will, if you don't feel joy and excitement while writing it, then you're wasting good white paper, even if it sells, because there are other ways in which a writer can bring in the rent money besides writing bad or phony stories.

Exercise

Imagine you're the characters in the scene you're working on and pump up their emotional level. Feel what they're feeling. Soon enough, you'll be ready to write.

Beating the Envy Trap

In addition to writer's block, there are other challenges that will try to keep you from writing. One of the most pernicious challenges is comparing yourself to other writers.

It's almost automatic that writers look at who is on the rungs above them and, in doing so, stay constantly anxious about their own position. Noxious thoughts start popping into the mind, robbing them of writing energy.

The answer to envy and comparison is simply this: Learn to be grateful for what you have.

Gratitude is the great secret to happiness. Are you unpublished? Be grateful you have the ability to learn the craft. Be grateful for new opportunities in the digital world.

Is your critique group getting you down? Be grateful for the people in your life who love you. Dogs and cats count, too.

If you're feeling the grip of envy or comparison, sit down and write it out. Write a journal entry talking to yourself about it. Get it out of your system. Physical exercise is good, too.

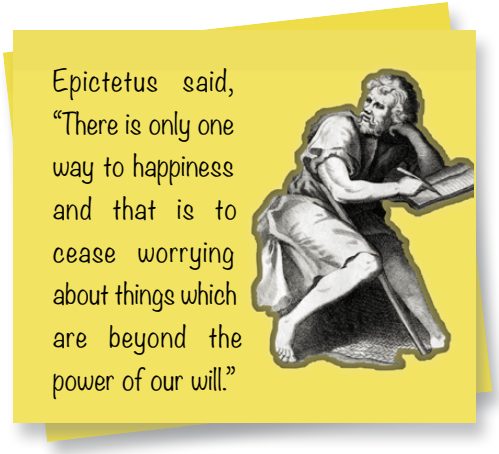
Just be thankful. Be thankful that you're a writer. Be thankful because you get to play. You get to make stuff up. You get to spin yarns that have the potential to move people.

The Need for Validation

For a writer, validation can come in many forms:

- ✍ an agent saying yes to representing you
- ✍ a publishing house acquiring your manuscript
- ✍ being honored with an award from a recognized organization
- ✍ being included in conversations with successful writers who acknowledge you and give you literal or virtual pats on the back
- ✍ seeing your name on the cover of a printed book the first time as you open the box sent by your publisher
- ✍ spotting your book on the shelf at a bookstore

Validation feels good. But that's where a writer can get trapped—in feelings. If you don't watch out, your desire for outside approval can become a requirement for your inner well-being. Don't let outside forces control you.



You can't control the will of agents, editors, critics, readers, awards committees, or the IRS—so don't worry about them. Instead, focus on your daily work. Get into your scene. Think about ways to make it better. That's what you can control.

And don't let the quest for validation take away from hardheaded assessment of your career. If you desire the validation of a traditional book contract, concentrate on your writing—on becoming the kind of writer that a publishing company wants to publish.

Just don't let yourself be chained to the need for approval. You don't need approval. What you need is confidence in yourself and a good work ethic.

Coping with Rejection

The other side of validation is rejection. It can come in various forms, such as being turned down by an agent or publisher or getting a bad review on Amazon. The first thing you need to realize is that this happens to every writer at one time or another, and usually many times. Even the best writers of all time had to endure rejections and rotten reviews. So, when you get a rejection or bad review, remember you're in very good company.

Then remind yourself constantly that you are a writer, because you write. There are many more people who do not write, yet feel perfectly at ease sniping at those who do. When such a snipe comes your way, know that you are the one putting yourself on the line, opening a vein, walking the tightrope, singing a solo under hot lights. You are part of a courageous bunch who are all about doing.

Develop rhino skin and keep writing.

> Thomas Bailey Aldrich, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1892, said of Emily Dickinson, "An eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar. Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood."

Managing Expectations

Also learn to keep expectations in check.

While it's good to set goals, make plans, and take action, don't let expectations build up too much in your mind. Based on a study he conducted, Dr. Robb Rutledge of University College London commented, "Lower expectations make it more likely that an outcome will exceed those expectations and have a positive impact on happiness."

If you get nominated for an award, don't keep picturing your acceptance speech. Don't dust the mantel twice a day. When you get to the banquet, sit at the table and be a good conversationalist. Try to enjoy the rubber chicken. Then, if your name is called, it's a bonus. If it's not, you won't want to crawl under the table with a bottle of wine.

Setting the Mood

Another thing writers seem to be heir to is bad moods. Artists tend to see things more deeply and feel things more intensely.

Be proactive with moods. Try a little noise. Some writers like absolute quiet when they write; others like to play music in the background. Still others like to write in public places, such as coffeehouses and delis. What level is right for you?

Research into creativity has shown that a moderate level of sound helps creative people in their work. What appears to happen is that more parts of the brain are pinged when there's a bit of background noise going on than when there is total silence. You are working consciously on one thing, with particular focus, while other parts of your brain below the conscious level are turning gears and yanking pulleys. And every now and then, the foreman sends up an idea your consciousness grabs hold of.

This is why some writers often like to write in coffeehouses. This type of noise seems to be quite effective for the writer. The sound of rain is good for the stressed-out writer. It has a calming effect that removes obstacles in your mind, such as worry or anger. Try other kinds of noise, such as wind or ocean sounds or the sound of trains on a track. These and more are available at Defonic.com.

Coffitivity.com gives you, right on your computer or phone, the noise of a coffeehouse or lunch place.

But the most powerful form of sound is music. Music can help you feel the emotions you are writing about in a scene. Try using movie soundtracks that don't have lyrics to distract you. You can also create playlists for various moods: suspenseful, heartfelt, happy, distressed. Depending on what your point-of-view character feels and the tone you desire, start that playlist and write.

Finding Inspiration

Some writers think they should only write when they're inspired. But a professional writer writes even if he or she doesn't feel like it. And while you may not always feel inspired over your daily pages, you can learn to be inspired about being a writer.

> Writer Peter De Vries once said, "I only write when I'm inspired, and I see to it that I'm inspired at nine o'clock every morning."

Try collecting quotes on the writing life that resonate with you. Looking at these quotes can pull you out of the writing doldrums and keep you fired up about your calling.

You can also put visuals in your writing space, such as a coffee mug that has the word *writer* on it or photos of authors you admire. Having a visual reminder is like having a framed picture of someone you love on your desk. And that aspect of love—love of what you do, love of writing—is crucially important for this business of fiction. Love the craft and love your readers, and give them stories that will help them escape into a dream.

> "Remember, almost no writers had it easy when starting out. If they did, everyone would be a bestselling author. The ones who make it are the stubborn, persistent people who develop a thick skin, defy the rejection, and keep the material out there, trolling." — Barnaby Conrad

Suggested Reading

Bell, *The Mental Game of Writing.*
Palumbo, *Writing from the Inside Out.*

Exercise

Create an inspirational visual for your office or regular workspace—such as a coffee mug with *writer* on it or the photo of a writer whose career you admire. Whenever you get ready to write, look at that visual. Then, begin a collection of inspirational writing quotes (you can search for them on the internet) that you can turn to when you're not writing. Remember, with all the ebbs and flows of the writing life, the one thing you can always do is produce the words. Carpe typem!

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Gone with the Wind

Gran Torino

The Hunger Games

Lethal Weapon

The Maltese Falcon

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Now, Voyager

Shrek

To Kill a Mockingbird

Toy Story

Wall Street

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