Creative Writing

Short story fiction writing

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Creative Writing

Introduction

Words are a very powerful tool and one of the major elements that make us human. They can inspire us, elate us, or move us to tears. Words can start or end wars, draw people together or tear them apart. We carry them with us at all times, use them endlessly, yet so many people are afraid to commit them to paper.

The goal of this **Creative Writing (CRW)** class is to show you how words can be used to strengthen relationships, build confidence and imagination, and communicate more effectively. We will focus on fiction writing, but the technique, form, and creative expression learned here can improve mental function and build confidence and the ability to share our experiences and ourselves more fully with those closest to us.

A R.E.E.F.S. course

REEFS stands for "Realizing Educational Emotional and Financial Smarts." REEFS offers programs that are written by inmates and taught by inmates. Essentially, REEFS is all about inmates helping each other.

Chapter 1 Beginnings

"Violence is the language of the inarticulate. When people feel they cannot be understood, they resort to violence."
-Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

What is Creative Writing?

To begin with, storytelling and writing is an art. As such, it means different things to different people. Art is a subjective experience. Art can take many different forms, but it always evokes some response, raises some emotion, inspires, interests, or draws the consumer into the artist's mind and heart. How it does this and what response it raises, is unique to every person. A story can mean something different to the reader and the writer, but it should always mean *something.*

Art is not science. This makes it unique among most REEFS courses in that there is no one way to write. There are, however, guidelines that are particularly useful to beginning writers. We must, of course, operate within the framework of English grammar. To that end, this class will present one way to write a story. We will talk about some common pitfalls for writers who are just starting out. We will also discuss the expectations of modern readers as well as efficient ways to write and edit. It is our hope that you can take the tools presented in this class and make them your own. Customize them, and find a way to write your story.

Class Rules and Expectations

REEFS classes exist thanks to the generosity and hard work of many people, from outside volunteers to facilitators to donors to institutional staff. Please respect their efforts and this privilege by honoring the following rules:

- Be here – attendance is mandatory.
- Respect each other.
- Please do not leave the classroom until dismissed as a group.
- Listen – to the facilitator and each other (we are all here to learn).
- Please pay attention, ask questions, and stay awake.
- Paper and pencils are provided when possible, but supplies are limited. Our volunteers and donors do their best, but you may need to bring your own.

In addition, there are some rules specific to this class. It should come as no surprise that there will be a lot of writing in this course. We will have several in-class writing assignments as well as five longer story assignments. If time allows, we will have one or two "writing workshop" days when you will have time to write or review any past topics. The majority of the projects will need to be completed on your own time, though. Be aware that, by the time we finish, you may have written from… 5 to 40 pages worth of stories between all the assignments. If this is not something you can commit to, please sign out and allow someone else the chance to participate.

For all written assignments, the following rules apply:

- No plagiarizing or copyright infringement.
- No pornography.
- No gratuitous violence and/or swearing.
- Know that staff can review your stories.
- Write legibly.
- Have fun!

Assignments will be graded according to the following rubric:

Fiction Wrtiters Workshop - Grading Rubric								
Total Grade:								
Storytelling Elements	**Your Score**	**Max Score**	**Engaging Elements**	**Your Score**	**Max Score**	**Library Elements**	**Your Score**	**Max Score**
Character Introduction		5	Beliveability		5	Setting		5
Crisis		5	Original		5	Dialogue		5
Provoking Event		5	Creativity		5	Character Development		5
Provoking Event Placement		5	Interesting		5	Narration/Dialogue Arrangement		5
Conflict		5	Logically Progressive		5	Remain in Point of View		5
Complication		5	Insight into Human Condition		5	Message/Theme		5
Climax		5	Total			Total		
Resolution		5	Multiplier	**1.00**		Multiplier	**0.67**	
Character Change		5	Section Grade			Section Grade		
Total			**Comments:**					
Multiplier	**0.731**							
Section Grade								
Technical Elements	**Your Score**	**Max Score**						
Followed Directions		5						
Grammar		5						
Brevity/Redundancy		5						
Overall Readability		5						
Total								
Multiplier	**0.85**							
Section Grade								
5= Excellent 4=Good 3=Average 2=Needs Improvement 1=Poor 0=Lacking								

5=Excellent (This point is presented clearly, flawlessly, and could not be improved upon.)
4=Good (This point is presented clearly, sufficiently, and shows an above average understanding of the element.)
3=Average (This point is presented yet may lack clarity or lis unfinished while still demonstrating a basic understanding of the element.)
2=Needs Improvement (This point is presented vaguely and shows a loose understanding of the element.)
1=Poor (This point is presented but shows an undeveloped understanding of the element.)
0=Lacking (This point is not presented.)

As we discussed earlier, writing is an art. The numeric grade you receive is to show you areas that you should focus on improving. What is required to pass the class and receive a certificate is a sincere effort. The only way to fail to succeed is not to try.

That said, the student with the highest average score at the end of the class will receive a special "Distinguished Writer Award!"

What are we not here to do?

There are many things that we hope you will take away from this class, but there are a couple of things that we are specifically not here to focus on. First and foremost, we are not here to get anyone published. We will discuss some publishing options for when you are out of prison as a brief topic, but there are so many restrictions on us as inmates in this regard that it cannot be the focus of our discussions. For those who are serious about becoming published authors, we hope that you will take what you learn here and use your time in prison to hone your craft. Sharpen your skills here so that you can have the best chance of being published after your release.

We are taking a class in a unique environment here every time we set foot in the Education building. You could be sitting next to a man with a Master's Degree on one side of you and a man with a sixth grade education on the other. Grammar and vocabulary are extremely important in writing, and we will spend some time reviewing those topics. Our focus in this class, however, is on structure and the creative process. There is a section on the grading rubric for grammar, but it is weighted least. Regardless of your educational background, we encourage you to strive always to improve.

What are we here to do?

We are, unfortunately, limited in time and resources for such a broad subject as "Creative Writing." As a result, we will necessarily narrow our focus to the writing of fiction short stories. This is hardly all that can be done by using the tools of creative writing. We will talk briefly about other types of writing that can be improved using creativity, but most of the class assignments will center around fiction writing.

The human imagination is an incredible gift. It is our ability to imagine that allows us to invent, to innovate, to explore, and to dare to try new things. It is our ability to imagine that allows us to picture a better future and gives us hope. It is our ability to imagine that allows us to see new options and break old patterns. This gift is our birthright; each of us is born with it. How many of us played games as children or drew pictures, wore costumes on Halloween, or just stared up at the sky and imagined we were in a different, perhaps better, place?

Sadly, this gift can be, and often is, lost over time. We go to school where we're taught to conform to strict mathematical standards. We're taught that "art-type" pursuits are hobbies or a waste of time. Maybe we're hurt to the point where all our dreams are painful ones. Or, we simply grow up and decide that imagining is nothing but daydreaming and not serious enough for an adult.

Everytime this happens, we lose something fundamentally human inside ourselves. This ability to imagine, to tell stories (to ourselves and to each other), is a part of what makes us, US. We've been doing it since before recorded history. In some cultures, the Storyteller is considered a holy person.

The loss of this thing is the loss of hope. It is the death of dreams.

The good news is that we can regain this gift. All it takes is effort. Imagination is like a muscle. If you use it, it strengthens, if you don't, it weakens. One thing we are here to do is exercise our imaginations.

It is also true that we are judged by the way we communicate. The words we use and how we use them forms a large part of others' opinions of us. The great speakers in history (Lincoln, Churchill, Martin Luther King, Jr.) all share a facility with language that enabled them to reach across groups, influence entire populations, and change the world. Words have that much power. One of the goals of this class is to improve our communication skills. Speaking and writing are connected in a fundamental way, and improving one can improve the other. We may never change the world at large with our words, but by improving our ability to be heard and understood, we can begin to change *our* world.

Writing stories also gives us a chance to pour out our souls. It is a unique opportunity to express ourselves, to vent all those feelings of hurt, disappointment, despair, or loss that we keep bottled up inside. We can share these things in an intimate way through fiction that also allows us to hold onto our privacy.

Finally, in this class we are here to build patience, perseverance, mental endurance, and empathy. The human brain is an amazing thing and maintains an ability to build new pathways for our entire lives.

The old saying that a person is too old to change their ways really is only true for people who don't try to change.

Characteristics of a successful writer:

It's easy to say that the difference between a writer and an author is that one of them gets paid. That's true, but the distinction is greater than that. A writer writes. He does it because he enjoys it. He may never get published, but he still writes for himself and for those around him. The difference between the two is like the difference between an artist and someone who can draw; the ability to write can be learned. To be a successful writer, however, does require certain characteristics.

- Enthusiasm to learn and master the elements of writing
- Courage to overcome set-backs, opposition, and interruption
- Patience to accept criticism
- Humility to receive praise
- Strength to ignore self-deprecation
- Determination to change and improve
- Discipline to see it through to the end
- A sense of humor

Rule #1: Write, write, write.

To put it another way, don't give up. The good news here is that all of these characteristics can be learned (save, perhaps for a sense of humor). With hard work, you will get better, and no matter how good of a writer you are, there is always more to strive for.

Where do I begin?

"Don't try to figure out what other people want from you; figure out what you have to say. It's the one and only thing you have to offer." -Barbara Kingsolver

It may sound simplistic, but the place to start with all your writing is with yourself. Of all the things we bring to the table, the most useful is our lives. Every one of us, regardless of our background, carries a wealth of knowledge and personal experience. We also all have flaws and personal demons to struggle with. Each person possesses a unique vision, a way of seeing the world. All of these should be where we begin. Which brings us to…

Rule #2: Write what you know

You might be saying: "Wait a minute. I want to write a story about an international spy or a test pilot or maybe a fire-breathing dragon. Maybe I want to write a story with a female main character. I don't really know what it's like to be any of those things. Does that mean I can't write those stories?"

You can write all those stories. Writing what you know is about taking your past, your knowledge and experience and using them to inform your characters. We all have our own vision of the world, a lens through which we view everything around us. Use your stories to hold that lens up for others to see through. Build your stories around those things that you are passionate about, those things that reflect your worldview, and your stories will be much better for it.

Determining Your World View - LIST A				
PART ONE: Rank the importance, to you personally, of each subject using the following scale:				
1=Extremely Important	2=Very Important	3=Somewhat Important	4=Not Very Important	5=Not Important
☐ Ability to Choose	☐ Depression	☐ Humility	☐ Lying	☐ Pursuit of Happiness
☐ Abortion	☐ Diligence	☐ Hygiene	☐ Mistakes	☐ Racism
☐ Academic Ability	☐ Disrespect	☐ Ignorance	☐ Money	☐ Rebellion
☐ Anger	☐ Diversity	☐ Incorruptibility	☐ Occupational Position	☐ Relationships
☐ Animals and Creatures	☐ Education	☐ Independence	☐ One's Sanity	☐ Religion
☐ Argumentation	☐ Employment	☐ Integrity	☐ Opinions	☐ Religious Beliefs
☐ Arrogance	☐ Environment	☐ Intelligence	☐ Optimism	☐ Reputation
☐ Atheism	☐ Freedom	☐ Intoxicants	☐ Orderliness	☐ Residence
☐ Athletic Ability	☐ Freedom to Choose	☐ Intoxication	☐ Other People	☐ Righteousness
☐ Authorities	☐ Friends	☐ Irresponsibility	☐ Peace and Quiet	☐ Rules
☐ Blaming	☐ Generosity	☐ Jealousy	☐ Personal Rights	☐ Sadness
☐ Bullying	☐ Government	☐ Justice	☐ Pessimism	☐ Safety
☐ Career	☐ Greed	☐ Kindness	☐ Physical Ability	☐ Self-Image
☐ Cheating	☐ Happiness	☐ Knowledge	☐ Physical Apperance	☐ Shyness
☐ Community	☐ Hatefulness	☐ Lawlessness	☐ Physical Health	☐ Stealing
☐ Competition	☐ Helplessness	☐ Laws	☐ Political Principles	☐ Stubborness
☐ Complaints	☐ Homelessness	☐ Laziness	☐ Politics	☐ Stupidity
☐ Courage	☐ Homosexuality	☐ Life	☐ Possessions	☐ Vanity
☐ Curiosity	☐ Honesty	☐ Livelihood	☐ Prisons	☐ Violence
☐ Dependability	☐ Hope	☐ Love	☐ Privacy	☐ Zealousness

- Pick what you consider the top 3 of your highest rated choices from List A and List B.
- In List A, assume the extreme for your top 3 choices. This can be the extreme in either direction. (observance or avoidance, adoration or abhorrence). What would be the effects, positive and negative, of this view?

Top 3 Highest Rated Choices:

1)_____ 2)_____ 3)_____

Effects of 1)_____

_____

Effects of 2)_____

_____

Effects of 3)_____

_____

Determining Your World View - LIST B			
PART TWO: Put a check next to any of the following that, in your opinion describe you now or at any time in the past.			
☐ A complainer	☐ Depressed	☐ Intelligent	☐ Promiscuous
☐ A drug abuser	☐ Diligent	☐ Irresponsible	☐ Racist
☐ A thief	☐ Dirty	☐ Jobless	☐ Rebellious
☐ Accusatory	☐ Disabled	☐ Judgemental	☐ Sad
☐ Affectionate	☐ Dishonest	☐ Kind	☐ Senseless
☐ Against abortion	☐ Disorderly	☐ Lazy	☐ Shunned by society
☐ Alcoholic	☐ Disrespectful	☐ Nosey	☐ Shy
☐ Atheist	☐ Foolish	☐ Obnoxious	☐ Silly
☐ Angry	☐ Friendly	☐ Of another religion	☐ Stubborn
☐ Argumentative	☐ Generous	☐ Opinionated	☐ Uneducated
☐ Arrogant	☐ Greedy	☐ Optimistic	☐ Unintelligent
☐ Close minded	☐ Happy	☐ Pessimistic	☐ Unlawful
☐ Competative	☐ Hateful	☐ Pious	☐ Untruthful
☐ Contemptuous	☐ Helpful	☐ Poor	☐ Violent
☐ Content	☐ Homeless	☐ Prideful	☐ Wealthy
☐ Critical	☐ Hopeless	☐ Pro abortion	
☐ Deceptive	☐ Ignorant	☐ Problematic	

- In List B, what are some positive and negative effects of having each of your top 3 choices?
- Ultimately, your choices from his exercise should be things that are important to you. The last question you should ask yourself is: "Why do I care?" You need to care, because if you don't neither will your readers. If you write about a subject you don't care about, it will come across in your writing. Your story, at that point, will seem boring to your readers at best. At worst, it will seem foolish. Take the items from List B and make them qualities of your characters. Do you have strong feelings about jealousy or justice or privacy or racism? Anything from List A can be the theme you explore with a story. Write from the heart. Write with all you have, and you will have accomplished something great.

Top 3 Highest Rated Choices:

1)_____ 2)_____ 3)_____

Positive Effects of 1)_____

_____

Negative Effects of 1)_____

_____

Positive Effects of 2)_____

Negative Effects of 2)_____

_____

Positive Effects of 3)_____

_____

Negative Effects of 3)_____

_____

Chapter 2 The Elements of Writing

"You learn by writing short stories. Keep writing short stories. The money's in novels, but writing short stories keeps your writing lean and pointed."

-Larry Niven

If you are writing solely for yourself, you can ignore certain things with your prose like grammar and logic. After all, your story only needs to make sense to yourself. If, however, you intend to ever have someone else read your work, then it needs to be written in a way that they can understand. It isn't only words that have power; it is the way we order and structure them.

The English language is an amazingly fluid, constantly changing, living language. It adapts to different regions, different cultures, and different ideals. It borrows words from other languages and makes them its own. English is one of the hardest languages for non-native speakers to learn, but it is capable of amazing beauty and precision. It comes with a framework of rules, called grammar, that standardizes the use of our language to make it easier to understand.

In writing, we have a certain license with grammar. Anyone who has read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Ulysses*, or *Naked Lunch* will realize that grammar is somewhat mutable for artistic purposes, but your work still needs to be understandable. To that end, it is important to know the rules of grammar before you can know how those rules can be bent and when they can be broken. To put it simply: Work with the basics before you get fancy.

Although this class doesn't focus on language arts, it is a very important part of writing. So, let's review some of those basics here. For those who may have trouble in this area, it is strongly encouraged for you to work on improving through G.E.D. courses, tutors, or even self-study with books from the library. This is not about never making a mistake, but it is about trying our hardest to be understood by as many people as possible.

Grammar Review – The Eight Parts of Speech

1) Noun: a person, place, thing, or idea (Mike, Florida, book, love)
2) Pronoun: takes the place of a noun (He, it, you, they, we)
3) Verb: shows action or a state of being (cry, run, be, is)
4) Adverb: tells when, where, how, or to what extent (slowly, sadly, soon)
5) Adjective: tells which one, what kind, or how many (blue, large, only)
6) Conjunction: joins words or phrases (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so)
7) Interjection: one word that shows strong emotion (Ouch!, Wow!, Horray!, Huzzah!)
8) Prepositions: show a relationship between a noun, verb, or another noun. (to, on, above, around, over, into, under, off, from)

A Visual Guide to the Eight Parts of Speech

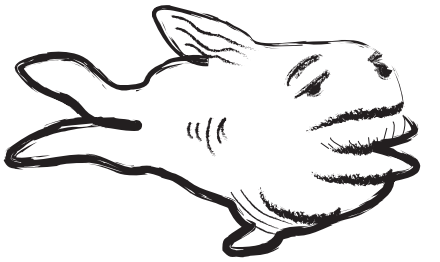
Prepositions are linking words like "to," "at," "near," and "under." As in "the bobber floats on the water"

Water

A **Noun** is a word for a thing, a person, an animal, a place, or an idea, such as "cat," "woman," or "table." A noun is plural when you are talking about more than one. "cats," "women," or "tables."

A **Pronoun** such as "I," "she," "me," or "yours," is a word that stands in for a noun. If you say "the fish ate your bait," and then, "he ate mine?" you can see how "he" stands for "fish" and "mine" stands for "your bait."

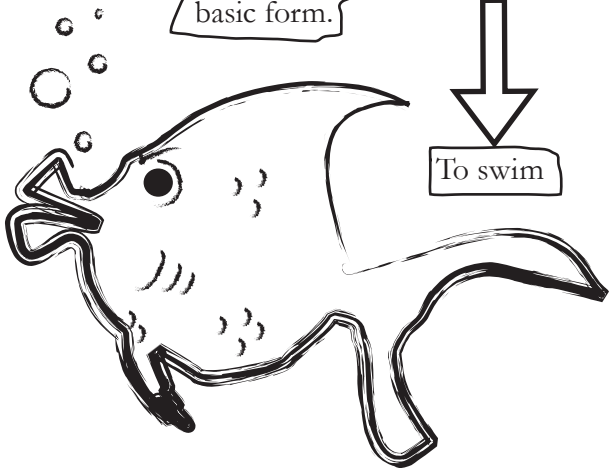
A **Verb** is an action word such as "play" or "eat" and also "have," "think," and "be." Verbs have tenses according to when the action takes place. For example, "I eat" or "I ate." Infinitives like "to play," or "to eat," or "to swim" are a verb's most basic form.



The angry worm

An **Adjective** is a word that describes something, usually a noun. For example, "angry" as in "the angry worm."

Is this your fish?



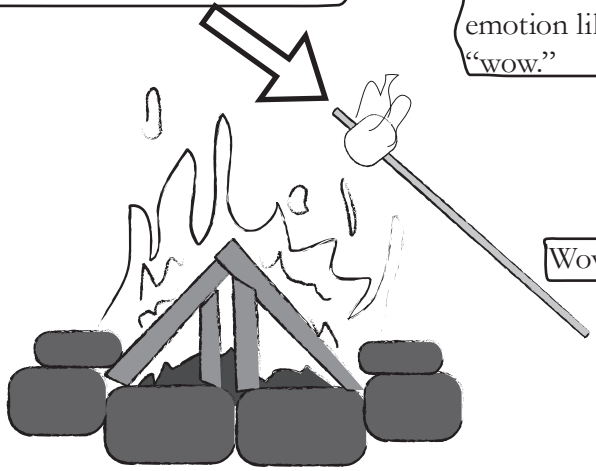
To swim

The angry worm bites the hook furiously.

An **Adverb** gives extra information about an action. Most adverbs describe verbs, as in "badly" in "He plays guitar badly." Other adverbs describe when or where an action happens like "soon" or "here."

A **Conjunction** joins words or phrases, as in "the fire, the stick, and the marshmallow."

An **Interjection** is a single word that shows strong emotion like "ouch" or "wow."



Wow! That fire's hot!

Punctuation

1) Use a period:
    a) At the end of a declarative sentence (I went there.)
    b) After an abbreviation (etc.)
    c) After an initial (Thomas Wendt, M.D.)

2) Use a question mark:
    a) at the end of an interrogative sentence (Did you go there?)

3) Use an exclamation point:
    a) after a strong interjection (Ouch!)
    b) at the end of an exclamatory sentence (I can't believe it!)

4) Use a comma:
    a) between words and phrases in a series (planes, trains, and cars)
    b) to set off the name of a person (Mike, where have you been?)
    c) after a mild interjection (Wow, what a trip.)
    d) to separate a direct quotation from the rest of a sentence (He said, "I don't eat fish.")

5) Use an apostrophe:
    a) to show possession (Sarah's, Chris's, all the cars' tires)
    b) to take the place of the omitted letter or letters in a contraction (can't, didn't, should've)

6) Use a hyphen:
    a) between parts of a compound word (self-worth)
    b) for clarity (recreation vs. re-creation)

7) Use quotation marks to enclose a direct quotation
    ("On Fridays," he said, "I don't eat steak.")

These are just two (very abbreviated) areas of English grammar. To go over everything completely would require a course all in itself. The more familiar you can become with grammar, the better your writing will be. For the purposes of this class, the areas we concentrate most on are spelling, punctuation, proper word usage, and the proper use of indenting.

What do readers expect?

The expectations of readers change over time and vary from genre to genre. There are some things that most modern readers expect, though. Working within this framework will quickly engage people who look at your stories and let them feel respected by your writing.

What readers want most from a writer is clear, concise writing. They want to understand and be caught up in the story. Part of that is the correct use of vocabulary. Using the wrong word or using the right word the wrong way can alter your meaning or even reverse it. Consider the difference between the commonly reversed words "accept" and "except."

For example: I excepted his gift.
Accept (v.): To receive something, especially with gladness.
Except (tv.): To leave out; to reject.

If you use the wrong word in our example, you can see how it would reverse your meaning. It's important to know the exact meaning of the words you use.

The other part of writing clearly has to do with format, structure – appearance. Readers expect your writing to fit a certain format to make it easier and more natural. The goal is to make reading your work as effortless as possible. One important way to ensure this is to use indentation correctly. Indenting is simply leaving a space between the margin and the start of the first line of each paragraph. In my case, I leave about a 1 centimeter gap.

For example:

This line is indented.

Indenting is also very important with dialogue, which we will go into in more detail later. It may seem like a simple, obvious thing, but the proper use of indenting can vastly improve the overall readability of your stories.

Using paragraphs correctly also goes a long way toward making your writing clear. A paragraph must be at least one sentence long. There really is no maximum number of sentences, but when you change your topic or thought, change paragraphs. It's not always obvious when this happens. The best way to learn how this works is to read; books, magazines, newspapers, anything with writing that is broken into paragraphs. Pay attention to the way the paragraphs break down.

Most importantly, readers don't want reading to be work. If they want to solve a puzzle, it should have to do with a clever plot. They do not want to try to puzzle out what your sentences mean. Clear, concise writing involves the reader very quickly. It uses action verbs to draw them in. By using powerful words correctly, you can move people emotionally. Above all…

Rule #3: Avoid helping verbs

Helping verbs (also called auxiliary verbs) are usually forms of the verb 'to be:' is, are, was, and were should be particularly watched out for. It's not possible to eliminate them all, nor should you. However, professional writers use action verbs instead of helping verbs as often as they can. An editor or literary agent can usually spot an amateur writer by how often they rely on helping verbs.

The problem with these particular words is that they separate the reader from the story. They make you work to get at the underlying meaning. It's the difference between reading about a story and experiencing a story as you read it. Consider the following example:

The sky was gray and ominous. It was like our mood.

Perhaps without realizing it, people who read this sentence have to stop and do math. The sky + gray + ominous = how it makes the characters feel. That may only take a fraction of a second, so it may not seem like a big deal. Our job as writers, though, is to write sentences that are easily understood. We want the readers to enjoy the story instead of focusing on the words that make it up. Let's revise…

The gray, ominous sky reflected our mood.

This new structure eliminates the equation. By using a single action verb – reflected – we link the gray, ominous sky with the characters' mood in a quick, concise way. It's direct and easy to understand. It also reveals a more advanced, professional writer. Let's look at a few more examples.

Helping Verb

He was startled by the ringing phone.

Action Verb

The ringing phone startled him.

Helping Verb

The building is old and abandoned. It is also haunted.

Action Verb

The old, abandoned building stood tortured and haunted.

Helping Verb

We were tired after running the marathon.

Action Verb

Running the marathon exhausted us.

Helping Verb

They are waiting impatiently in front of the store.

Action Verb

They waited impatiently in front of the store.

Any time you are able to, take a careful look at any helping verbs in your writing and replace them with action verbs if possible. So, let's revise Rule 3.

Rule #3: Avoid Helping Verbs. If your verb needs help, use a stronger verb.

Basically, readers want to enjoy your stories, but they don't want to work to do it. Stumbling over poor grammar and clumsy structures can be mentally exhausting. Always remember that reading is a voluntary action. If you confuse people who choose to give your story to chance, be aware that, at any time, they can also choose to stop reading.

Active vs. Passive Voice

Helping verbs do have their uses, especially in combination with something called the Passive Voice. The object is not to completely eliminate them but to use them only when necessary. What we strive to do is to use the best words possible to the greatest effect. Active and Passive Voice are excellent tools to do this. Let's examine these.

If the subject of a sentence performs an action, the verb is said to be in the active voice. If the subject receives the action, the verb is in the passive voice. Consider the following examples:

Active Voice

The lightning bolt hit the transformer, blowing it to pieces.

Passive Voice

The transformer was blown to pieces when it was hit by the lightning bolt.

The active voice, with 'lightning bolt' as its subject is more vibrant and dramatic. It gives the reader an image of sparks flying. The passive voice has 'transformer' as its subject and reads more like a report of something that happened. It is much less immediate than the active voice.

Active Voice

I will always remember my incarceration.

Passive Voice

My incarceration will always be remembered by me.

The passive examples are less direct and assertive, as if the writer is unsure or disinterested – passive. They also tend to be longer. As a general rule, it's better to use the active voice. It's more direct, more engaging, and much "snappier."

There are times, however, when the passive voice is very useful. When used correctly, it can heighten tension or a sense of mystery.

Active Voice

Sharice turned off the lights before we arrived home.

Passive Voice

The lights had been turned off before we arrived home.

Note how the passive example above hides the actor. Used correctly, it can evoke a sense of eeriness in the reader and leave them wondering who shut off the lights.

The passive voice can also be used to establish a type of character by the tone of their speech. Using the active voice can make a character seem strong, assertive, and certain. Passive voice characters come across as timid and unsure.

Active Voice

"You will follow the rules," he said.

Passive Voice

"The rules are to be followed," he said.

The differences can be subtle, but they can make the characters in your story feel vibrant, varied, and alive. Use variation to make your characters more real.

Tense

Your stories can be written in past, present, or future tense. The choice is up to you, but be aware that each has advantages as well as limitations. Present tense verbs describe an action that is happening now. Past tense verbs describe actions that have already happened. Future tense verbs describe actions that haven't happened yet.

The most important thing to remember is that once you pick a tense, stay there. It is one of the hard and fast rules of grammar that you do not switch tenses. Consider this example:

John went to the store and purchases milk.

The verbs here are went (past) and purchases (present), which leaves the reader confused as to when the action is taking place. A confused reader can quickly become an aggravated reader, a condition that he can end at any time by tossing the confusing story into the nearest trashcan.

Fortunately, the solution is as easy as being consistent. Pick your tense and stick with it.

Past tense

John went to the store and purchased milk.

Present tense

John goes to the store and purchases milk.

Future tense

John will go to the store and purchase milk.

Sentence Patterns

This is a little more advanced grammar, but for those who are comfortable with it varying sentence patterns can give your writing a much more professional, smarter rhythm.

When composing sentences, it is easy to end up with one of two extremes: short, choppy sentences; or long, complex ones. Thoughts expressed in staccato statements can bore your reader with a monotonous beat. Long-winded statements can lose your reader in exhausting verbal maze.

Monotonous

John broke the law. He went to prison. He was sentenced to three years mandatory. His attitude early on was negative. He soon realized he needed to change. John enrolled in the G.E.D. class. He graduated a year later. He decided to start a business when released. He was released one year later with a plan. John started his business and became successful.

Complex

John broke the law and went to prison when he was sentenced to three years mandatory and had a negative attitude but soon realized he needed to change, so he enrolled in the G.E.D. class and graduated a year later and then decided to start a business when released, and he was released a year later with a plan and soon started his business and became successful.

Both of the above examples express complete thoughts, but the clarity and meaning is muddled by the way they are presented. More, the emotional effect of the information is bled out to the passage. The monotonous example seems almost childish with a flat, dull beat while the complex example is a run-on sentence, confusing and exhausting to read in one breath. By varying sentence length and structure, the information can flow much more naturally and draw the reader in.

Varied

John broke the law and went to prison. Having been sentenced to three years mandatory, his attitude early on was negative, but he soon realized he needed to change. Because of this, he enrolled in the G.E.D. class and graduated a year later. With more confidence in himself, he decided to start a business once he gets out of prison. When released a year later, he had a plan. Eventually, he did start his business and, with hard work, became successful.

Clichés

Cliché (n.): a trite or overused expression.

Put simply, avoid clichés whenever possible. As with helping verbs, they can reveal you as an amateur writer. It isn't that they are never effective. In some cases, people come to expect the use of a cliché (such as the inevitable car chase scene in action movies). More often, they are tired and old and tend to have the same effect on a reader as a bad pun. Consider the following examples:

Clichés to Avoid List

above and beyond the call of duty	shooting himself in the foot	left to his own devices	turn the other cheek
go for the kill	by the skin of one's teeth	stubborn as a mule	fit as a fiddle
piece of cake	icing on the cake	dumb luck	two peas in a pod
accident waiting to happen	can't judge a book by its cover	lock, stock, and barrel	fit to be tied
goes without saying	if looks could kill	sweating bullets	on cloud nine
playing for keeps	sight for sore eyes	easier said than done	ugly as sin
add insult to injury	clear as a bell	misery loves company	flat as a pancake
grass is always greener	in a nutshell	talk your ear off	on the same page
practice makes perfect	smells fishy	easy come, easy go	up a creek without a paddle
after all is said and done	cold as ice	monkey on your back	fly off the handle
he broke the mold	in the nick of time	think outside the box	on top of the world
reading me like a book	spill the beans	eat crow	welcome with open arms
at arm's length	could eat a horse	more than meets the eye	get my ducks in a row
his bark is worse than his bite	in the same boat	through thick and thin	out of my league
real McCoy	sitck to your guns	face the music	where there's smoke, there's fire
better late than never	dog-eat-dog world	needle in the haystack	get off scott-free
hit the nail on the head	knock the socks off	time is money	pay the piper
both sides of the coin	straight from the horse's mouth	fair and square	whole nine yards
hook, line, and sinker	don't know him form adam	never a dull moment	get the show on the road
see the forest through the trees	leave no stone unturned	to each his own	perish the thought
bring home the bacon	strong as an ox	fall from grace	wild-goose chase
I wasn't born yesterday	down in the dumps	nip it in the bud	

All of these sayings were fresh and new at one time. They described something so well that everyone began using them. Over time, that overuse robs them of impact and makes sayings like this stale and boring. If you want to create a character that people will roll their eyes at, have him speak in clichés. Otherwise, decide what it is that you're trying to say and find a fresh way to say it. Make it your own.

IN CLASS EXERCISE

In class exercise: Rewrite the following in a new way, without using clichés.

1) "I'm the one who brings home the bacon!" Phil said and angrily slammed the door.

2) Use this opportunity to think outside the box.

3) The old gray mare was fit as a fiddle and stubborn as a mule, but she could eat like a pig.

Brevity and Clarity

New writers often fall into the trap of thinking that the more words they use, the better their writing will be. This is not the case. Use the words you need and nothing extra. Writing concisely allows your reader to navigate the story more easily and enjoyably. This doesn't necessarily mean making your sentences as short as possible. It just means not making them too wordy.

The birds, which were bright yellow in color, flew toward the sunset on the horizon.

The above example is too wordy. Rewording it in a more concise way will make it more stylish, natural, and vibrant in the reader's mind.

The bright yellow birds flew toward the sunset.

Brevity is also affected by what is called redundancy. Redundancy is using unnecessary words, specifically repeating something that is already obvious. In the example above, 'the sunset on the horizon' is a redundancy. The reader knows where the sun sets without you needing to tell him. One of the worst things you can do as a writer is to underestimate the intelligence of your readers. Think about how it feels to be talked down to. That's how it feels when you overuse redundancy. All of the following sayings are redundant. Chop them down to give more weight to your words.

IN CLASS EXERCISE

In class exercise: Shorten or rewrite the redundant examples.

Redundant Samples

Absolutely certain	Empty space	Give birth to a baby girl/boy	Never at any time	Raise up
Actual truth	End result	Good bargain	New beginning	Reason why
Add an addition	Enter in	Good benefits	New bride	Refer back
Advanced warning	Established fact	Had done previously	New recruit	Repeat again
Advance reservations	Estimate at or about	Harmful injury	Nine AM in the morning	Sad tragedy
After the end of	Every now and then	HIV virus	No trespassing allowed	Seemed to be
Bald headed	Evil fiend	Honest truth	None at all	Short in length
Basic fundamentals	Exact duplicate	Hot water heater	Now pending	Since the time when
Blend together	Exact opposites	I myself personally	Null and void	Sincerely mean it
Brief moment	Fake copy	If and when	Old Cliché	Skipped over
But however	False pretenses	Important breakthrough	Old proverb	Solemn vow
Came at a time when	Fellow classmates	In close proximity	Opening introduction	Spelled out in detail
Cancel out	Fellow teammates	Introduce for the first time	Originally created	Stacked on top of each other
Clearly obvious	Few in number	Invited guest	Over and done with	Still continues
Combine into one	Filled to capacity	Joined together	Over exaggerate	Still remains
Completely destroyed	Final conclusion	Just recently	Pair of twins	Strangled to death
Continue on	First and foremost	Kneel down	Past experiences	Stupid fool
Cooperate together	First began	Last of all	Past history	Suddenly exploded
Currently today	First of all	Lift up	Personal friend	Sufficient enough
Deep chasm	Follow after	Look back in retrospect	Personal opinion	Summer season
Direct confrontation	For a period of six months	Major breakthrough	Personally believe	Sworn affidavit
Drop down	For the purpose of	Mental telepathy	Postponed until a later time	Temporary reprieve
During the course of	Forever and ever	Merged together	Pre-recorded	Terrible tragedy
Dwindled down	Free gift	Midway between	Proceed ahead	Totally eliminated
Each and every	Free pass	Mix together	Protest against	True fact
Earlier in time	Gather together	Natural instinct	Proven fact	Twelve noon

Similar to this, repetition is repeating an actual word or phrase verbatim. It is as subtle as constantly ringing a bell in your reader's ear. Consider this example:

Janet walked up the stairs. Janet noticed the creaking of each step on the ancient wooden stairs, and Janet winced, fearing that Maude would awaken at the creaking noise and come screaming down the creaky stairs to yell at Janet for waking her.

There are all sorts of bells going off in this example. One of the reasons pronouns exist is to avoid the repetition caused here by the use of Janet, Janet, Janet, Janet. We also have stairs, stairs, stairs and creaking, creaking, creaking. Doing this can annoy your readers and cause them to focus more on the words than the story.

Sometimes, you can use this concept of a ringing bell to your advantage, as in this literal example:

Gong! Gong! Gong! Each peal of the courthouse bell struck terror into my heart. This was not how I was meant to end, swinging from a noose, and each ring of that damned bell brought that end ever closer.

Gong! Gong! Gong!

The key to redundancy is always to look at it carefully to make certain that it works without causing your readers to cringe.

Clarity is using the right word the right way. Having an expansive vocabulary is useful, but remember that our goal is to be understood. Consider this example:

He had been emancipated from the penitentiary for three weeks, and now his restless peregrinations had conveyed him to this luminal place, seeking purgation in the permafrost of the hyperborean tundra, which was an apt analogue of the permafrost in his heart.

Having a large vocabulary is useless if no one knows what you're saying. We do use lots of words in writing that we don't commonly use in everyday speech (I looked on in bewilderment.), but words that draw attention to themselves because of their rarity draw attention away from the story and point it at the writer and his thesaurus. Worst case, the reader starts playing ping-pong between your thesaurus and his dictionary.

When the reader has stopped to wonder at your voluminous vocabulary, or, worse, when the reader has stopped because the word you've used has no more meaning to him than a random string of letters, the reader is not involved in your story.

None of this is to say that you should only write with language accessible to fourth graders. Having a large vocabulary is an essential tool for serious writers, and there is nothing wrong with making some readers occasionally reach for the dictionary. However, understand that they only legitimate reason to do that is if the word you have chosen is the best word to express the idea. To put it another way, saying 'edifice' instead of 'building' doesn't tell your reader anything more about the building; it tells the reader that you know the word edifice.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the following example:

Henderson watched the rumination of the city and broiled. At last, his unsavory plans, so long sluiced on this place, had come to frutescence. Ululating under his breath, he perused his way down off the catwalk. "At last, I shall vacate my revenge," he whickered.

Using words the reader doesn't know is not a great idea, but there are at least, excuses for it from time to time. There is never an excuse for using words that you yourself don't know. Nonwriters might wonder how this could happen, and frankly, so do we. Unfortunately, it tends to happen a lot.

If you've only seen a word once and never bothered to look it up, the chance of shooting yourself in the foot is high, and nothing will make a reader stop reading faster than making him think you're an idiot.

Using a word almost correctly, or using a word almost exactly like the right word, amounts to almost speaking English. You might think the occasional slip doesn't matter, but the language you choose is the clothing in which your story is draped. Saying 'incredulous' when you mean 'incredible' is the written equivalent of going to your chapel call-out without any pants on.

The point here is to say, 'use words that you know.' That means words you would comfortably use when talking to an overeducated and sarcastic friend who wouldn't hesitate to make fun of your for misusing a word.

If you feel that limiting yourself to words you know leaves you with too small a vocabulary for your purposes, there is no short-term solution. Expand the types of books you read, branch out to genres you wouldn't normally spend time with, make crossword puzzles a habit. It's a slow process, but these things can enrich your vocabulary over time.

"If you think in pictures, write. If you think in words, paint."
-Frank O'Hara

If you find yourself getting stuck on a word and unable to find the right word to describe something in your story, try sketching what you want to describe. Literally, take a blank sheet of paper and draw the thing. It doesn't matter how good you are at drawing. It doesn't matter if you can draw only stick figures and those badly. No one will see this but you. What matters is that you're using a different set of skills, employing a different part of your brain and forcing it to look at things in a different way. Using different connections can yield vastly different results.

This can actually be a great technique to use in many different areas of life. If someone upsets you, try drawing or writing how it makes you feel, listen to music, do something that is outside of your normal patterns, and you could see a different outcome. In writing, it is often enough to get you over your roadblock.

Rule #4: Show don't tell

This is one of the most important concepts in Creative Writing and one of the most difficult for beginning writers to grasp. If done correctly, it is a clear sign to both readers and publishers of a talented writer. Done incorrectly, or not at all, it can leave you with a story that feels flat and unengaging.

What 'Show, don't tell' means is that imagery draws readers into your story much more effectively than simple explanation. Let them "see" your story and not just read about it. Show the reader what's happening; don't just tell them. Here is the difference:

Telling

Tom was mad at Joe.

Showing

Tom jabbed his finger in Joe's face as he yelled.

Showing is much clearer and vibrant. It paints a much clearer picture of Tom's anger, leaving the reader possibly wondering what Joe's reaction will be. In the 'telling' version, the reader's response will likely be, "Yeah? So what?" Telling is simply less interesting.

Telling

"I'm not sure," he said nervously.

Showing

"I'm not sure," he said with darting eyes and fidgety fingers.

The word 'nervously' is a descriptive adverb, but it doesn't paint a picture. What does 'nervously' look like? It might look different to different people or, worse, like nothing at all. A writer needs to control what the reader sees. Creating vivid images of the action is part of a writer's most important duties. Think of a blind person who was once able to see, but a long time ago. You job is to describe to him what is happening, making the scene as vivid as possible, so he can experience it as if it was unfolding before his eyes.

Telling

It looked like it might rain.

Showing

The clouds loomed overhead, swollen and bruised.

Telling

Terrance, who is very tall, entered the room

Showing

Terrance had to drop his head slightly when he stepped through the door.

You can also use dialogue to show instead of tell and add emotional weight to the scene.

Telling (with narration)

Sean Dunham was a nurse running from a troubled past. He'd been fired for neglecting a patient at Sacred Heart Hospital after Sean was found drunk in the nurse's station. The patient died under his care.

Showing (with dialogue)

"Don't I know you?" said the woman. Sean turned, and she peered at him closely.
"No, I don't think so," he said with a shrug.
"Yeah… you were on the news."
"I don't know what you're talking about. Excuse me, I need to –"
"You're that nurse from Sacred Heart who let a patient die because you were wasted. Isn't that right?"
"Leave me alone!" Sean yelled and hurried away.

Remember: images can plug directly into your reader's minds and emotions at times when explanation falls flat. 'Donna felt weak' can look like anything. 'Donna struggled, unable to even bring the spoon to her mouth.' Which version makes you want to know what happens next?

IN CLASS EXERCISE

In class exercise: Try rewriting the following statements in a way that shows instead of tells.

1) The garden was ready for picking.

2) I hate broccoli.

3) The moon is full.

4) Ken was bored.

Replacing explanation with imagery can make vague moments vivid and memorable. Try looking at your writing and seeing where you can show instead of tell. Sometimes, a simple statement can be powerful. Such as:

"*I froze when I entered the room. The dog was dead.*"

But, you never know until you try.

Chapter 3 The Framework of a Story

Before we begin writing, there are some things we need to know about stories. We need to know what a story is and what it isn't. We need to know how to structure a story for modern readers. There are some technical things to learn, and we need to know what the point of our story is. These form the skeleton of every story, the framework upon which the flesh of our narrative is placed. So, first…

What is a Story?

The dictionary defines a story like this:

Story (n.): an account or recital of an event or a series of events.

Very straightforward, but not very detailed. If you read a writing manual, many will tell you that it contains three acts with a beginning, middle, and end and has a protagonist that makes choices leading to a progression of events. But, is that all of it? Consider this example:

"*I woke up this morning. I ate breakfast. I left for work.*"

Is that a story? It has a protagonist (a main character) who made choices and a sequence of events. It even has three acts with a beginning, middle, and end. That's what makes something a story, right?

Actually, no. Defining a story seems like it would be a simple thing, but it's deceptively complex. Much easier to define what a story is not. It is not simply a list of events. It is not just a beginning, middle, and end. So, what is a story?

Another description of a story is a description of a character and what happens to that character. Even that doesn't quite grasp it, but two things are an absolute necessity: characters and conflict.

Aristotle may have given us the best definition of a story. Millennia ago, in his book 'Poetics,' he noted that while a story does have a beginning, a middle, and an ending, the beginning is not simply the first event in a series of three. It is the emotionally engaging originating event. The middle is the natural and causally related consequence, and the end is the inevitable conclusion.

In other words, stories have an origination, an escalation of conflict and a resolution. At its most basic level, a story describes a transformation – either of a situation or, more commonly, a character. A story tells about change through conflict. Simply put, you don't have a story until something goes wrong.

A story, then, is about a character dealing with tension, with setbacks, and with opposition. The secret to drawing readers in and making them keep turning pages is not simply to make more and more things happen to a character. The key is to create more and more tension as your story unfolds.

Understanding the fundamentals at the heart of all stories will help you tell your stories better. These form the framework of a story and, just like two houses may be built of the same materials but end up looking vastly different, the story you build on this framework should always be uniquely your own. These, then, are the five fundamental ingredients of a story:

Ingredient #1: Orientation

The beginning of a story needs to grab a reader's attention, orient them to the setting, mood, and tone of the story. The main character you introduce needs to be someone they will care about. If the readers don't care about your main character, they won't care about your story, either.

Ingredient #2: Crisis

The event that tips your character's world upside down must be one that can't be immediately solved. It's an unavoidable, irrevocable challenge that sets the story in motion.

Ingredient #3: Escalation

This is where most of a story occurs. The escalation details your character's efforts and struggles to resolve the crisis. Generally, more problems arise either along with his efforts or because of them. At this point, if a reader says he's bored because "nothing's happening," he doesn't necessarily mean that events aren't occurring, but rather that he doesn't see the main character making an effort to solve his struggles.

Ingredient #4: Discovery

At the story's climax, the main character will make a discovery that changes his life. This can come through wit or grit, from within or without, but however it comes about it should reshape your character's life and circumstances forever.

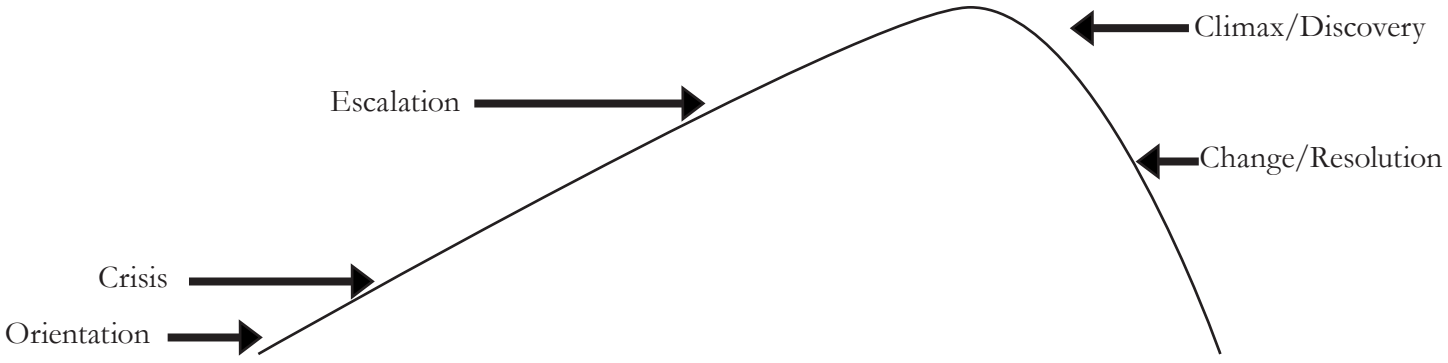
Ingredient #5: Change

This is the result of your story, the resolution. Your main character's life has been transformed; this is where we hint at how he deals with that transformation. What new direction is he now set on?

Genre can heavily influence the direction of this transformation. Horror stories, for instance, often end with some kind of death (physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual). Most genres, through, end with new life (physical renewal, psychological understanding, emotional healing, or spiritual awakening).

Modern Structure

If these are the ingredients, how are they arranged? The answer to that question depends largely on your style, what type of story you're telling, and who you're telling your story to. Story structure changes over time as tastes change, but the most common structure that modern readers look for goes something like this:



The resemblance to a roller coaster should be obvious. For those who like roller coasters, reading a good story should be a very similar experience. Imagine sitting in the first car. You look ahead and all you see is a turn and then a long climb up and up and up. Near what you think must be the peak, the track disappears into a dark cave.

Oriented as to what to expect, you nevertheless feel a moment of excitement as the cars start moving (the crisis). As you rise higher and higher, with the cave entrance yawning ahead, the tension rising the further you move upward. Then, a moment of discovery as the track tips just inside the cave, plunging you into a careening freefall in the darkness. Finally, you emerge back into the light to come rolling back into the station feeling satisfied and excited, your anticipation resolved.

Stories should work like that; only you normally can't see that far ahead on the track. As with stories, there is a basic structure to roller coasters. But, is there a loop? Is it dark? Does it move backward? Is there a barrel roll or two? All that is up to you. Make it your roller coaster, your story.

Many writing manuals will talk about three act structure or standardized plot formulas. There are some necessities (character and conflict), but don't feel chained to a specific formula. Stories don't happen in three acts, or two, four, or seven. They happen in as many acts as it takes to tell the story. Think of it as an organic whole that reveals a transformation of your character. The number of acts or events should be determined by the movement of the story, not the other way around.

To put it another way, story trumps structure.

If you render a portrait of the protagonist's life in such a way that we can picture his world and care about what happens to him, we'll be pulled into the story. If you present us with an emotionally stirring crisis or calling, we'll get hooked. If you show the stakes rising as the character struggles to solve this crisis, you'll draw us in more deeply. And, if you end the story in a surprising yet logical way that reveals a transformation of the main character's life, we'll be satisfied and anxious to read your next story.

Details

In all this talk about what story is and is not, and what structure is and is not, there are some things that are never mentioned. Things like setting, style, theme, genre, length, and fiction or non-fiction are not brought up because none of those things define a story. They only define the type of story you want to tell. They are all choices. That said, some of these choices may be made for you. Length, for example, may be dictated to you if you enter a contest or write for magazines or newspapers. In this class, you'll be given page limits on your bunkwork assignments. We'll be dealing with short stories (which is anything from 1-49 pages). Novellas (literally "short novel") are from 50-100 pages, and novels are generally defined as anything over 100 pages.

Genre

Genre is defined as 'a type, class, or category.' This is one of the biggest decisions you'll make in terms of detail. Some contests might want a specific genre, but, for the most part, you get to decide what type of story you want to tell. Some examples of genre are:

Action/Adventure
Identified by:
Intense, non-stop action
Exotic locations
Extraordinary protagonist/characters
Excitement in every chapter

Book/Author Examples:
Three Musketeers - Alexander Dumas
The adventures of Dirk Pitt - Clive Cussler
Jason Bourne (series) - Robert Ludlum
James Bond (series) - Ian Flemming

Romance
Identified by:
A quest for true love
Conflicts and resolutions between men and women
Love lost/Love found
Book/Author Examples:
Echoes - Daniel Steel
Pirate - Fabio
Bithright - Nora Roberts
A Message in a Bottle - Nicholas Sparks
Fantasy
Identified by:
Magic, spells, witchcraft, imaginary creatures (elves, faries, dragons, etc.)
Ancient civilizations
Clear delineations between good and evil
Book/Author Examples:
Harry Potter (series) - J.K. Rowling
The Hobbit (series) - J.R.R. Tolkien
The Eye of the World (series) - Robert Jordan
Eragon (series) - Christopher Paolini
Horror
Identified by:
Terror filled scenes and characters
References to the spirit world
Showcasing fear
Book/Author Examples:
It - Stephen King
Silence of the Lambs - Thomas Harris
Blackstone Chronicles - John Saul
Dragon's Tears - Dean Koontz
Crime Fiction
Identified by:
Mystery and intrigue
Struggle between right and wrong
Clues to discover and puzzles to solve
Book/Author Examples:
Narrows - Michael Connelly
Fade Away - Harlan Coben
Extreme Measures - Vince Flynn
Trip Wire - Lee Child

Science Fiction
Identified by:
Showcasing technology
Extraordinary Circumstances (i.e. alien invasion, time travel)
Battles between good and evil
Book/Author Examples:
Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy - Douglas Adams
Positronic Man - Isaac Asimov
Ender's Game - Orson Scott Card
Suspense/Thriller
Identified by:
Mysteries to solve
Crime and Punishment
Emotions showcased such as fear and anger
Book/Author Examples:
The Da Vinci Code - Dan Brown
The Bourne Identity - Robert Ludlum
Sum of All Fears - Tom Clancy
Sahara - Clive Cussler
Western
Identified by:
Wide open spaces
Family values
Values, honor, and principles
Battles and clear delineations between good and evil
Book/Author Examples:
Western Legends - Zane Grey
Cry of Eagles - William Johnstone
Three-ten to Yuma - Elmore Leonard
Religious
Identified by:
Showcasing bibilcal principles
Lessons on morality
End time events
Battles between good and evil
Wars between religious groups
Book/Author Examples:
Left Behind (series) - Tim Lahay and Jerry B. Jenkins
This Present Darkness - Frank Peretti
Heaven's Wager - Ted Dekker

Theme and Premise

Premise is the main plot of a story. It defines the events of a story. If someone asks you what your story is about, this is generally what you would respond with.

Premise

Barry, on a dare, must survive a night in a haunted house.

Theme

Overcoming fear and resisting peer pressure.

Which one do you start with? It's your choice. Most people come up with a plot first, and the theme comes out later as they write. (Such as 'I want to write a story about a woman who cheats on her spouse.') Others will start with a theme and let it help form a plot ('I want to write a story about jealousy and cheating.').

IN CLASS EXERCISE

In-Class Exercise: Here are some examples of Premises. Try to come up with a theme that would fit them.

1. Trip gets arrested for a robbery that his friend committed and gets sentenced to prison.

2. Paolo meets the girl of his dreams, but she's already married.

3. Your plane crashes on an Andean mountain in a snowstorm.

Chapter 4 From Thought to Page

"Everybody walks past a thousand story ideas every day. The good writers are the ones who see five or six of them. Most people don't see any." -Orson Scott Card

Where do you get your ideas from?

By Neil Gaiman

Every profession has its pitfalls. Doctors, for example, are always being asked for free medical advice, lawyers are asked for legal information, morticians are told how interesting a profession that must be and then people change the subject fast. And, writers are asked where we get our ideas from.

In the beginning, I used to tell people the not very funny answers, the flip ones: 'From the idea-of-the-month club,' I'd say, or 'From a little ideas shop in Bognor Regis,' 'From a dusty old book full of ideas in my basement,' or even 'From Pete Atkins.' (The last is slightly esoteric, and may need a little explanation. Pete Atkins is a screenwriter and novelist friend of mine, and we decided a while ago that when asked, I would say that I got them from him, and he'd say he got them from me. It seemed to make sense at the time.)

Then I got tired of the not very funny answers, and these days I tell people the truth: 'I make them up,' I tell them. 'Out of my head.'

People don't like this answer. I don't know why not. They look unhappy, as if I'm trying to slip a fast one past them. As if there's a huge secret, and, for reasons of my own, I'm not telling them how it's done.

And, of course, I'm not. Firstly, I don't know myself where the ideas really come from, what makes them come, or whether one day they'll stop. Secondly, I doubt anyone who asks really wants a three hour lecture on the creative process. And thirdly, the ideas aren't that important. Really, they aren't. Everyone's got an idea for a book, a movie, a story, a TV series.

Every published writer has had it – the people who come up to you and tell you that they've Got An Idea. And boy, is it a Doozy. It's such a Doozy that they want to Cut You In On It. The proposal is always the same – they'll tell you the Idea (the hard bit), you write it down and turn it into a novel (the easy bit), the two of you can split the money fifty-fifty.

I'm reasonably gracious with these people. I tell them, truly, that I have far too many ideas for things as it is, and far too little time. And, I wish them the best of luck.

The Ideas aren't the hard bit. They're a small component of the whole. Creating believable people who do more or less what you tell them to is much harder. And, hardest by far is the process of simply sitting down and putting one word after another to construct whatever it is you're trying to build: making it interesting, making it new.

But still, it's the question people want to know. In my case, they also want to know if I get them from my dreams. (Answer: no. Dream logic isn't story logic. Transcribe a dream, and you'll see. Or better yet, tell someone an important dream – 'Well, I was in this house that was also my old school, and there was this nurse and she was really an old witch and then she went away but there was a leaf and I couldn't look at it and I knew if I touched it then something dreadful would happen…' – and watch their eyes glaze over.) And, I don't give straight answers.

Until recently.

My daughter Holly, who is seven years of age, persuaded me to come in to give a talk to her class. Her teacher was really enthusiastic ('The children have all been making their own books recently, so perhaps you could come along and tell them about being a professional writer. And, lots of little stories. They like the stories.') and in I came.

They sat on the floor, I had a chair, fifty seven-year-old eyes gazed up at me. 'When I was your age, people told me not to make things up,' I told them. 'These days, they give me money for it.' For twenty minutes I talked, then they asked questions.

And, eventually one of them asked it.

'Where do you get your ideas?'

And, I realized that I owed them an answer. They weren't old enough to know any better. And, it's a perfectly reasonable question, if you aren't asked it weekly.

This is what I told them:

You get your ideas from daydreaming. You get your ideas from being bored. You get ideas all the time. The only difference between writers and other people is we notice when we're doing it.

You get ideas when you ask yourself simple questions. The most important of the questions is just, What if…? (What if you woke up with wings? What if your sister turned into a mouse? What if you all found out that your teacher was planning to eat one of you at the end of term – but you didn't know who?)

Another important question is, If only…(If only real life was like it is in Hollywood musicals. If only I could shrink myself as small as a button. If only a ghost would do my homework.)

And then there are the others: I wonder… ('I wonder what she does when she's alone…') and If This Goes On… ('If this goes on, telephones are going to start talking to each other and cut out the middleman…') and Wouldn't it be interesting if… ('Wouldn't it be interesting if the world used to be ruled by cats?')…

Those questions, and others like them, and the questions they, in their turn, pose ('Well, if cats used to rule the world, why don't they any more? And how do they feel about that?') are one of the places ideas come from.

An idea doesn't have to be a plot notion, just a place to begin creating. Plots often generate themselves when one begins to ask oneself questions about whatever the starting point is.

Sometimes an idea is a person ('There's a boy who wants to know about magic'). Sometimes it's a place ('There's a castle at the end of time, which is the only place there is…'). Sometimes it's an image ('A woman, sifting in a dark room filled with empty faces.').

Often ideas come from two things coming together that haven't come together before. ('If a person bitten by a werewolf turns into a wolf what would happen if a goldfish was bitten by a werewolf? What would happen if a chair was bitten by a werewolf?')

All fiction is a process of imagining: whatever you write, in whatever genre or medium, your task is to make things up convincingly and interestingly and new.

And, when you've an idea – which is, after all, merely something to hold onto as you begin – what then?
Well, then you write. You put one word after another until it's finished – whatever it is.

Sometimes it won't work, or not in the way you first imagined. Sometimes it doesn't work at all. Sometimes you throw it out and start again.

I remember, some years ago, coming up with a perfect idea for a Sandman story. It was a succubus who gave writers and artists and songwriters ideas in exchange for some of their lives. I called it Sex and Violets.

It seemed a straightforward story, and it was only when I came to write it I discovered it was like trying to hold fine sand: every time I thought I'd got hold of it, it would trickle through my fingers and vanish.

I wrote at the time:

I've started this story twice now, and got about half-way through it each time, only to watch it die on the screen.

Sandman is, occasionally, a horror comic. But, nothing I've written for it has ever gotten under my skin like this story I'm now going to gave to wind up abandoning (with the deadline already a thing of the past). Probably because it cuts so close to home. It's the ideas – and the ability to put them down on paper, and turn them into stories – that make me a writer. That mean I don't have to get up early in the morning and sit on a train with people I don't know, going to a job I despise.

My idea of hell is a blank sheet of paper. Or a blank screen. And me, staring at it, unable to think of a single thing worth saying, a single character that people could believe in, a single story that hasn't been told before.
Staring at a blank sheet of paper.

Forever.

I wrote my way out of it, though. I got desperate (that's another flip and true answer I give to the where-do-you-get-your-ideas question. 'Desperation.' It's up there with 'Boredom' and 'Deadlines'. All these answers are true to a point.) and took my own terror, and the core idea, and crafterd a story called Calliope, which explains, I think pretty definitively, where writers get their ideas from. It's in a book called Dream Country. You can read it if you like. And, somewhere in the writing of that story, I stopped being scared of the ideas going away.

Where do I get my ideas from?

I make them up.

Out of my head.

Where we can get our ideas

So, where do we get our ideas from? The short answer is: everywhere. The key is to train yourself to recognize them. There are always some good places to look for new ideas, though.

Mythology/History

As we've talked about before, humans have been telling each other stories since before recorded history. This has left us with a rich and vast library of myth, legend, and history. By mining the morality and relationships of those stories, we can use those examples to inform our own tales.

Current Events

This happens all the time in television. Whenever you see a show that's been "ripped from the headlines," it means someone took a current event and imagined a new direction for it. You could use this simply to find a topic to use as a stepping off point (election year, military aggression, Olympic games).

Songs

This is a very common one. A song can move us and suggest a narrative that can quickly grow into a story.

Other Stories

It's important to be careful with this one to avoid plagiarizing, but every once in a while a passage in another novel will somehow "speak" to you as if it were written for you alone. Usually, it will be something the other novelist glossed over or only mentioned in passing. However, for you, it made you pause. Can you form a story idea around that?

Dreams

Mr. Gaiman didn't like this source for a good reason. Dreams are notoriously difficult to remember and seldomly logical. But, the individual ideas and elements of our dreams can be vivid and detailed. Some writers keep a dream journal and write down their dreams in order to recall them later.

Life

If you've been an Ice Trucker in the Yukon or lived on a sparsely populated South Pacific island, you've probably had experiences that can be spun into story ideas. Even if you haven't lived through something that exciting, everyone has family, friends, locations, or events in their pasts that can be used to form parts of our stories.

What if…?

This is, perhaps, the most important question in the fiction writer's toolbox. Use this in combination with any other category here and story ideas almost happen all on their own. What if history happened differently? What if a current event had gone another way? What if this song was about me? What if my dreams were real? What if this background character was the main character? What if I really had lived on a sparsely populated South Pacific island?

OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE

Bunkwork Assignment: Write a story that is exactly 500 words in length using either the brainstorming idea from class or the prompt below. Your story must:

- **Have a title**
- **Have a beginning, middle, and end**
- **Use the story structure from Chapter 3**
- **Be exactly 500 words long**

Optional Prompt: You wake up to find that all the people on the compound (except you) have been turned into flesh-eating zombies.

Ideas should never be the complicated part. If you don't limit yourself you will soon discover that, as a fiction writer, you can go anywhere. The trick, then is to take the next step, to move from an idea to a story. An idea, after all, is merely a place to begin. Where do we go from there? First, there are a couple questions you need to ask yourself.

Where is my story going to happen?

At this point in the process it's okay to be vague, but a story has to happen somewhere. Does it take place in the past, present, or future?

Does it happen in the real world or on a world all my own? Does the story take place entirely in one room?

Setting is very important, and if you think of the best stories you've read, the setting itself often adds layers of detail and personality. Sometimes it can fell like a character in its own right. At this point, though, it's okay to use broad strokes. We can go back later and fill in details. So, I don't need to k now that my story is set in a house on Canton Street in Stoughton, Massachusetts. To start with, I can merely decide that my story is set in a town in New England.

Who is my story happening to?

A story is nothing without characters. We can write some great poems about trees or the sky, but to tell a narrative there are two absolute necessities: character and conflict. We'll go into conflict in more detail later. First, we need to define who the characters are.

Every story has a main character, a character who the story revolves around. It's important to know that the purpose of any character in a narrative is to illuminate or reveal something about the main character. His own thoughts or actions tell us something about him. The way he interacts with others should show us his motives or personality or some facet of his "character." With that in mind, let's talk about the four types of characters found in a story.

The Protagonist

This is your primary or main character. It is this lead character who provides access to the plot. We 'see' the story and the world in which it happens through the protagonist's eyes. We feel through his emotions. He is the filter through which we experience the plot. It follows, then, that the more we can identify with the main character, the more intense our experience is. With identification, you create the wondrous feeling that the story is, in some way, happening to me.

Our protagonist, therefore, needs to be a strong character. That doesn't necessarily mean physically strong or even mentally strong. It means that he needs to be like us, a real human being. The reader needs to feel that, under the right circumstances, he would react in a similar way.

What are the marks of a real human being? Look inside yourself. More likely than not, you are: 1) not perfect; 2) a little fearful or worried at times; 3) trying your best to make it in the world. Find those qualities that make your protagonist just like most people, and readers will begin to identify with them. In other words, make your readers empathize with your main character.

"I try to create sympathy for my characters then I turn the monsters loose."
-Stephen King

In contrast to mere empathy, sympathy intensifies our investment in your protagonist. There are four key ways to establish sympathy, but choose among them wisely. Don't overload them, as it may make a reader feel manipulated.

• **Jeopardy**: Put the protagonist in terrible, immediate physical or emotional jeopardy, and you have the sympathy factor at work right away.

• **Hardship**: If the protagonist has to face some misfortune not of his own making, sympathy abounds. The key to this is not to allow the character to whine about it. There can be moments when they break down due to hardship, but don't let him stay there for long. We admire people who try to overcome.

• **Misfortune**: Readers love people who face long odds. We love to root for the underdog.

The fourth way to establish sympathy is one of the most important – **vulnerability**. Brandon Sanderson is a prolific fantasy author who came up with three laws for writing fantasy novels. His second law sums up vulnerability perfectly.

"Sanderson's second law: Limitations > Powers"

Put another way, a character's weaknesses are more interesting than his strengths. Sanderson uses Superman as his example. He states that Superman's powers are not what makes him interesting, but his limits, specifically his vulnerability to kryptonite and the code of ethics he received from his parents.

Rule # 5: Use weakness.

It can make your characters come to life.

All of these can apply to any character, of course, but they are vital for your protagonist. As the lens through which we view your story, your main character must be a real lens.

The Antagonist

This is the person or thing that works against the protagonist in your story. His entire purpose is to irritate, enrage, belittle, confuse, elude, hunt, and, above all, to confound the main character. Interestingly, as an opposing force the antagonist does not have to be human. This could be a demon, an animal, an alien, a ghost, or even a storm. The antagonist could even be an internal struggle. It could as easily be the protagonist's own alcoholism, cowardice, or mental illness as it could be the smarmy guy trying to seduce the main character's wife.

Even if your antagonist is an asteroid hurtling toward the earth, remember that it should always perform the function of a character. Through conflict and the protagonist's reaction to it, the antagonist should illuminate or reveal something about the main character. Through opposition, an antagonist shows us something about who the main character is.

Secondary Characters

If our story was a movie, this type of character would be receiving the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. His purpose is to support and reinforce the protagonist's role. This is the friend, spouse, boss, dog, or alien from Beta Carotene IX. These characters can get just as much "screen time" as the main character, but always remember that they are not the stars. It's important that they don't "steal the show." This can be a careful balancing act. Be aware that if your secondary character becomes the focus of the story, he just became the protagonist.

The other side of this is that secondary characters are not throwaway characters, either. Note that there should be no useless characters "in the spotlight." Secondary characters should do two things. Through interaction, they should deepen a reader's understanding of the main character, and they should satisfy our expectation for conflict and resolution.

A good way to think of secondary characters is to realize that, for the most part, they could be protagonists if they were part of a different story.

Minor Characters

Remember when we mentioned that there should be no useless characters "in the spotlight." That's because they should be here in the background. Minor characters are incidental, sometimes generic, or momentary characters. In film credits, these characters would be listed as Man 1, Man 2, Cashier, or Homeless Lady. They can speak. They may even say something witty that gives the protagonist (or antagonist) some insight, but we will most likely never see them again.

It is possible to give minor characters names, but it's usually advisable to leave them as generic types. This is because, as the writer, you lend importance to things by describing them. The more you describe something, the more important the reader expects it to be. Consider this example:

THE GUM ON THE MANTLEPIECE

Irina entered the drawing room to ensure a fire would be warming the room when her sister arrived. Before bending to stir the coals, she plucked from her mouth the moist pink wad of gum she'd been chewing since coming to Petersburg from the family crèche in the countryside. The mantelpiece was bare, and Irina planted the large, wet bolus of gum firmly upon it.

At that precise instant, Uncle Vanya entered the room and paused at the piano to play one eerie, dissonant chord, which seemed to hang ominously in the air.

"Irina!" said Masha, rushing in. Her pale skin looked cold from the wintry wind outside. Her eyes regarded her sister in a severe way as she approached the fire to warm herself. Her lustrous, sable hair, long her pride, swayed in the rising heat, coming very, very close to the sticky lump of gum, kept warm and moist by the flames dancing below. The wad lurked like a glowering presence, hungry and malevolent, like a sea anemone waiting patiently for its approaching prey.

Then, Masha moved away and took her sister by the arm. She led her somberly toward the chairs by the fire and said, "Come. We must discuss what to do about this hunter."

"Yes," Irina agreed.

Later that evening, Uncle Vanya cleaned up the gum.

The gum here is incidental, but, by drawing so much attention to it, it's possible to make the reader feel cheated when it turns out to be unimportant.

The same is true of minor characters. It can make our job as writers harder as we need to represent a world that feels real without being too real. The reader is always aware that everything you write is a conscious choice. So, while *you* might spend some time checking out the buxom Italian waitress you spot while on vacation in Rome, knowing you'll likely never see her again, if you have your protagonist do the same, the reader will expect her to be important to the story. If you then changer her from "waitress" to "Isabelle," the reader will *know* she's important and feel cheated if she turns out not to be.

So, have your protagonist notice the buxom Italian waitress and move on. Don't linger more than necessary on minor characters.

Minor characters serve another important function, and that is to bring the world your story is set in to life. It is an easy mistake to make to create a world where the protagonist, antagonist, and maybe a secondary character or two are the only people who act. The real world, however, is full of minor characters that come in and out of our lives every day. Don't inundate your story with minor characters, but they are an excellent tool to create a vibrant background that also tells the reader how your protagonist interacts with the world.

A unique setting, a wild plot, and lots of conflict are all important, but what is most important is to give your characters life. Vivid, real characters can compensate for a mundane setting; but, how do we create these characters? Setting cannot be ignored, of course. It's vital to give your characters a believable world to inhibit. The reader should believe that the story exists for the characters, not the other way around.

Building a Character

First, it's important to realize that, as the writer, you must connect with, understand, and empathize with your characters. It may sound strange, but the principle characters need to be real people in the writer's mind. You need to care what happens to them (for good or ill). If you don't, neither will the reader. One way to get there is to build a profile for your characters. This is an important step for the protagonist and antagonist. It's also a good idea for any major secondary characters.

To begin, it's alright to use an archetype to base your character on. An archetype is an original model or type or an ideal example, and it is a sort of skeleton upon which we can form a character. An archetype is like a character without specific details. So, if we were talking about Rocky, James Bond, or Batman, the archetypes we might base those characters on could be Fighter, Spy, or Vigilante.

Once you have a concept for your character, we begin to fill in as many details as possible. The Character Profile Worksheet is a great tool for this. To do this, use a piece of notebook paper, and follow the prompts below.

Character Profile Prompts

I. Name/Race/Male/Female/Age/Animal/Spirit/Other

We start off with some very basic traits for our character. Names actually require a little more thought than simply choosing one off a list. Names are symbolic and should not be arbitrary. Think about this: If you hear the name Linus, what short of person do you picture? It can make your job harder if you try to convince a reader that your protagonist is strong, valiant, and capable of fighting off a formidable enemy if you give him a name like Bernard. Spend some time choosing a name that fits your idea for your character. Also, be willing to change later on if you think your character seems more like a Chad than a Ralphie.

Name should be based on gender, of course. Some names can work equally well for men or women, but Horace is as terrible a name for a girl as Wendy would be for a boy. Maybe your character isn't even human. In which case, you will need to think even harder about this topic. Readers tend to like names they can identify with. An alien named Zavis is more accessible than one named Xcvczt.

Once you have a name, determine how old your character is. Whether you reveal that to the reader or not, you need to know. Children, teens, adults, and seniors all react to the world in a different way.

II. Height/Weight/Body Build

These physical characteristics should help fix the appearance of the character in your mind. If possible, try to approach this topic from a descriptive standpoint. This will help you later in introducing your character. It's fine to say, 'Weight: 160lbs. Height: 6'3"', but try to think of it from the reader's perspective as well. Weight: 160 lbs., lanky. Height: 6'3", tall. These descriptions should paint a picture in your head.

III. Hair and Eyes

Approach this the same way. It's easy to say that a girl has blue eyes and leave it at that, but if this is your protagonist (or antagonist), you want the description to really pop out and stick in the reader's mind. How much more engaging is it to say that she has sapphire eyes and raven hair? Remember, being descriptive here will help you later.

IV. Dominant Physical Trait

When a person enters a room, what is the first thing you notice about them? Is it their height or hair color? Do they have a limp? A dominant physical trait is something that stands out more than anything else. It's ok to exaggerate a bit for effect in fiction writing. So, our protagonist may have "iron grey eyes" or "ratty bleached hair." Maybe your character is completely average (and that's okay), but even then something should be able to stick in the reader's mind (even if it's nothing more than a cocked eyebrow).

V. Dominant Mannerism

Think about the characters that stand out most in your mind from television or movies. Did they have a particular behavior that was specific to them? If it was Kojak's lollipop or Darth Vader's metallic breathing or Columbo's "Oh, just one more thing…" some characters have an odd or interesting idiosyncrasy that can leave a lasting impression in your mind.

VI. Dominant Core Trait

A dominant core trait is an outward behavior that stems from a deep-rooted and often hidden inner nature. A main character should have a core trait that he is either aware of or not. Someone who can't complete a project until it is done perfectly is a perfectionist (a core trait). Another who portrays himself as an honest, law-abiding citizen yet cannot refrain from stealing is an example of a core trait that is interesting to the reader, especially if you can show that the character with the trait is in denial. Maybe it provides some of the conflict in the story when he is forced to face this part of his personality.

VII. Strengths/Weaknesses

Traits are characteristics that we are born with. The strengths we are talking about here are achievements. They could be physical, mental, or spiritual. 'Strength' is something that helps your character to achieve his goals. Weaknesses are those things that slow your character's progress toward achieving his goals. He could either be aware of them or not. A weakness could be a constant battle with anger, self-deprecation, or alcoholism. Maybe it's a fear of snakes. Most people don't like to admit to weakness, but it is our ability to overcome our weaknesses that makes us strong.

VIII. Good Trait

Good traits are those things that make it easy for your reader to root for your character. A protagonist could be kind, generous, affectionate, punctual, or trustworthy. Don't overload him, but he should have some redeeming quality.

Some examples:

Agreeable	Benevolent	Compassionate	Empathetic	Gentle	Pleasant	Steadfast
Amiable	Calm	Concerned	Faithful	Humanitarian	Polite	Sympathetic
Attentive	Caring	Considerate	Friendly	Loyal	Respectful	Thoughtful
Balanced	Committed	Dedicated	Generous	Persistent	Reverent	Trustworthy

IX. Bad Trait

Our traits make us human, whether we like it or not. Even if we don't like to admit it, most of us could make a list of personal bad traits. We might have a quick temper, bouts of selfishness, or we might simply be irresponsible. The point is that none of us are one-dimensional. Each of us is more than the worst things we have done, and we are worse than the best things we have done. So it should be for our characters.

Some examples:

Absentminded	Disrespectful	Harsh	Inconsiderate	Reckless	Tactless	Unfeeling
Callous	Disruptive	Hasty	Irresponsible	Shameful	Thoughtless	Unruly
Careless	Distracting	Heatless	Negligent	Spiteful	Uncaring	Unyielding
Cruel	Foolish	Inattentive	Noisy	Stony	Uncontrolled	Violent

X. Personality

You probably already have an idea of this by now. Just a word or two is all that's needed to describe how your character acts.

Some examples:

Aggressive	Dedicated	Generous	Introverted	Optimistic	Self-Centered	Virtuous
Assertive	Dishonest	Good	Lazy	Persistent	Sensitive	Well-balanced
Blunt	Energetic	Haughty	Methodical	Philosophical	Short-tempered	
Comical	Evil	Honorable	Non-confrontational	Pretentious	Tactful	
Confident	Extroverted	Humble	Observant	Quiet	Tenacious	
Creative	Fearful	Intelligent	Obstinate	Reliable	Understanding	

XI. Clothing Style

People make judgments about us based on our clothing. Not only the style we choose but also the condition of the clothing says much about us even if the assumptions people make are wrong. Clothing can make an outward statement about your character as well as placing them in a specific historical era.

XII. Imperfections

This could be a trait including a nose permanently misshapen by too many fights, a missing finger, or an oddly attractive giggle from an otherwise homely flight attendant. What is imperfect about your character?

XIII. Skills/Knowledge/Education

What skills does your character have? Is he a skilled carpenter, a gifted preacher, or a master chef? Some of these things you will never mention in your story, but knowing them will help cement the character in your mind and possibly suggest how he might react to certain situations.

Is your character a trivia master? Does he know how nuclear reactors function? Perhaps the protagonist knows secrets that will be revealed later. Listing some quick things that are known by the character now can help fill in gaps in your story later.

The education level of your character can range from GED to college degrees. One character might only be street-wise, another educated only in Tibetan meditation.

XIV. Residence

This has to do with setting. Whether the reader spends any time there or not, it's a good idea to know how the character lives. What country does he live in? What type of neighborhood is his house in? Is it a home or just a place to sleep? Is it clean, untidy, or filthy? Again, you may never mention it in story, but this knowledge can help you to add depth to the character.

XV. Worldview

Just like we went through the worldview exercise back in Chapter 1, your characters also have a unique worldview of their own. Does it line up with yours, or are they completely different? What opinions do your characters have of the world? This is an important step, and if you only choose to go into depth on a few of these topics make this one of them. It can be a powerful predictor of decisions and developments within the character. For example, a protagonist named Ben might have a worldview that defines love between a man and woman as physical only. "Women don't listen to words, but they hear pain loud and clear," he says and believes – until he is given 200 hours of community service to be completed near a shelter for battered women. While fulfilling his sentence, he meets and falls in love with a woman staying at the shelter who, to his great relief, is not repulsed by a man sentenced to janitorial duties or with an abusive past. By the end of this story, Ben's worldview and attitude have been changed by a series of dramatic events.

Worldview can be the basis for an entire story.

XVI. Religion

This topic is tied to worldview fairly closely. Your character's beliefs about God, the universe, and man's purpose within it can help determine his decisions, attitudes, hopes, relationships, goals, successes, and health just to name a few things. Even if your character is agnostic or an atheist, this says much about him and can help you predict some of his choices and attitudes.

XVII. Dialogue Style

This doesn't have as much to do with accent (since your reader can't hear it anyway) as it does with how they form sentences, their choice of words, when they speak and when they don't, and how they say what they think. One character may think the antagonist is grandiloquent. Another may just say he's a pompous ass. Each of your characters should have a fairly distinct dialogue style.

XVIII. Occupation

What does your character do to make a living? Does he panhandle; get paid under the table, work in an office, or sleep with older women who supply all his wants and needs?

XIX. Friends/Lovers/Acquaintances

Do not insert a character into your story just to fill space. There are few surer ways to annoy a reader. Characters in your story should fulfill a role. If you have a protagonist with five friends, all of whom are basically interchangeable and perform the same function in the plot, give your protagonist one really good friend instead. It's fine to mention other friends, but leave them in the background.

For example:

After work, Buddy decided to stop by Eddie's place to see what the guys were up to. He parked and let himself in; they'd all be down in the rec room watching the game, no doubt.

He walked down the stairs and found everybody sitting around, watching the game.

"Hey guys," Buddy said and helped himself to a beer from the well-stocked fridge.
"Buddy!" Ralphie called from across the room.
"Good to see you, Buddy," said Eddie, looking his way.
"Hey, Buddy," Billy said, holding up a hand without taking his eyes off the TV.
"Anyone need another beer?" Buddy asked.
"I'll take one," Ralphie said.
"Me, too," said Eddie and caught the one Buddy threw his way.
"Yeah, I could use one, too," said Billy.
Buddy settled in on the couch. Another weekend had begun.

Remember that we lend importance to things by including them in the story. This does not mean that we can never include minor characters, but if your protagonist has more than one friend they need to have more than one personality. Most crucially, they need to be distinguishable by more than the names that have been assigned to them. If they can be collectively referred to as "the guys," there really doesn't need to be more than one of them.

Consider how much cleaner the above example works when written like this:

After work, Buddy decided to stop by Eddie's place to see what the guys were up to. He parked and let himself in; they'd all be down in the rec room watching the game, no doubt.
He walked down the stairs and found everybody sitting around, watching the game.
"Hey, guys," Buddy said and helped himself to a beer from the well-stocked fridge.
"Hey, Buddy," said Eddie, holding up a hand without taking his eyes off the TV. The others all waved with half-hearted interest.
"Anyone need another beer?" Buddy asked. Everyone piped up. Buddy passed out the beers then settled in on the couch. Another weekend had begun.

Notice how we still acknowledge the existence of the other friends, but we only call attention to one, the one that's important to the story. For this topic, it's fine to make a list of all a character's friends and acquaintances, but highlight the ones that will be relevant to the plot. Pick those to make some more detailed notes. How did they meet? What is their relationship like? Your character may think he has a good friend and find out differently later, or he may find himself falling in love with a good friend.

Spend some time with this topic as the people that your character surrounds himself with can speak volumes about what sort of person he is. Just as in real life.

XX. First Impressions

This topic has two parts.
1) What impression does the character give the readers right away?
2) What impression does the character give to other characters?

The answer to these two questions can (and often will be) different. Think about a character that is tough as nails and intimidates most who cross his path but who is longing for a loving relationship on the inside. As the reader, we may see that interior longing well before any of the other characters can crack his tough exterior.

XXI. Known by Others as…

Look back to your list of friends and acquaintances. We can use those to begin building a list of secondary characters. Each character that knows your protagonist will make certain judgments about him. This topic is about those assumptions.

XXII. Characters Views Self as…

How does your character see himself? Does our tough as nails protagonist view himself as intimidatingly as everyone else does, or does he see something else? Maybe he sees the boy that was abused and bullied, the one who eventually made the decision to spend all his time working out, the one who swore he would never be powerless again. The past can be a hard thing to leave behind. When he looks in the mirror does he see the man who can pummel any bad guy or does he see the scared little boy?

Remember, the answer to this topic does not need to line up with how others see this character.

XXIII. Secrets

If your character has secrets, they should be integral to the plot. If you're writing a story about the dissolution of a man's family, the reader will care less about the piece of cake he stole from the office fridge as they will about the affairs he is trying to keep his wife from finding out about. Secrets should be used to aid the plot or deepen our understanding of the character.

XXIV. Main Goal

What is the main thing that the character wants in the story?

XXV. Back Story

Where was the character born? What was he like as a kid? Where did he go to school? By this point, you probably have some good ideas about what happened to the character to make him turn out the way he did. Use that to create a mini-story about what's happened to the protagonist up to this point. This doesn't need to be a detailed biography. It's fine to write it as quick bullet points with a few details to jog your memory. The point here is that a writer who is intimately familiar with a character's past will have less trouble allowing that character to react to situations on his own.

This last step is an important one. We refer to what happens before the story as the "back story." This provides a history of the protagonist and explains why he believes what he does and behaves the way he behaves. It tells the writer where the antagonist came from and how and why those two characters interact. The back story can be a great tool to inform or even create the main story.

This may seem like an awful lot of detail, and it is. Why is it all necessary? One reason is for consistency. Always be aware that readers notice everything. If your character goes from blonde to brunette or from right to left-handed, the readers will notice. With noticing, they are taken out of the story.

The other reason for this level of detail is that the writer must know his characters more intimately than friends or family so he can believably describe what they do and know why they're doing. It. You need to dive deeper into your characters thoughts and emotions than your readers do.

That said, you might never reveal everything about your characters, and you probably shouldn't. Not everything in a character's background is relevant to the story being told. Consider this example:

THE WAITING ROOM

Reggie boarded the train at Montauk and found a seat near the dining car. As he sat there, smelling the appalling cheeseburgers from the adjoining carriage, he stared out the window and started thinking about how he had decided to become a doctor. Even as a boy, he'd been interested in diseases. But, did that mean he had a vocation? The train jolted, keeping him from falling asleep, and the smell of those cheeseburgers was making him nauseous. Blood still made him feel that way, he realized. Why had he made that decision, so many years ago?

He thought back to the advice his Uncle Frank had given him as the tiny houses of Montauk rushed past…

(50 pages later)

… And so he'd been denied the golf scholarship to Penn State. It left a bitter taste in his mouth to this day. But, had premed really been the only other option? True, there was Aunt Katherine to consider, who…

Remember that a reader expects the things you write to have significance by virtue of the fact that you've chosen to write it down. From their perspective, the main story is about what's happening to the protagonist now. Back story is a vital thing for the writer to know, and parts of it can be woven into the story to add depth. Bear in mind, however, that by slapping it all in at once as in the above example, we've just written a 50 page scene with the main action being a man sitting and staring out a window, feeling a little queasy, for page after page after page.

As a writer, it's your job to know your characters, but it's seldom necessary to share all of that information with your readers. Ask yourself if the readers need this information to understand the character or plot. If so let the details come out in scenes where something actually happens. How much more effective would it be to have our narrator worry about his choice to become a doctor while trying to save his wife's life?

Even then, hold onto the information as long as possible. Unless, it's important information for the reader to be able to understand the character, secrets are an excellent way to stay one step ahead of (and surprise) your readers.

Rule #6: Know your characters

Rule #7: Keep secrets

Introductions

I have my characters all figured out; now, how do I introduce them? The short answer is to show, don't tell. Be descriptive but avoid lists. Lists tend to read like a driver's license, and driver's licenses are not usually interesting reading.

Use adjectives and emotion instead, and make it a part of your scene instead of an addition to it.

For example, let's say I've made a character with the following traits:

Name:	Pei Pei Ming	**Age:**	27	**Hair:**	Short, Black
Ethnicity:	Asian/American	**Height:**	6'7"	**Weight:**	275 lbs.
Build:	Very Muscular	**Physical Trait:**	Busy Eyebrows	**Eyes:**	Brown
Mannerism:	Natural Scowl	**Occupation:**	Medical Transcriptionist		
Core Trait:	Pacifist	**Personality:**	Painfully Shy		
Other Traits:	Introverted, Intelligent				

If Pei Pei attends a conference, I would not want to introduce him like this:

Pei Pei Ming, the 27-year-old Asian-American medical transcriptionist, was a painfully shy, introverted, and intelligent pacifist with bushy eyebrows over his brown eyes and a natural scowl. He combed his short black hair and tried to slouch his six-foot-seven-inch, 275 pound very muscular frame so other people wouldn't look at him.

This is wordy and clunky. It reads like a list and does little to move the story forward. I managed to squeeze all the information in there, but it doesn't sound exciting or natural. What if we introduced him this way:

Pei Pei ducked to get through the doorway and shook his head with a quiet sigh. They just didn't make the world to fit people like him. Doors were too short, shirts strained against his biceps and pecs, and people made their hurtful assumptions. He looked around, eyes dancing skittishly across the people gathered in the cavernous meeting hall standing in clumps and groups and talking amid the long rows of chairs. Predictably, those closest to him shot him anxious glances and shied away. He shrunk a bit, pained at the typical reaction, but it was just as well. Had they tried to talk to him, he'd only have tripped over his words. This way he was free to just enjoy the medical conference, alone as usual. He took a seat at the back of the room and waited for the first speaker to emerge and almost didn't notice when the slim, fiery red-headed woman slipped into the chair beside him.

It's much longer, but notice that the story's narrative doesn't stop so I can introduce my character here. Interspersed with the introduction are clues to the setting (cavernous meeting hall, clumps of people standing amid long rows of chairs, medical conference). Also, by using adjectives and descriptive phrases I don't need to spell out the exact details of my profile sheet. It still gets the point across, so instead of saying he's 6'7" tall, we point out that he has to duck to get through the door. And, this depends on what's important to communicate. If Pei Pei's exact height is vital to the plot, I would want to find a way to point out that he's 6'7" in height. If what's important is merely that he's very tall and imposing, what I've written is fine. Ideally, you want to give your reader enough information to form a complete picture in their mind while giving them enough freedom to make the image their own.

Using descriptive language also lets me bring in more information about PeiPei's thoughts and feelings. It allows me to show instead of tell. In the first example, we spelled out that our character was shy and introverted, but they come across as flat, emotionless facts. In the second example, we get a clearer image of how PeiPei feels; what shy and introverted look like for him.

By not stopping the narrative for a description, it also leaves an opening for me to provide a lead-in for what's coming up. In our first example, what happens next? Do we even care? In the second example, who is the fiery red-head? Why is she sitting next to PeiPei, and what will his reaction be? Knowing how he feels, rather than a simple, flat character trait, makes us anticipate his reaction more easily and wonder how it will turn out.

So, let's try to build our own example.

IN CLASS EXERCISE

In-Class Exercise: Build a character as a class and describe him, her, or it boarding a plane.

All writing should be done descriptively, like in our second example. The key here is to use as many senses as you can when describing anything. One of the best ways to draw a reader into a scene is through using more than one of the five senses.

Scent

This is actually the most prominent and powerful of the senses available to us. Believe it or not, scent is more powerful in our minds than any other sense. Scent can instantly trigger memories, thoughts and emotions in our minds. It has the same effect in a story.

Our scene begins with the protagonist (a husband) engaging a secondary character (his wife) on the sidewalk near a bakery. The scent of freshly baked breads and cakes – cinnamon, hot apples, caramelizing sugars and rising yeasts – fills the air and becomes the dominant impression that the writer weaves through the scene. This comforting, homey scent contrasts against the argument between the husband and wife. The writer can reveal the internal thoughts of the wife who is outwardly confrontational but inwardly torn as images of them as playful newlyweds baking dinner rolls in the kitchen mingle with the scents surrounding them now.

Sound

Later, after walking away angrily, the husband enters an old cathedral alone seeking its coveted silence. Hoping for time with his thoughts and with God, he instead fights against the hollow echoes of men erecting scaffolding, apparently to reach a leaky portion of the vaulted ceiling. The gonging drip, drip, drip of water from the ceiling to the tiled floor, and the dull ping of the metal scaffold off the stony walls mock his need for answers.

Sight

Frustrated, he leaves the cathedral. It's dark. He walks along the sidewalk, which is wet from an earlier rain. Everything shines and sparkles as though tiny lights are embedded into every surface, like the stars of heaven had descended and somehow become the jewelry of man-made things.

Touch

After a few hours of walking and thinking, the husband returns home where his wife has been waiting since the argument. He stands in the foyer, rain drizzling beyond the open door behind him, and looks into the sodden eyes of the woman he loves. He goes to her, takes her hand and touches her face. Both are soft and smooth much like warm silk – he is comforted and penitent.

Taste

They kiss. He can taste the cinnamon on her lips and the salt of her tears. He vows never to taste the latter again.

Always consider the five senses when you are writing. You can choose one to be the dominant impression, one that might help to convey the mood of a scene or give the reader a piece of scenery to associate with the setting. When introducing a character, you can use that character's own senses to reveal some of how the character thinks and feels.

OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE

Bunkwork Assignment: Write a 1-5 page story using one of the prompts from class. Your story must:

- **Have a title**
- **Have a beginning, middle, and end**
- **Use the story structure from Chapter 3**
- **Introduce me to your main character**

Chapter 5 Plotting the Course

"Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."
- E.L. Doctorow

We have a good idea now, a unique setting, and some memorable characters with life. How do I make all this into a story? The answer is to use a map.

Outlining

Ask a dozen authors how to outline and you will get a dozen different answers. Some get very detailed and some don't do it at all. This is one of those gray areas of writing that allows for a lot of personalization. As beginning writers, I highly recommend that you use an outline to plot out your story. Experiment with different styles until you find one that works best for you, but try not to think of it as a chore or, worse, restricting. When some writers hear the word 'outline,' they run screaming for the hills. But, outlines are not meant to be a set of handcuffs. Think of it as simply a suggestion. Think of it like a recipe. You can follow a recipe exactly for, say, cheesecake, or you can add a bit of chocolate to the batter and… chocolate cheesecake. You could add a graham cracker crust and cherries to the top and get something different. Recipes guide us, but the creativity still belongs to the chef.

As you write your story, you may find yourself editing your outline. You may find yourself discarding it altogether. What's important is that you think through your characters and plotlines to make sure your initial ideas are sustainable. What an outline does for us is give us a clear picture of point A and point B and the best way to get from one to the other. With this map, it becomes possible to see pitfalls and plot holes before we fall into them. With the ending in sight, it also allows us to stay on track even if we choose to follow a different path from the one that we first laid out. Outlining also allows us to layer in foreshadowing.

With the ability to see the whole story laid out in front of us, we can see opportunities to place clues to things that might be coming up. We know what things the protagonist may have to face and use that to give the reader insights into how he thinks and feels about those situations. Outlining helps you to figure out if a scene should be longer or shorter. If you need to step away from a project for a while and come back to it, an outline will let you know right where you left off when you return.

So, how do we create an outline? There are several different methods. We'll look at only a few here. Again, you do not need to use all of these. You may choose to use a method that isn't even discussed here. The point is to find the way that works best for you. One thing to bear in mind with all methods of outlining, however, is the idea of scenes.

Think in Scenes / Write in Scenes

Stories are told in scenes, not in chapters or paragraphs. This is an important point to remember, especially when working on your outline. Chapters and paragraphs organize your story into coherent thoughts and ideas; they let the reader know what parts of your story go together (as you choose to reveal it to them), but they do not tell the story. It's the scenes that do that.

Think about your favorite movie. Do you remember what happened in the 27th minute, or do you remember what happened in that scene where the bomb was slowly ticking down to zero? Scenes tell the story.

We're not sitting down to write the actual story yet, but it's a good idea to know how scenes are structured before we start laying them out in the outline. So, there are a few important points to remember.

1. **Scenes exist for a reason.**
   Just like with characters, there should be no useless scenes. Whether there is progress or a setback, the plot should always remain in motion. Show that in your scenes. Even if you are depicting nothing more than an interaction between characters, the plot should always be looming in the background.
2. **Scenes take place at a specific time and place.**
   Change either one and you've changed scenes.
   If your protagonist is trapped in a room with the building on fire. The scene is about him trying to escape before he burns to death. Once he breaks the window and jumps outside, you've begun a brand new scene. We'll look at this in more detail later.
3. **Scenes are a little like short stories all on their own.**
   There should be a goal and progress or setbacks on the way to achieving that goal.

With this in mind, how do I open a scene? Remember that a scene can act like a miniature story, so the opening to your scene should grab the reader's attention just like the opening to your story should.

Setting

By opening with this, we can make the reader experience the setting as the characters do. Be careful with this option, though. Your descriptions need to be dynamic and vibrant; they need to draw the reader in. Use all the senses available to you to describe what the characters are experiencing .

Dialogue

If you open a scene with dialogue, do not make it mundane. Make it interesting or unexpected. Arriving at a scene in mid-argument will grab a reader's attention much better than listening to a character talk about the warm weather.

Action

This is always a good option when it is possible. Sometimes, we need to convey mundane details or back story to explain a plot point. That's fine, but placing a tense, exciting scene before that can carry your reader's interest through the slower bits. Be aware that 'action' does not necessarily mean explosions, car chases, or bar fights. Action just has to do with high stakes and tension .

Regardless of how you open a scene, always be aware of the goal. What is the point of your scene? It could be revealing a secret, accomplishing some achievement, or strengthening the relationship between two characters. The goal could be nothing more than getting some money out of the ATM. The important point is that, whatever is happening in your scene, the goal should be important to the plot. It does not have to be directly related to the plot, but success or failure should definitely influence the overall story. In our example above, the plot itself might be about finding the Maltese Mongoose, but our protagonist finds himself in a burning building with his life in jeopardy. The goal of the scene becomes to survive, to escape the fire. Does that help the protagonist to find the Maltese Mongoose? It may not tell him anything about where the fabled Mongoose is, but if he died, it would certainly hinder him. Remember that scenes can help or hinder progress in the main plot .

The Four Elements of a Good Scene

1. Cause and Effect: Scene 1 leads to scene 2 leads to scene 3 leads to… It is certainly possible to tell a story out of order (this is called a non-linear story), but there should still be some sort of logical progression, each scene building on the information in the previous scene. The movie *Pulp Fiction* is a great example of this. The story happens completely out of order, but the order it is told in is chosen very carefully, with secrets being revealed slowly from scene to scene.

2. Every main character in a scene has a plan. Each of them has a way that they want the scene to play out. Some of them may be at cross-purposes. If the protagonist and antagonist are both present in the scene, chances are good that they will want opposing things, but they both have a plan.

3. **Always** move the story forward. No matter what happens in the scene, the story does not stop. Unless God Himself shows up in your story and hits the pause button, life goes on whether your characters want it to or not.

4. A scene has a goal. Use it to establish drama. It's important to establish one as early as possible to give yourself as many options for dramatic development and tension in your story. Tension is excitement, and excitement will keep a reader from putting your story down.

With this in mind, we can start building our outline. Remember that, whichever method you choose, your outline should describe the beginning of your story, the ending, and the scenes in between. This is our map to guide us to the destination.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One: Jay, 8 years old, and Jack, his father / Front Porch
Event A: Jack enters and notices Jay is looking very sad. He tries to find out the cause.
Event B: Jay resists his father's efforts at conversation. He is lonely because he's homeschooled and doesn't see his friends very often, but he does not want to talk to his father about it.
Event C: Jack eventually gives up and goes into the house feeling very worried about his son.

Chapter Two: Jack and Sue, Jay's mother / Living Room
A: Jack talks to Sue about Jay's mood and how it's been consistently bad lately.
B: Sue agrees and realizes that the problem is Jay's loneliness.
C: They discuss possible solutions: vacation, a sleepover for Jay's friends, public school...

Chapter Three: Jay, Jack and Sue / Living Room, later
A: Jay wanders into the room, looking like he really doesn't want to be there. He perks up a little and looks curious when he spots a large cardboard box in the middle of the room.
B: He looks suspicious at receiving a gift as it isn't his birthday or a holiday, but Sue and Jack talk him into opening it.
C: Harley, a golden lab is revealed resting in the box when Jay opens it. The dog looks up and leaps up happily into Jay's arms when he sees him.
D: Jay laughs, shocked but happy as he collapses onto the floor with Harley. Jack and Sue look on with smiles.

The point of this style of outlining is to see where problems lie. Note that there are only minimal details. It tells me who is present, where the scenes take place, what happens in each scene, and how or why it happens. This is particularly useful in spotting where any problems might come up.

This type of outline also shows what types of characters are needed. I need to design character profiles for Jay, Jack, and Sue. I'll also need to give Harley the dog some sort of personality. Will I need to know anything about golden Labs? With this type of outline, I can see these things coming and plan appropriately.

Signpost Outline

In this method, placeholders briefly note the type of scenes you will need, including the character, setting, and a general idea of what happens. It's similar to the Chapter outline but much less detailed (remember to stick to the basics here). Keep in mind that we aren't writing the story just yet. We're only outlining the events in it. Below is an example of a simple story outlined using this method.

Setting: A home in the country amid woods and open fields, very isolated
Characters in story:

- Jay: age 8, homeschooled and very lonely
- Jack: Dad
- Sue: Mom
- Harley: a dog

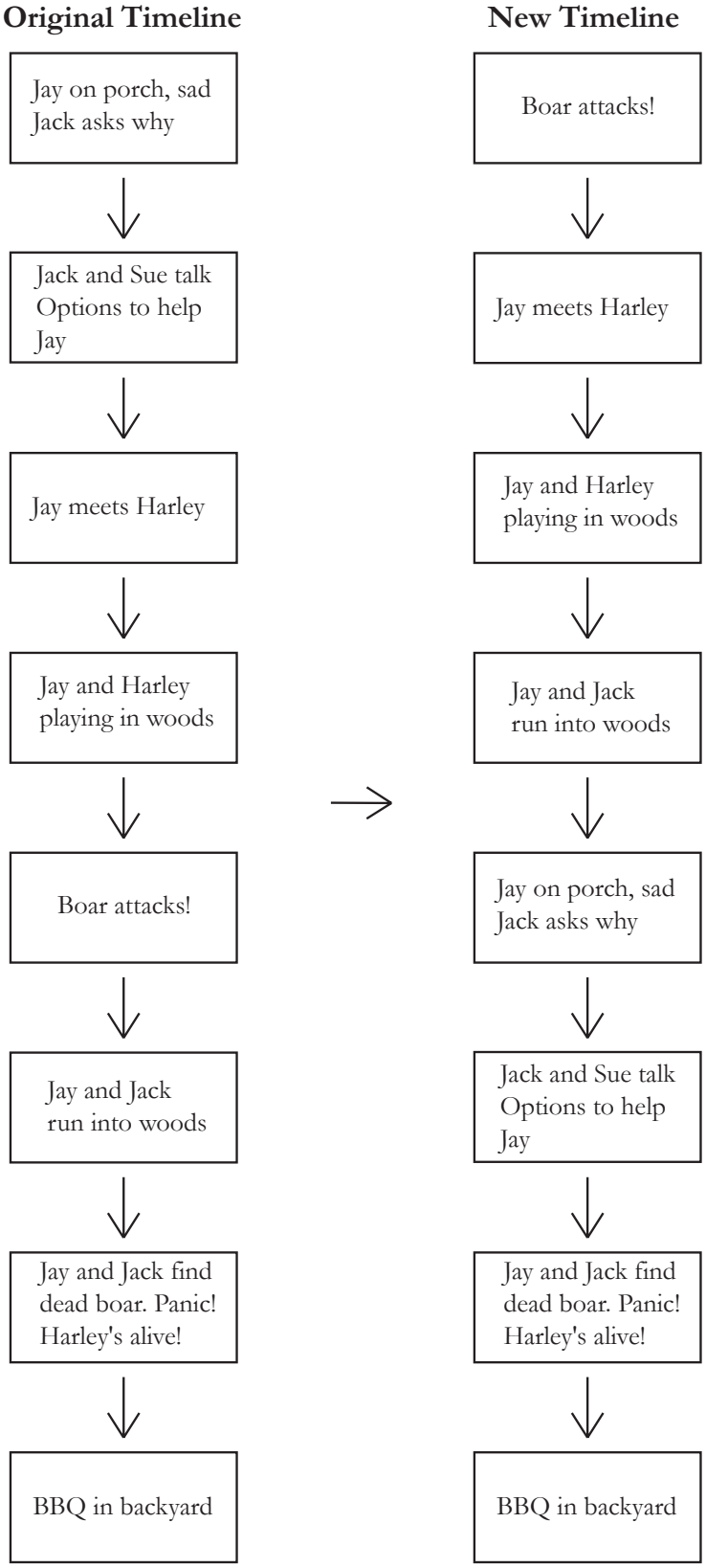
Story:

- Scene 1: Front Porch
  - Characters: Jay, Jack
  - Plot: Jack notices Jay looking very sad and asks why
- Scene 2: Living Room
  - Characters: Jack, Sue
  - Plot: Jack and Sue discuss Jay's sadness. They come up with a few different options to help.
- Scene 3: Living Room (next day)
  - Characters: Jay, Jack, Sue, Harley
  - Plot: Jack and Sue present a dog (Harley) to an overjoyed Jay.
- Scene 4: Woods (not long after scene 3)
  - Characters: Jay, Harley
  - Plot: Jay and Harley exploring and playing, enjoying time in forest
- Scene 5: Woods
  - Characters: Jay, Harley, a boar
  - Plot: A boar rushes in and attacks. Harley defends Jay by fighting the boar. Jay runs for help
- Scene 6: Backyard
  - Characters: Jay, Jack
  - Plot: Jay runs in yelling for help. He explains in a panic about the boar. Jack grabs his rifle. They run back into the woods.
- Scene 7: Woods
  - Characters: Jay, Jack, Harley
  - Plot: Jay and Jack arrive back at the scene of the fight. The ground is all churned up and bloody. They boar lies dead near a tree. There is a long moment of panic as Jay and Jack call desperately, searching for Harley. Harley runs in moments later, happy, scratched up and bloody, but not seriously hurt.
- Scene 8: Backyard
  - Characters: Jay, Jack, Sue, Harley
  - Plot: Jay washing the dog while Jack cooks a barbecue. Boy and dog are now best friends for life.

This sort of outline gives you a lot of freedom up front, but it leaves more of the details to be worked out in the writing of your story. Note that this allows you to see where you can add things like foreshadowing and characterization. Maybe it would be a good idea to include signs of the boar in Scene 4 that the characters miss. Working with this sort of outline allows you to see the story quickly as a whole and make decisions about what to include or exclude.

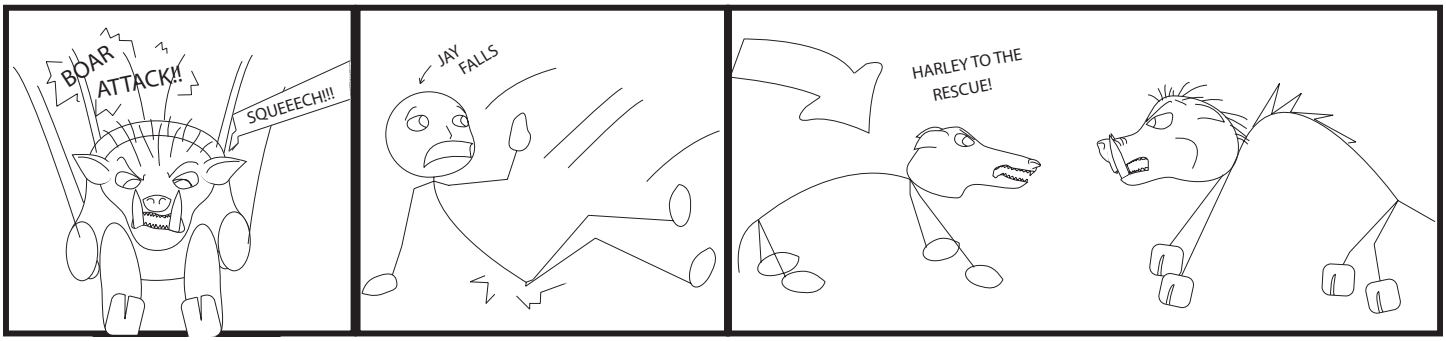
Note Card Outline

Remember using Flash Cards? That's the idea with this type of outline. With this method you write a brief description of each scene as in the signpost method, with each scene on a separate note card or piece of paper. Be sure to note the major plot details and the scene's purpose. The benefit here is that the scenes are portable and can be mixed up, allowing you to rearrange them and find the best order for your story. Want to start with a car chase and follow up with a flashback of what led to that point? This is a great outlining method to use.



Storyboarding Outline

This is a great method for those who are more artistically inclined. In this method, we build a sort of short graphic novel with rough drawings of each scene as it plays out. This is a great outlining technique for people who think visually. It also gives you a great head start on describing your characters and setting since you need to draw them out first .



Screenplays

Speaking of visualization, screenwriting can be a great method of outlining as well as an end in itself. For those who are interested in writing screenplays, there is lots of money to be made in this field (a single screenplay sold to a major studio can easily net a seven figure payout), but there is also a lot more competition. If you are writing professionally, there is also a lot less freedom in formatting. The film and theater industry have very exacting standards, and those agents who review screenplays will not even look at your work if it does not meet those standards .

The advantage of screenplays is that they need far less detail to be complete. When describing a scene, we only need to note if it is inside or out, the time of day and a word or two about the location. It would look something like this:

```
INT. – BEDROOM – NIGHT
EXT. – PRISON YARD – AFTERNOON
```

This works in a screenplay (and in an outline) because the script itself is a guideline for the director, the set designer, or production manager. They (or you, as the writer) are responsible for filling in the details of what a bedroom looks like, or a prison yard or factory. This is one of the big reasons why screenplays work very well as outlines. It paints the story in broad strokes.

Screenplays operate with a theme and premise. A good premise comes from a theme of emotion – love, fear, hate, desire – and revolves around a character, conflict and conclusion. *Othello*, for example, carries a theme of jealousy; *Titanic* – love; *Silence of the Lambs* – courage. It is the characters' motivations that drive the plot. In *Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lecter states his motivation when he says, "I want a view." He wants freedom above all else.

A good way to find this is to list everything your character wants and pick the ***one*** thing they would sacrifice anything or everything to achieve or protect.

Screenplays also tend to follow a 3-Act structure. In a feature-length screenplay, one page generally represents one minute of screen time. Act One is typically 30 pages long and establishes character, setting, motivation, and conflict in the first 10 pages. Think about your favorite movie. Within the first ten minutes did you know where the story was taking place, who the characters were, and what they wanted?

Act Two is typically 60 pages long and represents the part of the story where goals are accomplished, conflict is faced, and the climax and change is reached. This is the main body of the story. Act Three represents the resolution and is typically 10-20 pages.

All of this should sound familiar at this point. A good outline should work like a screenplay in the basics. It should show character, setting, conflict, and resolution. It should identify the problems and how your characters overcome them.

If you use the screenplay option as either a goal in itself or as an outlining technique, be aware that screenplays are very heavy on dialogue. Unlike written stories, theater and films can only rely on visual and audible cues for the audience. That limits the number of senses available for description. If you can't see it or hear it, you can't experience it in a movie. That doesn't make a movie better or worse than a book. They just accomplish different things in different ways. For this reason, dialogue becomes crucial to a successful screenplay, and it is one of the hardest but most vital elements of a story to master. It takes practice.

In proper screenplay format, the first scene in our story about Jay and Harley would look something like this:

EXT. - PORCH - AFTERNOON
JACK enters. He sees JAY sitting on the porch looking sad.

JACK
What's wrong?

JAY
Nothin'.

JACK
Jay, come on. It's not nothing. You look like someone stole your shoes.

JAY
(sighs)
So?

JACK
So, talk to me. What's wrong?

JAY
I said it's nothin'! Jeez...

JACK
You know if you talk about your problems sometimes they're easier to deal with.

JAY
Yeah. And, sometimes they're not.

JACK
(sighs)
Well... If you want to talk about it later just let me know, okay? I'm just worried about you.

JAY
Yeah, fine.

JACK exits into the house looking worried.

Note the emphasis on dialogue. From an outlining standpoint, this is very useful because all the dialogue work is done up front. You can spot problems, work on making it more natural, and try to find a unique voice for each character. It's more work when you start out, but when you sit down to actually write out the story, most of the hard work is finished. At that point, it's just a matter of plugging in the details. As we said above, though, it takes practice to get it right. Many beginning writers find dialogue to be one of the most challenging aspects of writing.

Dialogue

Dialogue represents what the characters say. It can be either direct or indirect, and it's used to create action or tension or atmosphere, or it reveals what kind of people the characters are. Like characters, dialogue should inform or reveal; it should illuminate either character or plot. Many beginning writers have some difficulty when giving characters lines of dialogue. An avid reader can quickly detect an amateur writer by his use of dialogue. Following are some tools to consider when you use dialogue:

1. Try to give each character a different 'voice.'

This can be as simple as the words a character uses or the figures of speech. It's an important point, however. A story where every character 'sounds' the same can get very confusing to the reader.

2. Dialogue should be a 'slice of life.'

It should sound natural. There is a rhythm to the way that people speak that should be reflected in the way that your characters speak. The best way to test this out is to say it out loud and listen to how it sounds.

3. Show emotion and avoid 'helpers.'

This, again, is 'show, don't tell.' Consider the following examples:

Bedelia's lip was trembling as she cowered in the corner. Tom was angry, and he'd hit her and split her eyebrow, causing it to bleed. He would get like this when he drank, and she would always hate it. It would make her nervous and she would drop things.

"Why can't you do anything right? You stupid cow!" Tom yelled angrily.

"I'm sorry. Please don't be angry," said Bedelia, frightened. She was sniffling and it made Tom get even angrier. He hit her again.

In this example, there are a number of problems. It's littered with helping verbs (count the number of times was is used). Helpers in dialogue are something else. The helper here is the word 'angrily' in 'Tom yelled angrily.' It's unnecessary and underestimates the reader. What you should concentrate on is showing me that Tom is angry with his dialogue rather than just telling me with a tag. The word 'angrily' does nothing to make me see what his anger looks like. To fix this, we should eliminate the helping verbs, the dialogue helper and rework the scene to look something like this:

Bedelia cowered in the corner before Tom's rage. Her lip trembled and her eyebrow bled, split by his class ring where he'd slugged her. She hated the alcohol and what it did to him almost as much as she hated her own clumsiness.

"Why can't you do anything right? You stupid cow!" Tom yelled.

"I'm sorry. Please don't be angry," said Bedelia. Tom's face twisted in fury at her sniffles, and he hit her again.

4. Avoid small talk.

Dialogue can be handled in one of two ways – direct and indirect. Direct dialogue is anything inside quotation marks. It represents the exact words that a character says. But, there is a pace to a story that needs to be considered when handling dialogue. In real life, when we run into someone we know, we exchange pleasantries and talk about banal topics, often never getting around to discussing anything serious. If you do this in a story, however, it can take a tense, fast-paced scene and bring it to a dead stop. It can kill the tension and interest before it even gets started. For example:

"Hi, Mary."
"Hey, Kevin. How are you?"
"Good, good. How are the kids?"
"They're doing really well. How's Stacy?"
"A lot better. The PT's really helping."
"That's great. Hey, did you guys watch the game last night? Green Bay really came through."
"Yeah. We'll get you next time, though."
"Listen, the reason I called you down here is because there's been another murder at the docks. We could really use your help."

Indirect dialogue is dialogue that happens outside of quotation marks. It informs the reader what the character said without directly quoting him, and is a great way to skim over small talk. The discussion of the kids and the Packers is really unnecessary to the plot of the scene. Using indirect dialogue, we can also include clues about setting and character that we don't necessarily get in direct dialogue. Using indirect dialogue, we can rewrite this scene like this:

I walked into the Captain's office and sat in one of the old leather chairs. They hadn't allowed smoking in the precinct for a decade, but somehow it still smelled like cigars. Mary beat around the bush as usual, even getting in a jab at the Lions, before she got down to business.

"Listen, the reason I called you down here," she said as she leaned against her desk, "is because there's been another murder at the docks. We could really use your help."

See the difference? The small talk is still there, but it's understood and doesn't slow down or get in the way of the plot.

5. Be cautious of speech tags.

As we talked about redundancy, these can be overdone as well. Speech tags are the indicators of who is speaking. 'He said,' 'She said,' 'Miss Watson said,' and so on. As we mentioned earlier, there is a rhythm to speech, a pattern. Once you've established the pattern of who is speaking, the reader expects that pattern to continue. Especially if you only have two people speaking, it becomes obvious that the speakers are proceeding in A, B, A, B, A, B order. It's alright to use speech tags once in a while, but they aren't needed on every line. Establish the pattern, and then let the dialogue do the talking. Whenever possible, show the emotion in the words, not in the speech tags. If it is obvious who's speaking, you may not even need to use speech tags at all, such as in our example:

"Hi, Mary."
"Hey, Kevin. How are you?"
"Good, good. How are the kids?"
"They're doing really well. How's Stacy?"
"A lot better. The PT's really helping."
"That's great. Hey, did you guys watch the game last night? Green Bay really came through."
"Yeah. We'll get you next time though."
"Listen, the reason I called you down here is because there's been another murder at the docks. We could really use your help."

This exchange works without speech tags because we point out who the speakers are and their pattern right away. If you wanted to use speech tags, you could as easily say:

"Hi, Mary," I said as I walked into the office.
"Hey, Kevin. How are you?" said the Captain, leaning on the desk.
"Good, good. How are the kids?"
"They're doing really well. How's Stacy?"
"A lot better. The PT's really helping."
"That's great. Hey, did you guys watch the game last night? Green Bay really came through."
"Yeah. We'll get you next time though."
"Listen, the reason I called you down here is because there's been another murder at the docks. We could really use your help."

Again, establish the pattern and use it. What you want to avoid is 'he said', 'she said' on every single line .

6. Watch out for stilted English (meaning stiff and artificially formal speech).

Direct dialogue is a special case in English grammar. When people speak, they tend to use contractions, run-on sentences, and slang. We drop entire words out of sentences and speak in fragments. In regular narration, grammar is very important. When you are inside quotation marks, however, anything goes. Bear in mind that it still needs to be understandable to the reader, but this is the one place where you can regularly break the rules. In fact, it sounds unnatural if you don't. The other part of this is to avoid overusing names. In real life, we might use someone's name once or twice in a conversation unless we specifically need to get their attention. If it's someone you know well, you might never use their name. Be aware of that when writing dialogue. As an example:

"Hello, John. How are you, today? I heard that you got an A on your examination."
"Yes, Mary. I got a 97% on the test that I took yesterday."
"What was the name of the course, John?"
"It was a general studies course called Environmental Science, Mary."

What you don't want is for reading your dialogue to become a chore. Let's drop some words, put in a contraction, and cut out most of the names and see if it sounds more realistic.

"John! What's up? Heard you got an A."
"Yeah, a 97!"
"What course?"
"Environmental Science."

It is well worth spending some time practicing dialogue until you can write it in a natural way. Read it out loud. Have someone else read it. Mastery of dialogue is a large piece of improving your writing.

Plotting the Course

Outlining is about plotting out the course of your story, and it's important to know the difference between story and plot. A story is about what happens. Plot answers the question: 'why?' It is the plot that gives the story meaning and purpose (much like the theme behind your premise). The plot of your story is not only what the characters do but why they do it .

The outline should give you an idea at least (if not a clear picture) of who the protagonist and antagonist are, what the conflict in the story is, what obstacles your characters will face, how those obstacles are overcome, and what effect your solutions will have.

We've only discussed a few different methods of outlining. Use one of these or make up a method of your own; find the way that works best for you to get the most out of your outline. Within an outline, you can change when two characters meet. You can clearly see the path your story might take, but you can chop, hack, change locales, or even events. Remember that this is *your* story, your world. Have fun with it. However you outline, it is not set in stone. The only time that an outline can't be changed is when a publisher decides it is ready to be printed or you decide it's done.

OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE

Bunkwork Assignment: Write a 1-6 page story using one of the prompts from class. Your story must:

- **Have a title**
- **Have a beginning, middle, and end**
- **Use the story structure from Chapter 3**
- **Use Dialogue**
- **Show a Crisis and Resolution**

Chapter 6 The Story Itself

Writing is an art. We've mentioned this before, but it's worth thinking about this again here, before we sit down to start writing our story. It is not a science. There are steps to writing, but the order and manner in which you carry them out is entirely up to you. To compare it to another art, think about painting. If you are painting, do you draw the background first, the trees on the left side of the canvas, or the house on the right? Where do you start, and does it matter? It really is up to you. However, when we first start to paint, maybe as children, we use paint-by-numbers and do things in a specific, repeatable order.

It's the same with writing. Some authors start at the beginning and work religiously forward. Others write the middle of the story first and work outward. Some authors actually write the end of the story first and work backward to the beginning. As beginning writers, we will focus on a certain order to writing, but be aware that the order you choose to use can change over time.

How do I tell a story?

Step One: The Introduction

Also known as the Orientation, the main job of this part of the story is to introduce the setting and the main character. We are literally 'orienting' the reader in the world that we are creating. The beginning of the story must grab the reader's attention, describe the setting, mood and tone of the story, and introduce a protagonist that the reader will care about, even worry about, and emotionally invest time and attention into. If readers don't care about your protagonist, they won't care about your story, either.

In essence, you want to set reader expectations and give them a portrait of the main character by allowing them to glimpse his normal life. If your protagonist is a detective, we want to see him at a crime scene. If you're writing a romance, we want to see normal life for the young woman searching for love. Whatever portrait you draw of your character's life, keep in mind that it will also serve as a promise to your readers of the transformation that this character will undergo as the story progresses.

For example, if you introduce us to Frank, the happily married man next door, readers instinctively know that Frank's idyllic life is about to be turned upside down – perhaps by the death of his spouse or his marriage. Something will soon rock the boat and he will be altered forever because when we read about harmony at the start of a story, it's a promise that discord is about to come. Readers expect this.

Please note that 'normal life' doesn't mean 'pain-free life.' The story might begin while your protagonist is depressed, hopeless, grieving or trapped in a sinking submarine. That could be what's typical for your character at this moment. When that happens, it's usually another crisis that will serve to kick-start the story .

That said there are three typical ways to launch a story:

1. **Fundamental Launch**: This method sticks to the basics. Describe the setting, the protagonist, and make it clear how your protagonist feels about the value that is about to be threatened. What's important, in more or less all launches, is to establish the status quo.

2. **Mission Launch**: This is similar to the Fundamental Launch, but we begin with an Event that causes the protagonist to embark on a 'mission', whether it be profound or mundane. Mission stories can be about the main mission or about what happens along the way .

3. **Enhancement Launch**: This type lends itself more to Character -driven stories.
An Event improves a human value – love, life, family, wealth, self-worth – and the story shows how your protagonist desperately tries to keep this enhancement or deals with the consequences of it .

The Hook

"There's one thing I'm sure of. An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know more about this." -Stephen King

The hook is your opening line. How many chances do you get to make a first impression? So it is with your opening line, your hook. This is your chance to grab the reader's attention and hold on to it. Think of the hook in terms of fishing. If you drop a hook in the water with no bait, how easy will it be to catch a fish? But, if you bait the hook it will draw the fish in. Once you have the fish on the line, you need to keep that line tight or the fish will likely slip away. The fish here is your reader; the bait is your opening line. There should be no boring words here. The first 50 words, the first 50 pages, need to capture a reader's interest. This is especially true if you are on the outside and trying to get published. An agent will typically ask for the first two or three chapters. If you can't impress them in that time, prepare for rejection.

For hooks, there are some general guidelines that we should consider:

The first cardinal rule of opening lines is that they set the tone for the story to follow. An opening line should have a distinctive voice, point of view, and some hint of characterization. By the end of the first paragraph, we should also know something about the setting and conflict to come, unless there is some reason to withhold that information (remember: writers should keep secrets from the reader when it serves the story's purpose). In other words, the opening should build momentum.

Resist the urge to start too early. You might be tempted to begin your narrative before the action actually starts, such as when a character wakes up to what will eventually be a challenging or dramatic day. But unless you're writing *Sleeping Beauty,* waking up is rarely dramatic. Often, when we start this way, it's because we are struggling to write our way into the narrative rather than letting the story develop its own momentum. Better to begin at the first moment of conflict. If the protagonist's early morning rituals are essential to the story line, or merely entertaining, they can always be included in the back story or flashbacks later.

Remember that small hooks catch more fish than big ones. It's true that the more unusual or extreme your opening line, the more likely it is to hook the reader, but beware that it also sets the tone of the story and the expectations of the reader. If your hook is extremely strange or misleading, you might have trouble reaching the bar that you set. Going for the gusto here is fine, but know that you're making promises that you then have to deliver on.

Avoid getting ahead of your reader. One of the easiest pitfalls in starting a story is to begin with an opening line that is confusing upon first reading, but that makes perfect sense once the reader learns additional information later in the story. The problem here is that if you confuse the reader too much at the outset, they may not even make it to the later parts of the story. This isn't to say that you can't include information in your opening that acquires *additional* meaning once the reader learns more. It's a highly rewarding technique, but the opening should make sense on both levels – with *and* without knowledge that will be acquired later.

Be careful with dialogue. Starting with dialogue can be a great way to launch a reader right into the personality of a character, but starting with a conversation can be an easy way to lose the reader. You need to be aware that the reader doesn't yet know who the characters are and take that into account. A reader needs to have context to understand what's happening.

Revisit the beginning once you reach the end. Sometimes a story evolves so significantly during the writing process that an opening line, no matter how brilliant, no longer applies to the story that follows. The only way to know is to reconsider the opening sentence once the final draft of the story is complete.

Opening lines set the stage for the story to follow. Consider the following examples :

"Marsh struggled to kill himself."
-*The Hero of Ages* by Brandon Sanderson
"Many things are not as they seem: The worst things in life never are."
-*White Knight* by Jim Butcher
"'Joey, Joey? O God! Joey?' his mother cried out of her extremity and pain."
-*Captains and the Kings* by Taylor Caldwell
"Everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard about the contest."
-*Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline
"From the top of the large boulder he sat on, Ensign Tom Davis looked across the expanse of the cave toward Captain Lucius Abernathy, Science Officer Q'eeng and Chief Engineer Paul West perched on a second, larger boulder, and thought, *Well, this sucks.*"
-*Redshirts* by John Scalzi

Step Two: Crisis

The crisis is **The Event** that disrupts your character's life and threatens some fundamental value. Usually, this disrupts the status quo as well and throws the character's life out of order. The Event represents the moment that a protagonist realizes a goal and is provoked into action.

"When written in Chinese, the word crisis is composed of two characters: one represents danger, the other represents opportunity." -John F. Kennedy

The crisis that tips your character's world upside down must, of course, be one that your protagonist cannot immediately solve. That would make for a very short and uninteresting story. It is an unavoidable, irrevocable challenge that sets the movement of the story into motion.

Typically, your protagonist will have the harmony of both his external and internal worlds upset by the crisis that initiates the story. One of these two imbalances might have happened before the beginning of the story, but usually at least one will occur on the page for your readers to experience with your protagonist, and the intersection of these will drive the story forward. It is the crisis that leads to the escalating conflict of the story. This conflict can be introduced within the Crisis step, and it should be if one was not introduced in the Introduction.

Depending on the genre, the crisis that alters your character's world might be a call to adventure—a quest that leads to a new land, or a prophecy or revelation that he's destined for great things. Mythic, fantasy and science-fiction novels often follow this pattern. In crime fiction, the crisis might be a new assignment to a seemingly unsolvable case. In romance, the crisis might be undergoing a divorce or breaking off an engagement.

In each case, though, life is changed and it will never be the same again.

George gets fired. Amber's son is kidnapped. Larry finds out his cancer is terminal. Whatever it is, the normal life of the character (the status quo) is forever altered, and he is forced to deal with the difficulties that this crisis brings.

There are two primary ways to introduce a crisis into your story. Either begin the story by letting your character have what he desires most and then rip it away, or deny him what he desires most and then dangle it in front of him. So, he'll lose something vital and spend the story trying to regain it, or he'll see something desirable and spend the story trying to obtain it.

Say you've imagined a character who desires love more than anything else. His deepest fear will be abandonment. You'll want to introduce the character by showing him in a satisfying, loving relationship and then insert a crisis that destroys it, or you'll want to show the character's initial longing for a mate, and then dangle a promising relationship just out of his reach so that he can pursue it throughout the story.

Likewise, if your character desires freedom most, then he'll try to avoid enslavement. So, you might begin by showing that he's free and then enslave him, or begin by showing that he's enslaved and then thrust him into a freedom-pursuing adventure.

It all has to do with what the main character desires, and what he wishes to avoid.

Both the Introduction and Crisis should be about establishing the goals of the story. Establish the main goal ***early*** (within the first 25% of the story). This allows the reader to 'keep score' and keep track of progress or setbacks and makes the story much more satisfying for them. A good example is a football game. Each team has an ultimate goal (to score the most touchdowns) that is opposing (protagonist and antagonist). With those goals in mind, and the rules of the game understood, it becomes both dramatic and easy to see if a team is doing well or not. It's the same with a story. Readers want to be able to tell if the protagonist is making progress or not, even if that information isn't known to the protagonist himself.

This doesn't mean that we can't play tricks on the reader. Using the element of surprise to make them think that progress is being made only to reveal that there was actually a setback is a good tool to build interest. There's a balance to be maintained, though. Readers who feel cheated are not happy readers.

Remember that all characters, no matter minor, have goals. They all want something. Make them earn it.

Step Three: Escalating Conflict

Conflict, as we've mentioned before, is the *engine* of the story. It moves the story forward. If you haven't introduced one or more conflicts in Step One, **do** so by the end of Step Two.

Remember when we mentioned pebble people and putty people? 'If you take a pebble and throw it against a wall, it will bounce off the wall unchanged. But if you throw a ball of putty against a wall hard enough, it will change shape.

Always in a story, your main character needs to be a putty person.' When you throw him into the crisis of the story, he is forever changed and he will take whatever steps he can to try to solve his struggle; that is, to get back to his original shape (life before the crisis).

But he will fail. Because he'll always be a different shape at the end of the story than he was at the beginning. If he's not, the readers won't be satisfied.

Putty people are altered. Pebble people remain the same. They're like set pieces. They appear onstage in the story, but they don't change in essential ways as the story progresses. They're the same at the ending as they were at the beginning. And they are not very interesting.

So, exactly what kind of wall are we throwing our putty person against?

First, stop thinking of plot in terms of what happens in your story. Rather, think of it as the payoff for the promises you have made early in the story. A plot is the journey toward transformation.

As I mentioned earlier, typically two crisis events interweave to form the multilayered stories that today's readers expect; an external struggle that needs to be overcome, and an internal struggle that needs to be resolved. As your story progresses, then, the consequences of not solving those two struggles need to become more and more intimate, personal and devastating. If you do this, then as the stakes are raised, the two struggles will serve to drive the story forward and deepen reader engagement and interest .

Usually if a reader says he's bored or that "nothing's happening in the story," he doesn't necessarily mean that events aren't occurring, but rather that he doesn't see the protagonist taking natural, logical steps to try to solve his struggle. He's not able to keep score. During the escalation stage of your story, let your character take steps to try to resolve the two crises (internal and external) and get back to the way things were earlier, before his world was tipped upside down.

Conflict is change , but it is also about emotion. Something stands in the protagonist's way. How does he feel about that? How does he deal with those emotions? Conflict is the biggest way to raise drama and tension in your story. This is about the conflicting goals of two or more forces in opposition . Raise the stakes and keep them high.

Keep the tension high. One thing that escalating conflict should do is escalate. The rules about using a hook don't go away after you've written the first line. Once you've hooked the reader you need to keep the line tight, pulling like crazy in the opposite direction. So, your Conflict should represent the action of the story. There are four simple steps you can take to do this.

1. **Keep it intense**.
It depends on the type of story you're telling, but, generally speaking, if significant amounts of time go by without suspenseful action, the story loses momentum and readers lose interest .

2. **Make the danger feel real**.
If the hero and heroine stop in the middle of a chase to share a passionate interlude while trusting in dumb luck to keep them from being discovered, it's going to be hard to convince the readers that they have a reason to be scared. If you want the reader to believe the danger is real, the characters must act like they are threatened. Even if the danger is not physical, keep the pressure on.

3. **Keep the emotion high**.
Even if the story does not involve physical danger for the characters, their lifelong happiness is at stake. Don't forget that.

4. **Keep secrets**.
Remember this one? It's okay to hide what your characters are thinking. If the heroine sees the hero's clenched jaw and thinks he's mad at her, and then you show him thinking about his aching molar, the heroine doesn't know she's wrong. But, the readers do – and all suspense is gone from the scene. If possible, let her and the reader wonder.

What's the problem?

Your protagonist should face many obstacles. You need to decide what the main obstacle is. This can be either internal or external, but remember that the reader wants to see how the character solves that problem. Any time you introduce a problem, and thus give your character a goal to achieve, you should make sure that it has appropriate and satisfying severity. Consider this example:

Mikey whistled as he walked home from school, stomping along the edge of the sidewalk. He loved the crunchy sound the dry autumn leaves made under his feet. He paused when he came up beside the little fence that outlined his yard. The wooden slats came up to his waist, gleaming with the fresh white paint he himself had put there not two weeks ago. Dad had even made him oil the hinges on the gate, and that gate now stood loosely closed and unlocked.

Someone had closed the gate! How would he get into the house? Mikey kicked at the leaves for a moment and thought about how to face the problem. His stomach growled with impatient hunger. He needed to get into the house! Finally, he made a decision. He stepped up to the gate and pushed. It opened easily and without a sound. Mikey grinned and ran through the front door.

If a problem is worth introducing, it's worth holding onto. If it's ridiculously easy to solve, don't introduce it as a problem. It's as simple as that. Just have Mikey walk through the gate and be done with it.

You can also use problems to introduce subplots. Subplots are really optional, depending on the length of the story you're trying to tell. If you're writing a novel, subplots are almost a necessity. If you're writing a 5 page short story, it's a little harder to work them in. If you use them, be sure not to let them detract from the main story. If your subplot leads the characters astray, they should at least learn something (even if it is only about how wrong they were and, perhaps, how cunning the antagonist is).

Always remember to come back to the main story you're telling.

Red Herrings are a special sort of aside or subplot. Red Herrings are things that are used to distract attention from the real issue (or plot). Remember the Gum on the Mantelpiece? By describing a thing, you lend it importance to the story. You can use this effect to intentionally mislead the reader. There is a careful balance that's needed when using this tool, however. The reader does *not* want to feel lied to. But, if you do this correctly, he will feel pleased at the surprise. Red Herrings are most commonly used in Mystery stories, when you think the butler did it for the entire novel only to find out it was really the victim's mother. The key with this is to be sure that the clues to the actual truth are always present but are overpowered by the false trail that you are laying.

Complications

Always keep in mind that escalating conflict should escalate. In general, things should go from bad to worse. Progress can be made over the course of the story; that's fine. But, until the story is over, the other shoe should always be threatening to drop. When you introduce a problem, make the severity of it appropriate to where it falls in the story. If it's a problem in the very beginning of the story (other than the main problem) it can be relatively easy to solve. Problems should get harder and harder to solve as the story progresses and come in more rapid succession. Regardless of where the problem occurs in the story, however, one thing you should never do is give the protagonist what he wants.

At least, not right away. Remember that the reader wants to see how the character deals with the obstacles in front of him and how he overcomes them. If you simply hand him a solution, it becomes very dissatisfying. If your characters earn their victories, they become much stronger characters.

What we are trying, primarily, to avoid is what happens in this example:

Private Hooligan shivered in the frozen ditch as the gunfire suddenly stopped. He stayed there with his arms over his head, breath clouding in front of him with each whimpering gasp, for long minutes before he realized it was over. Even then, his ears rang sharply, accusing echoes of the dead.

"You could have saved us, but you let us die!" they seemed to say. "You stinking coward!"

Hooligan shook with shameful tears, but he finally worked up the nerve to raise his head from his hiding place and peek out. Everyone was dead. His entire squad and the six enemy soldiers that had ambushed them now lay unmoving in the icy, blood-stained field on the other side of the road. Lieutenant Harridan, who had joked with him just this morning as they talked about shepherd's pie recipes, lay crumpled in a heap with half his face blown off. Mean old Sergeant Grouse was missing more than that. Even Orlo, the medic who spent every night with his pocket bible lay in a sodden mess of blood.

Regret hit Hooligan like a wave. He might have helped. He might have made a difference, but his fear had overwhelmed him. Then, it struck him. He was alone, fifty miles behind the front lines and on the wrong side. He couldn't stop crying as he searched the dead, both friend and foe. Almost all the guns had been fired dry. Fresh fear gripped him when he counted up the three whole rounds of live ammunition that remained. Alone, behind enemy lines with 3 bullets, he was going to die.

Just then, a truck rolled past along the road. Hooligan threw himself to the ground and prayed he hadn't been seen. The truck jolted as it hit a pothole, and a large wooden box fell out of the back, cracking open when it hit the ground. When the truck had gone, Hooligan crept out and smiled. Nestled in the box, a submachine gun and a dozen boxes of ammunition gleamed dully in the cold afternoon light.

'Deus Ex Machina' is defined as 'a person or thing (as in fiction or drama) that appears or is introduced suddenly and unexpectedly and provides a contrived solution to an apparently unsolvable difficulty.' As writers, we want to avoid this at all costs. Reading the example above, the typical response is, "How convenient. A box of exactly what he needed just happened to fall out of a truck right at his feet." At about that time, the reader generally rolls his eyes. Not a reaction you want from your reader. By handing out the solution to the problem, you have just weakened your protagonist. I've just stated that he isn't resourceful enough to solve his own problems.

Beyond that, you've just crippled your own chances of creating additional conflict and drama in your story. The key here is this: Let your characters solve their own problems. As we've discussed before, weakness is more interesting than strength. It is the struggle to succeed that draws us in, more so than the success itself.

Rule #8: Never Hand Out Solutions

Minor complications can be used as subplots or they could simply impede our protagonist's progress. We said that a story is about the protagonist and what happens to him, so complications should give us insight and illuminate his character. They should also be relevant. Just like with characters, useless complications should remain firmly in the background. If it does not move the plot forward, it slows it down .

Major complications are scenes that bring the protagonist closer to facing the antagonist. How many of these you include in your story usually depend, again, on the length of the story you are telling. In a novel, there are typically four or more major complications. Novellas may include two or three. Short stories don't usually have more than two.

OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE

Bunkwork Assignment: Write a 1-7 page story. Work on including a satisfying ending. Your story must:

- **Use the prompt from class as the protagonist**
- **Have a title**
- **Have a beginning, middle, and end**
- **Use the story structure from Chapter 3**
- **Show Crisis, Conflict and Complication**

Step Four: Climax, Discovery – The moment of change

At the climax of the story, the protagonist will make a discovery that changes his life. Typically, this discovery will be made through wit (as the character cleverly pieces together clues from earlier in the story) or grit (as the character shows extraordinary perseverance or tenacity) to overcome the crisis event (or meet the calling) he's been given.

The internal discovery and the external resolution help reshape our putty person's life and circumstances forever. Whatever form the protagonist's discovery takes, it must come from a choice that he makes, not simply by chance or from a Wise Answer-Giver. While mentors might guide a character toward self-discovery, the decisions and courage that determine the outcome of the story must come from the protagonist.

In one of the paradoxes of storytelling, the reader wants to predict how the story will end (or how it will get to the end), but he wants to be wrong. So, the resolution of the story will be most satisfying when it ends in a way that is both *inevitable* and *unexpected*.

Typically, the climax of the story occurs in the last 10% of the story. Technically speaking, the climax is also just another complication; although, it is the biggest complication. At this point, things have gone from bad to worse and then gotten even worse than that. If you're writing a novel, the first fifty pages (or five, or one, if you're writing a shorter story) should be firmly pointing in this direction. This is why we spent so much time talking about the opening of our story. The opening carries a lot of responsibility, narratively speaking. It needs to introduce the main problem, hook the reader, establish the rules of the story, and forecast the ending. It's all been leading to this. Remember the roller coaster from Chapter Three? This part of the story is like the huge drop at the end, the point where we go from a slow, steady climb to the plummet over the edge.

So, the climax should then do the opposite by reflecting everything that has gone before. We spoke about setting the bar very high. This is the ultimate point where that comes to fruition. If you've built up your antagonist to be a world-devouring demon straight out of Hell, prepare to write an epic showdown between good and evil. A sprinkle of holy water should not do the trick. Don't forget about appropriate severity. If your story is about the protagonist's struggle with alcoholism or drug addiction, the climax can be more personal. However, it should still be the hardest thing that he has ever faced.

Everything your character has gone through has led to this moment. Does he succeed or fail? Either way, it should be important. Consider this story:

Devon gets introduced to heroin by an older girl when he's 14 years old. Over the next four years, even though at first it scares him, he develops a severe addiction. He drops out of school, gets a girl pregnant at 17, and, though he promises to support her and help raise his son Jayden, everything comes second to heroin.

Devon struggles to make things work but fails again and again, even getting his son's mother hooked on heroin as well. Several times, they almost lose their child to the state. Devon sees himself as a failure, but he loves his son and tries to shelter him and give him the best life he can.

IN CLASS EXERCISE

In-Class Exercise: Take a few minutes and come up with what the climax to this story might be.

One Possibility:

One day, Devon is watching his son by himself and gets a call from his dealer who is going out of town but wants to give Devon something to tide him over for the week. It will only take him five minutes, so Devon runs out, leaving Jayden alone. It's just for a few minutes and he'll be back, Devon tells himself. While he's away, Jayden manages to get the door open and tries to follow his father. Devon arrives back almost ten minutes later to see police and ambulances in the street. His son had wandered in front of an oncoming truck and was killed.

What does this do to Devon? Does he change ?

Step Five: Resolution

If your protagonist is the caterpillar of the story, he has two options by the time the climax is over: become a butterfly or die. This is when he crawls into the cocoon. Either way, he does not have the option of remaining a caterpillar.

As you frame your story and develop your character, ask yourself, "What is my caterpillar doing?" Your character will either be transformed into someone more mature, insightful or at peace, or will plunge into death or despair.

Although genre can dictate the direction of this transformation—horror stories will often end with some kind of death (physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual)—most genres are butterfly genres. Most stories end with the protagonist experiencing new life whether that's physical renewal, psychological understanding, emotional healing or a spiritual awakening.

This change marks the resolution of the crisis and the culmination of the story.

As a result of facing the struggle and making this new discovery, the character will move to a *new normal* (a new status quo). The character's actions or attitude at the story's end show us how he's changed from the story's inception. The putty has become a new shape, and if it's thrown against the wall again, the reader will understand that a brand-new story is now unfolding. The old way of life has been forever changed by the process of moving through the struggle to the discovery and into a new and different life.

By this point in the story, the main goal has been reached. Or, missed. Either the protagonist or the antagonist has realized or resolved the main conflict of the story, and the protagonist has been changed. That change can be subtle, or it can be profound.

How do I end the story?

So, when do I stop? How do I know when I've reached the resolution? The answer is: When the story is done, stop writing. It sounds simplistic, but this is one of the reasons we made an outline before we began writing. If you outlined well, you already know where the destination is. Once you've reached it, you've arrived.

In our example with Devon's story, the protagonist is Devon and the antagonist is his addictions. Who wins in his story? It's up to you. Once again, there is a balance needed, however. It's entirely possible to have the protagonist lose, but if he does then you need to give the audience something to hold onto, something to let them feel like the story has been a worthwhile journey and has come to a logical conclusion. Readers want to feel like they haven't wasted their time in coming along on this journey with you.

Let's look at some possibilities:

(Antagonist wins): *Devon goes to prison and descends further into his addictions, trying to punish or kill himself for what happened.*

(Protagonist wins): *Devon goes to prison and seeks treatment. He takes classes, talks to a psychologist about his mental health, reaches out to Jayden's mother to try to resolve things with her, and even works to earn his GED. He turns his life around, but remains haunted by the child he failed. On parole, he begins a ministry to help others struggling with addictions and names it after his son.*

With either outcome, Devon is changed. Which is more satisfying to you ? It isn't easy to write a story with a protagonist that loses. It can be done, but be prepared for a lot more work.

The resolution is usually not very long in modern stories, and it ties up loose ends left over from the story, answering the reader's questions about what happened. Most of them. Should you explain everything, tie up every loose end? It depends on the story you're telling. The key here is to resolve the consequences of the climax, but it's alright to leave some things to the imagination. Remember that this step takes place *after* the conflicts have been solved or realized. This isn't about dragging out the story or introducing new problems to be solved. It's about winding the story down and revealing the effects of winning or losing. But, memorable fiction rarely ends with the last line. Leaving things unwritten allows the reader to think and reflect on the experience he's just had. To put it another way, 'And, they lived happily ever after' should be left for fairy tales. A good story remains with us, making us <u>feel</u> long after we've finished reading the last page.

"That which is written down endures. That which is remembered disappears."
– Mula-Mustafa Ševki Bašeskija

"The End"

Closing lines can be just as important as opening lines. A good closing should relate to the story's theme and reflect the journey that the protagonist has taken. It should leave the reader satisfied. In our Devon example:

I never did right by my son, or by myself. Part of that, I could fix, but I could never bring my son back. All I could do was make sure that he would never be forgotten. 'Jayden's Heart'… A good name for a ministry, I thought. Maybe, this time, I'd do right by it.

This is the "good ending", of course. How would you write the bad ending? And, note what isn't said here. Does Devon's ministry succeed? Does he finally do right and honor his son? I won't tell you. That's for you, as the reader, to decide.

"Life, is wanting to know what happens next."
-Tom French

Step Six: Finishing Touches

If you don't already have a title for your story, this is a good time to look back over what you've written and think about the message (the theme). That can be a great place to look for a title. If you started out with a title, review it at this point. Does it still fit? Do the same with your opening line, your hook. Things can change in the process of writing. We need to make sure that the start of our journey is still relevant to the destination.

Stories are revealing of our humanity, especially because the story is the product of the writer's imagination. Stories, even fiction stories, are **truth** – truth about human struggle and human desire. Behind the setting, behind the plot, behind all the interesting dialogue and the elements of storytelling is one single truth – what it means to be human. This truth is us, all of us, with nothing held back – our strengths, our weaknesses, our evils, and our kindnesses. The human condition, in all its greatness and all its ugliness, is what stories worth writing and reading are all about. The best stories carry us on that journey along with the protagonist and leave us changed as well.

One of the reasons people love to read, and writers write, is our yearning for understanding and our yearning to be understood. We wonder why we are drawn to things that feel uncomfortable and are enthralled when others experience these things. Why does someone else's suffering keep us glued to the page or screen? Perhaps the reason is to see how humans react, endure, and overcome misfortune and disaster. Writers need to be bold and never hesitate to reveal who we really are – flawed human beings, and wonderful. Humanity needs to know that we are never alone in our imperfections.

Whatever you write, write honestly. And, hold nothing back.

And, now… We're done! With the 1st draft. And, unfortunately…

Rule #9: The 1st draft is never the final draft

OUT OF CLASS EXERCISE

Bunkwork Assignment: Write a 1-8 page story. Your story must:

- **Have a title**
- **Have a beginning, middle, and end**
- **Use the story structure from Chapter 3**
- **Be true. Use the elements of storytelling to tell a story that has really happened to you. RULE: The story cannot relate to your crime, but it can be something that's happened to you while in prison.**
- **Show emotion**
- **Show Conflict and Change**

Chapter 7 Now The Work Begins

"Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long time to make it short."
- Henry David Thoreau

Show, Don't Tell

We've talked about this several times before, but it is well worth repeating. This is, perhaps, the most important skill to learn in writing, and it can be the hardest for beginning writers to really understand. In a real way, whenever we write something we are telling, we are relating what is seen or heard or what is happening. Yet, there is a way to write that allows the reader to experience what is being described rather than simply reading a recitation of events. For example, there is a difference between saying…

Liana stood in the doorway while the storm raged outside. She was afraid because her son, Colson, was missing. With things being destroyed all around her and the house shaking with the force of the wind, she searched for him. Later, she was injured and started to regret the sequence of events that had led her here.

And, this…

Liana stared out the open door, shaking with horror as the wind screamed by outside. Lightning strobed wildly, cracking the dark grey sky like a shattering egg. The smell of fresh churned earth saturated the air like a newly dug grave. Giant limbs of the great elm tree outside snapped, torn from the trunk to be flung away by the storm like an angry child's toys.

Colson… Where was Colson? Images of his small, thin body being thrown through the air and broken against trees, stones, or the side of the house flickered through Liana's panicked mind. Broken glass rattled like a crazy bell somewhere in the depths of the old farm house, urging her to action.

The wind whipped her long hair about, tossing papers, magazines, anything small and light into a maelstrom inside the rooms and hallways that she frantically searched. The entire house shook and groaned, trembling right along with her. The sharp crack as pieces of the building ripped away echoed right through her chest.

"Colson! Colson!" she screamed, but the sound disappeared in the deafening howl of the furious wind. What had she done? Was it possible to have such a terrible argument with an 8-year-old? She had, and now… She would never forgive herself if something happened to him. If she even lived long enough to try.

As she ran into the living room, the window across from her exploded, peppering her with sharp slivers of glass that sliced into her arms, her cheek. The force of the wind slammed into her, knocking her off her feet. Pain jolted through Liana's head where it hit the wooden floor, and her vision swam in a haze of terror and agony. The argument, the awful decision to come to this place that might have killed them all, all of it flashed through her mind in an instant.

Both of these effectively say the same thing, but one of these examples puts you in the action. A story is about more than relating the facts; it's about making the reader *feel* what's happening. Bring in emotion, sensation, and vivid images and you will leave your reader wanting more, wanting to know what happens next. Simply talking about emotions is not enough. "Laura felt scared" will not make the reader feel scared. Readers must be made to feel the situations in the story, to experience what the characters experience.

A good way to do this is to take the sense of sight for granted and emphasize the other senses. Details of sight alone almost always create a flat effect. At this point in your writing, with the 1st draft done, go back and re-read what you have written. Look at every place where you've described something and see what other senses you can bring into the scene. If you've described the lightning flashing in the sky, put in some details about the deafening howl of the furious wind or the rattling of broken glass. Throw in something about the scent of the earth smelling like a grave. It will give the scene much more depth and immediacy. Even if you only put in one other sense detail, it opens the scene up to immerse the reader in the story, feeling it rather than being told about it.

This is the power of words. Writing can make people feel what you feel, whatever that is. All you have to do is make the story real for them. Show, don't tell.

Editing

This is all part of the editing process. As rule nine said, the first draft should never be the final draft. The first draft should be messy. You should use helping verbs, over-describe things, and do whatever it takes to get the story written. Your goal for your first draft is to get everything down on paper.

Then, we go back and review. In the process of your first rewrite, go through the 1st draft with a fine-toothed comb. Cross things out, write in the margins, make cuts, move things around. Literally examine every single helping verb that you've used and think about what it does to the feel of the sentence and of the scene around it. Would it help to make it an action verb, and how would you have to change things to do that? Think very carefully about every single word. Could you use a better one? Maybe you've said too much and can shorten the scene . Maybe you need to lengthen a scene in order to show instead of telling. Sometimes short and sweet can carry more weight. It's your decision at this point, but this is your first opportunity to make changes. Don't be shy with them.

Once you've decided what changes need to be made, it's time to rewrite the story to include them. When done, this is your second draft. And, then… You do it again. How many times should you edit and rewrite? Until you think it's done. Later rewrites should look at more fundamental things. Look for spots to apply Chekov's Gun. Does my protagonist suddenly acquire a crowbar in the climax? I should insert a short scene describing where it came from. Think about foreshadowing. If my protagonist has a crisis of conscience at the end of the story, I should provide hints about how he feels about that before it happens. Find plot holes and plug them up. Remember that the reader tends to see **everything**. If I have a character whose hair suddenly changes color, I'd better have a reason for that. If I mentioned the all-important journal belonging to the main character's missing sister detailing the events leading up to her abduction and then no one ever reads it, the reader is going to cry foul. Try to think about the story from a reader's point of view.

This brings us to the final step in editing. Once you've exhausted all the changes that you can make to improve the story, it's time to bring in outside eyes. Test readers (sometimes called beta readers) can be a huge help in polishing your story, and it is at this point when you most need to have a thick skin. Be certain that the people you ask are going to give you helpful advice, but also be certain that they are going to be honest (sometimes brutally honest) with you. After looking at your story for so long, it becomes harder for you to see errors in language or in plot simply because you know what it's *supposed* to say. Outside readers have the ability to see the story without expectations and see things you might have missed .

When do you stop this process? It's up to you to decide. The short answer is that once it's done, it's done. How many drafts that takes depends on the story itself, but it should definitely be more than one or two. Once it is finally done, however, you've finally arrived at your Final Draft .

Finding an audience

Who are you writing for? Why are you writing? These are questions that many of us need to think about while we are here. Publishing is a path that isn't really open to us while we are incarcerated for several reasons. It's illegal for us to sign a contract, to run a business, or to profit from our crimes. Simply put, don't do it.

So, why write? We've gone over a lot of reasons already in this class, what writing and thinking creatively can do for us. We can use any of these tools whenever we do things like write a letter home, entertain our friends, or just explore those things that scare us if we're writing only for ourselves. If sharing stories is a part of what makes us fundamentally human, then it can only improve our lives to master the ability to do it. Ultimately, though, anyone who writes does think about publishing, so we're going to discuss some options for when we are back out in the world beyond these fences. Again, do not attempt it while you are in prison, but it is an excellent goal to strive for.

Step One: The Synopsis

A synopsis is defined as "a condensed statement or outline." If you've ever thought about buying a book and turned it over to read the back cover, you've read a synopsis. It's a brief outline of the story's premise, something to pique the reader's interest without giving too much away. Generally, it is about 50 words long, and these tend to be among the hardest 50 words to write. It's a very difficult skill to master to describe the story without spoiling it. But, it is a necessary step if you're looking to get published . An example:

Noah's Ark

Abraham Tully is a simple man living in hard but simple times. The War Between the States is behind him, and he's long since beaten his sword into a plowshare. But, his life is about to get more complicated. A new neighbor, Noah, brings with him oddity and wonders and, for the world-weary people of Mallard County who have suffered through drought and depravity, perhaps just a little hope.

Step Two: Pick a name, any name

When publishing a first novel (or even short story) always use a pseudonym. A pseudonym is a fictitious name, a pen name, and almost all authors use them for a simple reason. If you publish a first story under your own name and nobody likes it, your name now has that bad reputation attached to it. Believe that if you are known as a bad writer, readers will seldom give you a second chance. By using a pseudonym, the reputation is attached to that pen name. If it is not a good reputation, you can take some time to examine what you did wrong and try to improve. Use a different pen name and try again. If your first story does very well, you can always then reveal that the author was, in fact, you .

Step Three: Find a method

With a synopsis in hand and a pen name in mind, it's time to think about how to publish. There are three main options.

1. **Mainstream Publishing**

   This method uses a publishing house and can lead to the most money for a successful author. They offer professional editing and proofreading for authors under contract. They have huge, nationwide and international distribution networks and marketing departments. They also don't charge you anything up front. Your profits are generally a percentage of book sales by contract. Authors who have several successful stories generally also receive advances (payment in anticipation of future sales).

When looking at this option, you need to be aware that the vast majority of mainstream publishers no longer respond directly to inquiries from new writers. They work exclusively through literary agents. The key, then, becomes finding an agent to represent your work. You can find lists of agents in Writer's Market (an annual publication) or in most writing magazines. Be very careful, however. Make certain to use a reputable agent. A good rule of thumb here is that professional agents will not charge you money to get you published or to review your work. They earn their money as a percentage of profits on sales the same as authors do. Agents are also notoriously picky. Individual agents will only work with certain genres, certain story lengths; some will only work with male or female authors. Make sure you know what the preferences are of the agent you are sending an inquiry to. Sending a 1,000 page steampunk sci-fi novel to an agent who only deals with short story romances is a sure way to get the door slammed in your face. Your story will not even be looked at.

If you find an agent who is willing to look at your story, they will most likely ask you for a synopsis and the first three chapters. Remember when we talked about the hook and about making sure that you keep the line tight? The first 50 words, the first 50 pages, are your chance to impress. If the agent likes what he or she reads, they will then ask for the rest of the manuscript. At this point, you are doing very, very well.

Most people never make it that far. If you choose this option, that thick skin we mentioned needs to be even thicker. Be prepared for rejection and a lot of it. If you are one of the lucky few who get a contract this way, you will have the opportunity to earn very large sums of money.

2. **Self-publishing**

This option provides a lot more creative freedom and control. You no longer need an agent or a publishing house and so no longer need to meet another person's standards or expectations. You can write the story you want to write and then seek out your audience. You also retain all your own profits instead of only getting a percentage and having to give publishers and agents a piece of the pie.

The flip side of this is that you also don't have access to the publisher's editing and proofreading staff or its distribution and marketing networks. It's all up to you. All the data entry costs, the editing and proofreading costs fall directly on you. In addition to that, you have to pay directly for printing, which can get prohibitively expensive. Printers will generally have a minimum print run for books (usually at least 1,000) and a fee per copy. Costs can add up very quickly when using this option, costs which then have to be passed on to the consumer (the reader) in order for you to turn a profit. Think about this: If the printer charges you $17.00 per copy with a 1,000 copy minimum print run, you are now $17,000.00 out of pocket. How much will you have to charge per book to recoup those costs? Will you sell all 1,000 copies? There's a lot to think about with this method of publishing.

In addition to all of that, there is the problem of distribution. In the past, it was possible to go to a local independent bookstore and ask them to display your book. Many times they would agree (sometimes for a fee) as it helps their image to promote a local author. Independent bookstores are far less common than they once were, however. This leaves you, as the writer, to try to deal with larger book chains like Barnes & Noble or Books-a-million, many of which aren't willing to deal with independent authors or who will only accept so many per year.

3. **E-books**

This method of publishing is one that is turned to more and more by new writers, and can be a very good alternative to physical self-publishing. Similar to option two, this gives you complete creative control. It also shares the problem of editing, proofreading and marketing costs. Unless you self-edit, you'll need to pay for those services yourself.

Where this option turns around is in the printing costs and distribution. Amazon.com is a great example of an e-book publisher. Amazon has links that detail exactly what format you need to use. Then, it's simply a matter of uploading your story to a service like Createspace.com and linking it to Amazon (they list guidelines and instructions for this on their site). Depending on what price point you choose for your story, there are minimum or no publishing fees. With no physical copies of your book, there are also no print run costs. This limits the most expensive costs of self-publishing and is a good reason that there are so many e-books now available in today's market.

The down-side of that is that there are now so many e-books available in today's market. With 1,000's upon 1,000's of other aspiring authors out there it can be difficult to make your work stand out. The marketing with this option is all up to you. You also don't retain all profits while using this method. Amazon will expect you to pay them a percentage of sales (usually the larger percentage) in exchange for using their service.

There are huge success stories with authors using e-book self-publishing, though. It is convenient and popular and an excellent way to get your name out there if you can overcome the obstacles in your way .

Copyright

Many new writers are concerned about whether or not their hard work in writing stories is protected from theft. This is understandable – we spend a lot of time, energy, and spirit on our stories. The following copyright information is directly from the U.S. Copyright Office:

What is a Copyright?

Copyright is a form of protection by the laws of the United States (title 17, U.S. Code) to the authors of "original works of authorship," including literary, dramatic, musical, artistic, and certain other intellectual works. This protection is available to both published and unpublished works.

Who can claim a copyright?

Copyright protection subsists from the time the work is created in fixed form. The copyright in the work of authorship immediately becomes the property of the author who created the work. Only the author or those deriving their rights through the author can rightfully claim copyright.

Unpublished works

The author or copyright owner may wish to place a copyright notice on any unpublished copies or phonorecords that leave his or her control.

Example: Unpublished work © 2016 John Doe

Contact Information
Library of Congress
U.S. Copyright Office
101 Independence Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20559
www.copyright.gov
(202) 707-3000

Epilogue

Words can change the world. They can inspire us, elate us, or move us to tears. Words can make a bad day into a good one or a friend into an enemy. We carry them with us all the time, use them endlessly, yet so few people are willing to commit them to paper. Don't be one of those people.

You can use the tools and ideas that you have learned in this class to strengthen your relationships, build your confidence, and learn to communicate more effectively. I hope you will. The next time you write home, don't just talk about what's been happening or what you hope for. Show them your dreams. It takes courage to open yourself up that way, but it is your story. It can go wherever you want it to go.

Above all, take courage away from this class. It can be so easy to hide behind the words "I can't", but the spark of imagination and creativity runs deep inside us all. We may not all be able to write a bestselling novel, but every one of us has a story to tell. Tell it well. All you need to do is begin.

Above all, don't give up. Practice is the one and only way to get better at this. When we began this course, we stated that writing is an art. Over time you'll find your own voice and develop your own methods. We hope that you will take what you learned here and use it like an outline, as a map. Let it guide you, but make it your own. And, the way to do that is with time and effort and with the last rule:

Rule #10: Write your own rules

Most of all, keep writing. Change your world.

"If you write one story, it may be bad; if you write a hundred, you have the odds in your favor."
-Edgar Rice Burroughs

Appendix

Acknowledgements

So many people have contributed to the creation of this manual over a great period of time. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of all of the following people as well as those whose names have not been recorded over the course of the writing of so much material. All of their efforts are greatly appreciated. A great number of these are inmates. Others are volunteers and support staff. Every one of them has generously given of their time so that those of us who came after might have better lives.

Instructors

Scott Cooper
Richard Carrero
Juan Anthony Alicea
Chistopher Logan
Stanley Winchester
Josiah Shorey
Jeffrey Waites
Shilo Cutler
Carry Padgett
Mark Tousignant

Support Staff

Ms. Inzetta
Ms. Armstrong
Mr. Grant
Mr. Hickens
Nate Schaidt
Mr. MacMillan

Typesetting and Editing

Jason West
Ken Blosser
Booker Flowers
Mark Tousignant

Institutions

College Guild, Brunswick, Maine

Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts

University of New Hampshire, Manchester, New Hampshire

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Bibliography

Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004)

Auburn, D., Oxford American Writers' Thesaurus, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Burnett, H., Fiction Writers Handbook, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975)

Dietrich, R. F., The Art of Fiction, 4th ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: CBS College Publishing, 1983)

Goldberg, N., Writing Down the Bones, (Boston, Mass Shambhala Pub. 1986)

McCrimmon, J. M., Writing With a Purpose, (New York: Houghten Mifflin Co., 1976)

Memering, D., The Writer's Work, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980)

Monteleone, T., The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing a Novel, (New York, Penguin Group, 2004)

Smith, J., You Can Write a Novel, (Cincinnati, OH Writer's Digest Books, 2008)

Troyka, L. Q., Handbook for Writers, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002)

Winokur, J., Writers on Writing, (n. loc.: Running Press, 1990)

Mittlemark, H. & Newman, S., How NOT To Write A Novel, (HarperCollins Publishing, 2008)

Handbook for Writers in Prison (PEN American Center, New York, NY, 2010)

Gaiman, N., Where Do You Get Your Ideas From? (Neil Gaiman, 2014)