

WRITE *Great* FICTION



Revision & Self-Editing

Techniques for transforming
your first draft into a finished novel.

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[ON BECOMING A WRITER]

About ten years ago, losing all rationality, I decided to take up golf.

In those first couple of years I bought books and tapes and subscribed to the magazines. I was sure with enough study and practice I'd be shooting eighty soon.

Those of you who golf are laughing now. But I wasn't laughing. I also wasn't having fun. I thought the best course might be to chuck the whole thing and take up needlepoint.

What had happened was I'd pumped my head full of techniques and tips and reminders and visualizations. And I was always trying to remember every one of them as I played. You know, like the twenty-two steps to perfect putting and the thirteen most important things to remember at point of impact.

Insanity.

Just before flinging my clubs into the Dumpster, I met a golf teacher named Wally Armstrong. Wally is well known for his teaching skills, using simple household items—like brooms and coat hangers and sponges—to implant the *feel* of various aspects of the game.

If you're thinking about the swing while you're playing, Wally says, you're lost. You'll tense up. You will find yourself in a labyrinth of theory, with no way out.

But if you have the feel ingrained, you can forget about all the technical stuff and just play. Your body, trained in the feel, does its thing.

Wally was right, and I've been enjoying the game ever since. I don't shoot below eighty yet, but I have fun and don't embarrass myself.

Or rarely, that is.

Now, it seems to me that writing good fiction is a lot like playing good golf. With the same dangers, too. There is no end of books and articles teaching various aspects of the craft. But if you are trying to think of them

all as you write, you'll tense up. You won't write, as Brenda Ueland puts it, "lively and rollickingly." Plus, it won't be any fun. You'll feel like throwing your pages in the Dumpster (okay, many writers feel this way anyway, but that's just an occupational hazard).

So what I want you to be able to do is *feel* your writing. When you sit down for a writing stint, don't think about technique. Just write. Let it flow. Later, you'll come back to it and revise. This book will show you how.

When you're not writing, keep learning the craft. Increase the storehouse of knowledge. Analyze your work with techniques in mind.

But when you're writing, write. Trust that the techniques you are learning will flow out naturally.

When they don't, you can learn to see where the problems are.

That's what self-editing and revision are all about. Learning, feeling, writing, analyzing, correcting, and making your writing better.

Over and over.

The rest of your life.

That's right. You're a *writer*, not someone who wants to write some books. You are a person of the craft, a dues-paying member of the club.

So pay your dues by doing the following:

1] READ

You can't be a great fiction writer without reading. A lot. All kinds of novels. And poetry and nonfiction.

Each time you read a book, the flow and rhythm of the writing implants itself in your brain. When it's good writing, when you respond to it, it goes in the *good* file. When it's not-so-good writing, you sense it and put it in under *bad*.

You'll learn about plot and story construction and character building. Your storehouse will fill up and be ready for you when you're in need.

Be self-directed in your reading. In *Plot & Structure* I explained a process for learning plot and you'll begin to feel it in your marrow. Here's a brief recap:

- **Step one:** Get half a dozen novels of the type you want to write.
- **Step two:** Read the first book for pleasure and think about it afterward. What did you like about it?
- **Step three:** Now read the second book and take some time to think about it, too.
- **Step four:** Read the next four books in the same fashion.
- **Step five:** Now go back to book one and, on index cards, mark each scene. Number them, then give us the setting, what the scene is about, and what, if anything, makes you want to read *on*.
- **Step six:** Repeat this drill for all the books.
- **Step seven:** Beginning with any stack of cards, go through them quickly, remembering the books, giving yourself a movie in the mind.
- **Step eight:** Do the same with the other stacks of index cards.

What this exercise does is burn plot and structure into your mind. Keep those cards and review them periodically.

With some modification, you can do the same thing for any aspect of the fiction craft. See # below. So read.

2] RECORD YOUR OBSERVATIONS

When I was first trying to figure out this writing thing, I got very excited every time I spotted something in a novel that worked. Or got a technique from a writing book that made a little lightbulb go off in my head.

Whenever I learned something I'd jot it down. Sometimes on paper, sometimes on a napkin, whatever was handy. I still have a stack of these notes, carefully preserved in a large envelope. I look at them from time to time just to get my juices flowing again.

For example, here's one of my early notes, with the heading "READ ON TECHNIQUES!"

- 1] Action, peril, chase, jeopardy—then leave the scene before resolution. (See *Watchers* by Koontz, chapter one.)
- 2] Mention a portent, then cut to another scene. (See *The Dead Zone* by King, end of first scene.)
- 3] Hint—pull back.
- 4] The moment of decision, then leave the scene.

I still get a charge out of this. I was trying to learn how to write a novel readers couldn't put down and these were like finding gold nuggets.

Make a habit of recording the things you learn, every time something comes through. Don't let an insight slip away.

3] ASSIMILATE

When you learn a technique from a writing book that looks promising, practice it. Write a scene

that uses the technique. Get it out of your head and onto the page.

~~When you do this, you're assimilating the information. It's going from information transformation, making you into a better writer. It soaks into your memory, the way a golf technique that's *felt* soaks itself into your muscles.~~

You will know, absolutely, that your writing is getting better and better. It's an intoxicating feeling. As Ray Bradbury has said, stay drunk on writing so reality doesn't destroy you.

4] CONTINUE TO LEARN

Don't ever stop your growth process as a writer. Even after publication.

No, especially after publication. You want to keep publishing, and you do that by trying to make each new book a little better than the last. So improve.

In fact, be systematic about improving. Create your own "plan of attack" for strengthening your work.

Several novels into my career I stepped back and assessed where I was in my writing. I knew I was strong on plot but felt I wasn't strong enough on character. I wanted to go deeper with my stories and people. So I sat down and created a plan, with these steps:

- Pick several novels with unforgettable characters.
- Locate the character sections of the best writing books on my shelf.
- Read and analyze the above over several weeks. Take notes.
- Analyze and structure the notes, and compare to my own characters.
- Create characters for my next book using the principles learned.

Even after you get to #1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list, don't stop learning. One writer I know who reached that level still went to a seminar led by a famous editor, simply because he didn't want to rest on his laurels. His level of success has increased since.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In Part I: Self-Editing, we will be covering a broad range of fiction technique, with exercises—sort of writing boot camp.

Now, whole books have been written on the subjects covered in each of the chapters. For that reason, the material here is not intended to be comprehensive. My purpose is to explain and illustrate *the most important aspects* of each, the things that must be imagined *so you don't have to think about them*.

Beginning writers will therefore find this an essential overview of the craft of novel-length fiction. It is a compendium of the items that are non-negotiable in writing a solid novel. Do these things, and the chances of your selling a novel increase enormously.

If you're a more advanced writer, you can also use this book. Think of it as a giant checklist. Use it for brushing up on certain areas, strengthening technique, rethinking an approach. Do the exercises the way you might do the morning crossword puzzle. Every little bit helps.

And all writers will benefit from Part II, which offers a systematic approach to revising the novel.

I have used both novel and film examples in this book because there is much about the elements of a story that are common to both, and sometimes more people have seen the film than read the book.

My advice? Read more books and see more movies. And think about what's happening each time. That's how you get better.

Let me leave you with a credo from one of my favorite writers, the late John D. MacDonald. He was popular in the latter part of his career for the Travis McGee series. But I prefer the string of paperback originals he wrote in the 1950s. He managed to rise above the backwaters of this industry through sheer writing ability.

He was once asked what he looked for in a story, and his answer is a fitting one for all writers, whatever genre. This is from the introduction to MacDonald's short story collection *The Good Old Stuff*:

First, there has to be a strong sense of story. I want to be intrigued by wondering what's going to happen next. I want the people that I read about to be in difficulties—emotional, moral, spiritual, whatever, and I want to live with them while they're finding their way out of these difficulties.

Second, I want the writer to make me suspend my disbelief.... I want to be in some other place and scene of the writer's devising.

Next, I want him to have a bit of magic in his prose style, a bit of unobtrusive poetry. I want to have words and phrases really sing. And I like an attitude of wryness, realism, the sense of inevitability. I think that writing—good writing—should be like listening to music, where you identify the themes, you see what the composer is doing with those themes, and then, just when you think you have him properly identified, and his methods identified, then he will put in a little quirk, a little twist, that will be so unexpected that you read it with a sense of glee, a sense of joy because of its aptness, even though it may be a very dire and bloody part of the book.

So I want story, wit, music, wryness, color, and a sense of reality in what I read, and I try to get it in what I write.

Go thou and do likewise.

PART ONE

Self-Editing

Keep working. Don't wait for inspiration. Work inspires inspiration. Keep working.

-Michael Crichton

[A PHILOSOPHY OF SELF-EDITING]

You may be able to write wonderful sentences. The words may sing as they ping and pong off each other.

But if that's as far as it goes, you haven't written fiction. You've written poetry. Nothing against poetry. I like it. But if you're going to write a novel, you have to know what goes into a successful full-length narrative.

Train to be your own editor. Do the exercises in this book to help you fully understand and appreciate the essentials of fiction.

As you practice, what you learn gets implanted into your writer's mind.

This is how unpublished writers become published.

There is no other way, unless you want to self-publish.

However, 99.9 percent of self-published authors need to learn how to self-edit better. If this book helps you in that regard, I will be happy. So will the people who occasionally buy self-published books.

Self-editing is the ability to *know* what makes fiction work, so when you actually write (as in a first draft) you're crafting salable fiction. You learn to be your own guide so you may, as Renmi Brown and Dave King put it in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, "See your manuscript the way an editor might see it—to do for yourself what a publishing house editor once might have done."

In the revision section of the book, further refinements for these topics are given as they might come up in the process of review. Revision requires a systematic approach to the whole when you have a full manuscript and have to fix it. And all manuscripts have to be fixed.

Putting it all together, by doing the self-editing exercises and writing and revising your work, you'll be operating on all cylinders. Your writing chops will sharpen, and there will be days you'll wake up with that great feeling that you *know* what you're doing.

At the very least you will know more than you did a month or even a year before.

Never stop this process.

THE WRITING LIFE

Before we move on, let's consider a few items that recur in the writing life. These are mainly mental preparations for self-editing to keep you from deciding, a year from now, that you haven't given what it takes.

Look, if you want to be a writer, write. Don't ever stop. I mean it. Even if you can only peck out a hundred words a day (anybody can peck out a hundred words in a day—and if you say you can't then you really don't have what it takes so quit *now*).

Don't quit. It's very easy to quit during the first ten years. —Andre Dubus

Here are a few things to think about:

THE FREEZE

Once upon a time the housekeeper for Marcel Proust, the famous novelist and author of *Remembrance of Things Past*, happened into Proust's study. Instead of finding the master at his writing table, she saw him writhing on floor in what looked like a fit of apoplexy. Screaming, she ran to him. But he sternly told her to get out and leave him alone. It turns out he was in agony over what *single* word to write next in his manuscript.

Marcel had, perhaps, the worst case of writers block in history. Fortunately for literature he found that right word, and the next, and the next. And though he often seemed in torment as he wrote, he did manage to leave behind a masterpiece.

We all have times in our writing when the words get stuck, or the story we're writing just won't go on going again. Sometimes, we sit at our desks and fail even to get an idea. Time doesn't fly, but drags like Igor shuffling across the mad scientist's laboratory. If it gets real bad, we may think we're characters in an actual horror movie called *The Block That Would Not Die*.

The most important thing to remember at this point is not to give in to despair. All creative people have moments when the flow dries up. So know this: It can, and will, be overcome. But first we have to recognize the roots.

In *The Courage to Write*, Ralph Keyes identifies three primary causes of writer's block:

1] Can I pull it off? In other words, now that I've told the world I'm going to be a writer, can I deliver something people won't want to wrap fish in?

2] Page fright, the fear of sitting before a blank page. As John Steinbeck once said, "I suffer always from the fear of putting down the first line."

3] That naked feeling. What will others, especially my mother, really think of me once I've finished what I'm writing?

In addition to these, I sometimes find myself fighting another bugaboo, the Perfectionist's

Syndrome. Naturally I always want to write my best, but when putting down words I can be stopped dead in my tracks if I try to make every sentence perfect before moving on. (This, I think, is what Proust suffered from.)

There is another form of writer's block. Let's call it *the freeze*. It occurs when you look at the material you've created and have no idea what to do next.

Here are a few things that will help:

- **Warm up before you write.** Say you're working on a novel, and you are about to begin your daily stint. Do some simple, free association writing drills just to get your creative juices flowing. One exercise, suggested by Natalie Goldberg, is to "keep your hand moving" for ten minutes. That is, write without stopping to edit for ten straight minutes. Start with the sentence "I remember ..." and just go. Let the writing take you on any tangents you wish. The object is not to write anything to publish (though ideas often come from this exercise). The aim is to get into a creative state of mind.

Another exercise, from Leonard Bishop's *Dare to Be a Great Writer*, is to write a page-long sentence. Take an aspect of your story—a character sketch or scene—and write a sentence that goes for a whole page without using any punctuation and employing as many techniques as you like (dialogue, flashback, description). This exercise will help free you from artificial constraints when you start your writing.

- **Write in "tight compartments."** Instead of seeing your whole novel, just see the immediate scene you're working on. Anne Lamott calls this the "one-inch frame" method. Just concentrate on the little scene within the frame, and nothing else. You'll find your revision tasks are not so daunting as they seem when viewed this way.

- **Be strategic.** Learn to identify the most important tasks for revising your manuscript, and start with the most important ones. This book will help you make those identifications.

- **Get inspired.** One of my favorite movies is *Rudy*. It's the true story of Rudy Rudiger, a kid who had the dream of playing football for Notre Dame. But he was too small to make the team. So he got on the practice squad and worked his heart out. He was rewarded by getting into one game before he graduated.

Yes, it's a familiar enough plot, the underdog who triumphs by guts and grit, but the story was well told and acted.

Sometimes, needing a mental lift to get to my work, I'll play the football theme from *Rudy*. It's a trick, like getting a pep talk from the coach before running out on the field.

Why not? This writing game is hard enough without brain meltdowns.

- **Repeat this often: *It can be fixed.*** Neil Simon was once watching a new play of his in rehearsal. It was obvious something wasn't working. The director of the play knew it, too. In the darkness Simon wrote something on a piece of paper and passed it to the director. The note said, *I can fix it.*

That's a phrase worth putting up in your writer's space. Because any writing problem can be fixed. All it takes is tools and experience, and you get both the more you write and revise.

Remember that. *Any problem can be fixed.*

Some fixes will be more painful than others, of course. You may have to tear up a lot of your book and start over. That's all right. Because ...

- **Remind yourself that all this work is making your book better.** Imagine the look on an editor's or agent's face. They are hoping to find that next great manuscript. Let it be yours. Anticipate that it will be.

STORY SELECTION

The first editing decision you need to make is, *Which story do I select to turn into a whole novel?*

To write from start to finish?

~~You're going to be spending a long time with your novel. Months. A year. In some cases more.~~
don't want you to wake up twelve weeks from now and chuck all that work.

So here are a few keys to self-editing in the story selection phase:

1] Get lots of ideas. The key to creativity is to get lots and lots of ideas, *ironically without any self-editing at all*, then throw out the ones you don't want.

It's a little like how lawyers choose juries. In reality, they don't select jurors; they deselect them. The potential jurors who are seated in the box are drawn randomly. Then, through a questioning process called *voir dire*, the lawyers probe and ponder, then exercise *challenges*. They try to get rid of those jurors they believe will not be favorably disposed to their case.

So, too, you as a writer face your box of ideas and, through probing and pondering, toss out the ones you won't be writing about.

But first you gather, and as you do, let your imagination run free.

2] Look for the big idea. A novel-length story has to have a certain size to it. Not length of word but potential for a large canvas of emotions, incidents, and high stakes.

This is something you need to *feel* in your writer's spirit. Think about the novels that moved you most. What was it about them that got to you? If it was an unforgettable character, what made her so? If it was a turning, twisting plot, what were the stakes?

If it was a quieter novel, it had some simmering intensity about it.

Think on these things as you look at ideas to nurture.

3] Write your back cover copy. There are several questions to ask yourself about your idea, but at some point you need to see if it holds together, if you can get it in a form that both excites you and will excite publishers and readers.

One of the best ways to do this is to write your own back cover copy. That's the marketing copy on the back of the book (or on the dust jacket) that's intended to get readers to buy it.

When you do this, concentrate on the big picture. You'll need to write and rewrite this several times, but doing so will serve you well for the entire writing project.

Take a look at some examples and try to get the same effect for your project:

***Long Lost*, by David Morrell**

Brad Denning's brother Petey is long lost. Frozen in time as a skinny nine-year-old bicycling away from his uncaring older brother, Petey haunts Brad's consciousness. To this day, within his prosperous life, Brad knows with certainty that he was responsible for the boy's disappearance. He knows how much his mother and father suffered and

that nothing can ever bring Petey back again—until a stranger walks into Brad's life.

Suddenly, Brad is confronted by a man who claims to be his brother and is telling a tale of wandering, pain, and survival. As Brad gradually puts aside his suspicions, his alleged brother makes himself at home in Brad's life. Then everything is shattered. Petey is gone again. Only this time, he's taken Brad's wife and child with him.

Now Brad must struggle with a harrowing mystery. Was the man who knew all the intimate details of their childhood truly his brother or a vicious con man? Where has he taken Brad's family—and why? As the days stretch into weeks, the baffled police and the FBI are forced to end their search. Brad's only recourse is to put himself into the mind of the man who claimed to be his brother and hunt him down himself.

***White Oleander*, by Janet Fitch**

Astrid is the only child of a single mother Ingrid, a brilliant, obsessed poet who wields her

luminous beauty to intimidate and manipulate men. Astrid worships her mother and cherishes the private world full of ritual and mystery—but their idyll is shattered when Astrid's mother falls apart over a lover. Deranged by rejection, Ingrid murders the man and is sentenced to life in prison.

White Oleander is the unforgettable story of Astrid's journey through a series of foster homes and her efforts to find a place for herself in impossible circumstances. Each home is its own universe, with a new set of laws and lessons to be learned. With determination and humor, Astrid confronts the challenges of loneliness and poverty, and strives to learn who a motherless child in an indifferent world can become.

***Bleachers*, by John Grisham**

High school all-American Neely Crenshaw was probably the best quarterback ever to play for the legendary Messina Spartans. Fifteen years have gone by since those glory days, and Neely has come home to Messina to bury Coach Eddie Rake, the man who molded the Spartans into an unbeatable football dynasty.

Now, as Coach Rake's "boys" sit in the bleachers waiting for the dimming field lights to signal the passing, they replay the old games, relive the old glories, and try to decide once and for all whether they

love Eddie Rake—or hate him. For Neely Crenshaw, a man who must finally forgive his coach—and himself—before he can get on with his life, the stakes are especially high.

***Never Change*, by Elizabeth Berg**

A self-anointed spinster at fifty-one, Myra Lipinski is reasonably content with her quiet life, her dog, Frank, and her career as a visiting nurse. But everything changes when Chip Reardon, the golden boy she adored in high school, is assigned as her new patient. Choosing to forgo treatment for an incurable illness, Chip has returned to his New England hometown to spend what time he has left. Now, Myra and Chip find themselves engaged in a poignant redefinition of roles and a complicated dance of memory, ambivalence, and longing.

CREATIVITY AND MARKETING

At some point, you're going to have to decide how earnest you are to sell and market your writing.

Publishing is a business. The corporations that run book companies do so to make a profit. A large profit. Which means that fiction that appeals to a large commercial audience is more likely to be published than fiction that doesn't.

This doesn't mean that quieter, more literary-style fiction—which doesn't sell as well as commercial fiction—doesn't deserve to be published and won't be.

This book deals with aspects of the fiction craft that make a story more readable and enjoyable and entertaining for the reader. Even if your bent is toward high style and more complex stories, these tools will help you realize your vision.

FICTION FORMULA

Is there a formula for fiction?

Yes. And I'm about to give it to you.

Knowing the formula alone won't guarantee your novel success. You'll still have to learn the elements of the craft in order to flesh out the whole novel. But I give it to you as an overview something to keep in mind at all stages of writing and editing.

Here it is:

CONCEPT + CHARACTERS X CONFLICT = NOVEL

Concept is the big idea, the basic premise, the one-liner that will explain your story.

Every successful novel has a concept. It can be a "high" concept, one that has dollar signs, like

many movies do: "What if a killer shark terrorizes a beach resort at the height of tourist season?"

~~It can be a smaller, more intimate concept, such as, "A troubled prep school kid journeys to New York to find out if life is worth living."~~

Characters are, of course, essential to fiction. No characters, no story. *Conflict* is the blood of fiction, the heartbeat of narrative. Without conflict, the novel doesn't live and breathe. Alfred Hitchcock's axiom, which I quote often, states: "A great story is life, with the dull parts taken out." No conflict = dull.

Now, knowing this, can you guess the formula for a great novel? Here it is:

CONCEPT^x + CHARACTERS^x X CONFLICT^x = GREAT NOVEL

Where x represents some factor beyond the average. You take each element and make it *more*. Stronger, better.

Pause every so often and let your imagination play with each factor. Ask such questions as:

- What could make the situation worse for my Lead?
- How can I take that beyond worse and make it *worse than that*?
- What part of my concept is familiar? Has it been done before? How can I freshen it?
- What if I tried a completely different setting?
- What trait could my Lead possess that hurts her?
- How can that trait be made potentially deadly?
- How can I make the characters in conflict hate each other?
- How can I make the characters who love each other have to be on opposite sides?
- Are there relationships I can create that up the ante for each character?
- If my novel were rendered in a movie trailer, what would it look like? Would I want to see the movie? If not, what can I do to make it a *must see*?

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE FIRST DRAFT

So you're writing away, trying to get that first draft done, and right in the middle it has become tough slogging. Or maybe you've finished the first draft but the story just sits there, like Jabba the Hutt, mocking you.

Don't despair. All you need is a good zap to get yourself, or your book, back on track. Here's how to recharge your battery.

Sometimes writing a novel feels about as rewarding as turning a spit in the fires of hell. Worse, you may not feel you can turn the spit even one more revolution. Don't give up! There's always a way out.

Start by asking if this is writer's laziness as opposed to writer's block. Most often the parking butt in chair, and the pounding of keys by fingers, is all you need. No mercy here. Just do it, like the ad says.

What's stopping you may be your inner editor, yelping at you *as you write*. Shut that voice out. Give yourself permission to be bad. Write first, polish later. That's the golden rule of production.

A more insidious form of blockage is loss of confidence, the feeling that everything you're putting on paper is a foolish waste of time.

This is The Wall, and it should help you to know that most novelists hit it at some point in their first drafts. For me, it's around the 30,000-word mark. I get there and suddenly think all the wonderful things about my novel: The idea stinks and is beyond redemption; my writing is lame, the characters uninteresting, and the plot virtually nonexistent. I can't possibly go on. Career over. The anxiety is only magnified when there's an advance already half spent. Here's a simple prescription I've come up with:

- Take one whole day off from writing.
- ~~Try to spend some time at a peaceful location—a park, a lakeshore, a deserted parking lot~~

Anywhere you can be alone.

- Spend at least thirty minutes sitting without doing anything. Don't read; don't listen to music. Breathe deeply. Hear the world around you.

- Do something for pure fun. See a movie. Shop for hours without buying. Eat ice cream.
- In the evening, drink a glass of warm milk and fall asleep reading one of your favorite writers.
- First thing the next day, write at least three hundred words on your project, no matter what. Don't edit, don't slow down. Just write. You'll start to feel excited again.

- Push on until you complete your first draft.

And know this: Your first draft is never as bad as you thought it was at The Wall.

I hope this book becomes a reference to help you break through The Wall and every other challenge you face in the writing of your novel.

[CHARACTERS]

In the classic Universal horror movie *Frankenstein*, Colin Clive, overacting as Dr. Frankenstein, shouts, "IT'S ALIVE! IT'S ALIIIIIVE!" He's thrilled to the core when his creation takes on real life.

The doc was onto something. That's how it feels when a writer creates gripping, rounded characters. Cardboard cutouts don't excite you or your readers. Living, breathing characters do.

It has been said that all fiction is "character driven." This is true. Even in a novel that is heavy on plot and action, it's only through characters that the reader connects with the story.

Fiction is the record of how a character faces a threat or challenge. It may be an outward threat, such as physical death, or an inward, psychological challenge. Whatever the danger is, readers will respond if they are connected, bonded in a way, to the Lead character.

"The first thing that makes a reader read a book," wrote novelist and teacher John Gardner, "is the characters."

Plot is important. Theme deepens the story. But without compelling characters, readers will not connect with any of it.

Character work is also the key to originality in fiction. As the great writing instructor Lajos Egri put it, "Living, vibrating human beings are still the secret and magic formula of great and enduring writing."

TYPES OF LEADS

There are three types of Lead characters:

- **The Positive Lead.** This is what has traditionally been called the *hero*. The mark of the hero is that she represents the values of the community. She is representing the moral vision shared by most people and is someone we root for as a result.

Most fiction uses the Positive Lead because it's the easiest to bond with, and to carry an entire novel. Note that by *positive* we don't mean perfect. Leads, to be realistic, must also have flaws and foibles.

Further, those flaws must have a basis for existing, due to something in the character's past. A flaw alone is nothing. A flaw explained is depth.

- **The Negative Lead.** Naturally, this is the hardest type of Lead to do, because the reader may not like him. Why read a whole book about somebody who does *not* care about the community? Who is, indeed, doing things we find reprehensible?

There are ways to do a Negative Lead that are explained later in this chapter.

- **The Anti-Hero.** This is a Lead who doesn't seek to be part of the community, nor actively oppo

it. He is, instead, living according to his own moral code. He is the loner.

~~Like the classic anti-hero Rick, in *Casablanca*, he "sticks his head out for nobody."~~

A powerful story motif occurs when the anti-hero, because of the unfolding events, is forced to join the community.

In *Casablanca*, Rick is dragged into anti-Nazi intrigue. Will he continue to keep his neck out of trouble? He doesn't, and at the end of the film he rejoins the community by going off to fight with his new friend, Louis.

Ethan Edwards, the character played by John Wayne in *The Searchers*, joins the common enterprise to find his niece, captured as a child by Comanches. But at the end of the film he doesn't come back into the fold. Back turned, he walks poignantly away from his family, returning to his own world.

*

For purposes of this chapter we'll concentrate on the Positive Lead. But note that many of the aspects can be incorporated for the other two types as well.

So what makes a great Lead character?

GRIT, WIT, AND IT

Lead characters must draw us in. When we think of great works of literature, we flash to the major characters: Huck Finn. Gatsby. Tom Joad. Scarlett O'Hara.

Commercial fiction works the same way. Think of the staying power of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe or Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum.

What is it that makes these characters unforgettable? In analyzing hundreds of memorable characters, I believe three factors prevail above all. I call them *grit*, *wit*, and *it*.

Grit

Let me lead off with the one unbreakable rule for major characters in fiction: *No wimps!*

A wimp is someone who just takes it. Who reacts (barely) rather than acts. While a character may start out as a wimp, very early on he must develop real *grit*. He must do something. He must have forward motion.

Grit is guts in action. It is as described in Charles Portis's *True Grit*. Rooster Cogburn is the lawman who helps young Mattie Ross track down her father's killer. Cogburn is said by another character to be "double tough, and fear don't enter into his thinking."

All well and good, but grit in fiction must always be shown in action. Portis does this at the climax when Cogburn rides out to face Ned Pepper and his gang, reins in his mouth, firing guns with both hands.

Another gritty character is Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. While not entirely admirable, especially early in the novel when she overplays the coquette, Scarlett faces many challenges with courage. She is the one who has to help Melanie "birth" her baby, and later hold Tara together during Reconstruction.

In *Rose Madder*, Stephen King gives us a Lead who, in the beginning, is weak and vulnerable—a horribly abused wife. In the prologue we see Rose Daniels, pregnant, savagely beaten by her husband. The section ends, *Rose McClendon Daniels slept within her husband's madness for nine more years.*

Chapter one begins with Rose, bleeding from the nose, finally listening to the voice in her that says *leave*. She argues with herself. Her husband will kill her if she tries. Where will she go? But she works up the courage to open the front door and take *her first dozen steps into the fogbank which was her future.*

Every step she takes now requires grit. Rose is unprepared for dealing with the outside world, with simple things like getting a bus ticket or a job. And all the while she knows her husband is going to be

tracking her. Still, she moves forward, and we root for her. It would have been easy for King to spend ~~ten chapters detailing the abuse Rose took from her husband. But being a master of the craft, he knew that would have been too much "taking it."~~

If your novel seems to be dragging, one of the first places to look is right here, at the heart of your Lead. Is he giving up too easily? Has he been taking it for too long? Are there too many scenes where he's thinking or reacting and not *doing*?

Go back and put in some fight in an earlier scene. Get the Lead's dander up again. Make him take some action against a person or circumstance. Whether it's as simple as taking a step into the unknown or charging ahead into a dangerous battle, courage bonds us with the Lead.

To portray grit in action, you must *prepare*, then *prove*.

- Think up a scene early in your novel where your character must show inner courage. For example, he has to confront his boss over some company infraction. He can go through with it foreshadowing a greater display of courage to come toward the end.

- Or the above character can back down, setting up the necessity for growth. In the Oliver Stone movie *Wall Street*, the young stockbroker Bud Fox is asked by financial giant Gordon Gekko to do some unethical snooping on a rival. At this crucial turning point Fox gives in though he knows it's wrong. Fox will have to grow through bitter experience and develop the grit to confront Gekko at the end.

- Finally, play up your character's inner battle at the time of challenge. This will add a layer of depth to the confrontation. No one except James Bond goes into battle without fear.

THE LAMBERT SECRET

When my kids were young we liked an old Disney cartoon called *Lambert the Sheepish Lion*. It was the story of a lion cub raised by sheep. As a result, he was not a roaring lion but a rather timid and cowardly creature that the others made fun of.

In other words, a wimp.

But then one day his mother was backed onto a cliff by a ravenous wolf. The wolf was going to eat her or she would fall to her death. She cries out, "Laaaaambert!"

When Lambert hears the voice he raises his head. "Mama?"

Then he sees what's happening.

And from within, the lion that was always there ROARS! and leaps to her defense.

The wolf is scared right out of his fur and cowers. Too bad. Lambert bumps him right off the cliff.

From that day on, Lambert is the hero of the flock.

Know your character's inner lion. What is it that will make her roar and fight? Bring that aspect to the surface early in your story and you won't be hampered by the wimp factor.

Wit

In Kristin Billerbeck's *She's Out of Control*, lead character Ashley Stockingdale is arguing with her married and pregnant friend, Brea:

I am seriously annoyed now. "You never dated a guy afraid of commitment. You got married young, when you weren't 'bus bait.'" Bus bait is my brother's term meaning that I have more chance of getting hit by a bus than getting married over thirty. I'm thirty-one and counting. Take crosswalks seriously.

The throwaway last line is a perfect, witty counterpoint to what could have become maudlin self-pity. Ashley's wit is what helps keep her sane in the dark world of modern dating.

Wit is something everyone warms to when it's natural, not forced. An easy way to do show this

by making the wit self-deprecating. If the character has the ability to laugh at himself, wit will come naturally, as when Rhett Butler chides Scarlett O'Hara, "Why don't you say I'm a damned rascal and not a gentleman?"

Wit can also make light of an overly sentimental situation. When Scarlett dances with Rhett for the first time, she teases him to say something "pretty" to her. Rhett replies:

"Would it please you if I said your eyes were twin goldfish bowls filled to the brim with the clearest green water and that when the fish swim to the top, as they are doing now, you are devilishly charming?"

Wit will enliven even a negative character. Thomas Harris's flesh-eating antagonist in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal Lecter, is a perfect example. Who will forget Lecter's culinary account revolving around a census taker's liver and some fava beans?

- Find an instance when your character can gently make fun of himself. Work that into a scene early in the book. This makes for a great first impression on the reader.

- Look closely at your dialogue and tweak some lines to lightly deflate moments that might be too sentimental. If you can come up with a killer bon mot, so much the better.

It

The novelist Elinor Glynn coined the term "It" for the Roaring Twenties generation. By *It* Glynn meant personal magnetism—sex appeal as well as a quality that invites admiration (or envy) among others. Someone who walks into a room and draws all the attention has *It*. (Clara Bow was the silent film actress who was called "The It Girl" for her portrayal of such characters.)

We've all known people like that, but getting *It* on the page can be difficult.

One way is to have the *It* character described either by the author or other characters. Margaret Mitchell does the former in the opening line of *Gone With the Wind*:

Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm, as the Tarleton twins were.

Here we are told by the author that Scarlett has *It*. But then Mitchell wisely provides some action to back it up:

But she smiled when she spoke, consciously deepening her dimple and fluttering her brilliant black lashes as swiftly as butterflies' wings. The boys were enchanted, as she had intended them to be, and they hastened to apologize for boring her.

Later, at the barbecue at Twelve Oaks, Scarlett sits on an ottoman under an oak tree, surrounded by men. The scene gives us more proof of Scarlett's sex appeal. And, of course, Rhett Butler, who could have any woman, is drawn to her as well.

- Before you begin writing, hunt down a visual of your character. Go through magazines until you find a picture that seems to shout, *This is what she looks like!* Clip the picture and keep it for reference during your writing.

- Imagine a party where several people are chatting and your character walks into the room dressed to the nines. How do the other characters react? What do they say about your character? Record these things for possible use in your novel.

- Work into your novel an early scene where another character is drawn to your Lead character. This can be because of sex appeal, power, or fascination. It can be subtle or overt. But this will set the tone in the minds of the readers.

Grit, *Wit*, and *It*. Work them into your main character, and you'll be on your way to creating truly unforgettable fiction.

Do not hesitate to give your hero lusts of the flesh, dark passions, impulses to evil; for these da

powers, fused with their opposites—the will to good, the moral impulses, the powers of the spirit—will do to your character precisely what the opposite powers of fire and water do to the sword blade.

—William Foster-Harris

ATTITUDE

Compelling characters have a way of looking at the world that's uniquely their own. This is the *attitude*, and done well it sets them apart from every other fictional creation.

If you're writing in first-person point of view, attitude should permeate the voice of the narrator. Julianna Baggott's Lead in *Girl Talk*, Lissy Jablonski, is smart, witty, and a bit cynical. She describes an old boyfriend:

He'd been a ceramics major because he wanted to get dirty, a philosophy major because he wanted to be allowed to think dirty, a forestry major because he wanted to be one with the dirt, and a psychology major because he wanted to help people deal with their dirt. But nothing suited him.

We learn a lot about Lissy from her singular voice. One thing she's not is dull.

A third-person character shows attitude primarily through dialogue and thoughts. In *L.A. Justice* we're given a look into the head of Nikki Hill, the deputy D.A. who is the Lead in the legal thriller by Christopher

Darden and Dick Lochte. In one scene she reacts to her superior, the acting D.A. He's a man of two personalities *she had labeled "Dr. Jazz" and "Mr. Snide." In the office he was the latter, bent and doubled with an acid tongue and total lack of social grace ...At the moment, he was definitely in his Mr. Snide mode.*

This is a quick look at Nikki's attitude toward authority, which continues to be developed in the novel.

The best way to find your character's unique views is to *listen*. You do this by creating a free-form journal in the character's voice. It's okay if you don't know what the voice is going to sound like when you start. Keep writing, fast and furious, in ten- to twenty-minute stretches. A voice will begin to emerge.

Have the character pontificate on such questions as:

- What do you care most about in the world?
- What really ticks you off?
- If you could do one thing, and succeed at it, what would it be?
- What people do you most admire, and why?
- What was your childhood like?
- What's the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?

Let the answers come in any form, without editing. Your goal is not to create usable copy (though you certainly will find some gems). Rather, you want to get to know, deeply, the character with whom you're going to spend an entire novel.

THE CHARACTER VOICE JOURNAL

Start a free-form document that is just the voice of your character, in stream of consciousness mode. Go wild with this. You're trying to let the voice of the character develop organically. You want to be able to hear the character so he doesn't sound like any of the other characters.

Personalize and make it unique. These tools help you do that.

SURPRISES

Raymond Chandler had a little advice for spicing up a plot. Whenever the story starts to drag, I

counseled, "Bring in a guy with a gun." In other words, surprise.

~~Why not do the same thing with your characters? A character who never surprises us is dull by definition.~~

Surprising behavior often surfaces under conditions of excitement, stress, or inner conflict.

Archie Caswell, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of Han Nolans *When We Were Saints*, is told about his experience of the divine. Alone on a mountain he *dug his hands into the ground beneath him pulling up pine needles and dirt. He threw it at the trees. He picked up some more and threw it, too.* He berates God, then asks God's forgiveness. Not something we expect from a heretofore normal, trouble-making kid.

- Go to a place in your story where the tension is high. Now increase the heat. Ratchet up the conflict.

- Make a list of possible actions and reactions for your character. Push beyond the familiar. Allow yourself to come up with possibilities you would never have considered. The more surprising, the better (usually these will come when you force yourself to keep listing, so make the list at least ten items long).

- Sit back and choose an action or reaction that seems fresh and alive. Don't fear the unknown. Work that into your scene. See if you can work others elsewhere.

Unselfishness

We care about people who care about others. We like characters who don't just think of their own self-interest all the time. A Lead who shows concern for those not as well off as himself creates a strong bond.

Compare two Woody Allen movies. In *Scoop*, Scarlett Johansson plays an American journalist student in London. In her first scene she gets drunk and sleeps with a celebrity to get an interview.

Woody Allen plays a third-tier magician who gets Johansson as a volunteer one night. In the disappearing chamber she is visited by the ghost of a famous journalist who gives her a scoop on a serial killer.

She enlists Allen to help her track the suspect.

But we don't care.

Why? Because all we know about the Lead is that she is a woman of questionable morals and ethics with a nice bod. Her sidekick holds no

particular interest for us, either. He isn't doing too badly, apparently, even with his less-than-impressive shtick.

What was missing here?'

Now consider one of Allen's more successful films, *Broadway Danny Rose*. Here Allen plays a very similar character to the one he played in *Scoop*, a fast-talking but unimpressive Brooklynite. Yet we care deeply about Danny Rose. Why?

Because Danny is a talent agent to those without a chance, like a blind xylophone player and a one-legged tap dancer. He genuinely cares about his charges, and that's the key: We like characters who care about others.

- Is there a minor character in your story your Lead can care about? If not, create one.

- Your Lead doesn't have to be a saint about this. He can have inner conflict or annoyance about his caring. It's his actions that count.

- A useful technique is the "pet the dog" beat (see pages 224-225).

The Secret Ingredient: Honor

Honor can be defined as strong moral character shown by adherence to ethical principles. It is a

inner quality that motivates right action, even in the face of terrible odds.

In *High Noon*, Will Kane (Gary Cooper in an Oscar-winning role) is the retiring marshal of a small Western town. He's just married a Quaker woman (Grace Kelly), and they're about to ride out to start their quiet lives together.

Then Kane gets the terrible news: The killer he helped put away has been pardoned. And he's announced he's coming to town on the noon train to take care of Will Kane once and for all. And he's bringing three other gunmen to help him in his deadly task.

Maybe he should stay, Kane says. But the townspeople herd him and his wife onto a buckboard and rush him out of town.

A half-mile later Kane pulls up the horse. He tells his wife he has to go back. If he doesn't, the killers will hunt them down. The two of them will be on the run for the rest of their lives.

But it goes even deeper than that. The really important theme is that Kane knows he won't be able to live with *himself if he* runs, let alone with his wife. He's a man who cannot live with dishonor because to do so is

worse than death. He has to go back. And for this he risks losing Grace Kelly. Grace Kelly! Talk about a virtue holding sway over a soul!

The key moment in the film occurs just before Act III and the climactic shoot-out. Kane has tried unsuccessfully to gather a posse. The town he had served so well has let him down. He is alone, and four gunmen will soon arrive to kill him. He will almost surely die.

In the livery stable he begins to crack. What has he done? He's given up a wife and a future, for what? For honor? Is that worth anything?

He sees a horse and saddle and wonders if he should just get on and get out.

He meets Harvey (Lloyd Bridges), the young deputy who has bristled under the shadow of the great Will Kane. A coward at heart, Harvey wants nothing more than to have Kane leave town so he can take over his role as the big man. He's even tried to take Kane's former lover for his own, but she now holds him in contempt.

Harvey sees immediately what Kane is thinking and happily starts saddling the horse. "No one can blame you," he says. "Sure, this is what you've got to do."

And in that moment Will Kane sees what he'll become if he leaves. His dishonor will turn him into Harvey. His life will effectively end, even if he stays physically alive.

Kane refuses to get on the horse. This angers Harvey so much he tries to knock Kane out. They fight, and Harvey is the one who ends up on the ground.

Kane stays to face the killers, and you'll have to watch the movie to see what happens.

But it is that one moment, that interior reflection, where Kane fights the most important battle. As the essayist Michel de Montaigne put it, "It is not for outward show that the soul is to play its part, but for ourselves within, where no eyes can pierce but our own."

Honor is found in another literary classic, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, in a most unlikely place. Ishmael is astonished when Queequeg, the cannibal harpooner, risks his own life to save a young greenhorn from drowning. The astonishment comes from Queequeg's nonchalance about it all. He accepts no congratulations and seeks no reward, just some water to wash off the brine and a place to smoke his pipe. Ishmael seems to peer into the native's mind, catching the thought that we are simply all in this together, and we have to look out for each other. That's just what people do.

Who a character is comes out in those moments when, under moral stress, he has a choice to make. Will it be honorable or dishonorable?

When Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) gives up the love of his life, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman),

Casablanca, it is a transcendent and perfect ending. Blaine has made a sacrifice because to take another man's wife, even though she is willing, is too much dishonor to abide. They may not regret now, Blaine says to Ilsa, but they will soon, and for the rest of their lives. In this way, the anti-hero Blaine becomes a real hero and shoves off with his new friend, Louis (Claude Rains), to rejoin the war effort.

Contrast that with *An American Tragedy*, the Theodore Dreiser classic that was magnificently made into the film *A Place in the Sun*. Clyde Griffiths starts with one dishonorable act that leads to his inevitable downfall. Early in the novel, goaded by some of his fellow bellboys to visit a brothel, Clyde has a choice to make. He's curious but a little scared, because of his background. His parents were staunch Christians and brought him up that way.

Clyde, Dreiser writes, puts thoughts of his parents "resolutely out of his mind." Thus the choice is made.

After the experience in the brothel, Clyde has thoughts of shame, thinking back on his parents' teachings from the Bible. Yet the experience was "lit with a kind of gross, pagan beauty or vulgar charm for him." Honor is always pitched as a battle of two extremes.

Clyde has made his choice. He seduces the tragic Roberta, consents to marry her (to save his own reputation) when she conceives, then lets her drown so he can be free to pursue another woman.

As thoughts of seeing Roberta dead come to Clyde, Dreiser calls it "the devil's whisper."

When our characters show us the full fire of that inner battle, we have the makings of great fiction. For whether the choice is ultimately for honor or dishonor, we will see the consequences and the reader will be instructed without being taught.

- Define the ethics of your character. This doesn't have to be made explicit in the story, but if you know what they are your character will act accordingly.

- Construct or rewrite a scene that forces the character to make a moral choice. Make up strong reasons *not* to act honorably. Show us what the character does as a result.

GETTING PHYSICAL

When describing your characters, professional writers are of two minds. Some believe in giving a full visual description. They want to control the picture in the mind of the reader. This used to be the popular view. Thus, the beginning of *The Maltese Falcon*, by Dashiell Hammett, goes like this:

Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down—from high flat temples—in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan.

The other view, much more popular today, is minimalist. It recognizes that readers are going to form their own picture regardless, and that will be more powerful than what you, the author, can come up with.

Under this view, you select only those details that are essential, that truly characterize. One or two telling details are worth more than a whole page of standard description.

Award-winning novelist Athol Dickson makes an important point about tying the details of a description, whatever they might be, to the deeper goals of the story. "In my last two novels and in my work in progress," Dickson says, "all three protagonists have had physical characteristics that play an important role in conveying the story's central conflict. One is an African-American orphan with blue eyes seeking his roots, one returns to a hostile home disguised by long filthy hair and a bushy beard, and one longs for loving acceptance in spite of being self-described as 'mousy.' These physical

characteristics do more than ground the character within the reader's mind; they also serve as frequent reminders of the character's struggle."

Choose description wisely, no matter how much you use, and make it do "double duty." You don't simply describe; you describe in such a way that you add to the mood or tone of the novel. Nothing generic. Descriptions should do more than create a picture—they should support the other things you're doing in the story.

In Donald Westlake's *361*, the Lead loses an eye in chapter one. He gets a glass eye in chapter two. Later, when trying to convince an old man to talk, he pops out the glass eye and uses it for show value. It works. The old man keels over and dies.

This is getting double duty out of character traits.

- Make a list of all the physical traits of your character.
- Make a list of the moods you want to create, the way you want readers to feel as they progress through the story.

- Now, connect the traits with the mood words, and find ways to tweak them so they're consistent with each other.

THE CHARACTER CHECKLIST

For each of your main characters, consider the following:

- **Sex:**
- **Age:**
- **Occupation:**
- **Point of vulnerability:**
- **Current living conditions:**
- **Personal habits: dress, manners, etc.:**
- **Physical appearance and how she feels about it:**
- **Where she grew up:**
- **Main attitudes about people and events:**
- **Main shaping incidents in past influencing present life:**
- **Dominant attitude:**
- **What her parents are like:**
- **Her relationship with other family members:**
- **Schooling and her performance there:**
- **Others think of her as:**
- **What she likes to do in her free time:**
- **She is passionate about:**
- **The one thing she wants more than anything else:**
- **Her major flaw:**
- **Her major strong point:**
- **What I love about this character:**
- **The secret to be revealed:**

GETTING INSIDE

Bonding with characters is achieved through *intimacy*. The more we know and understand characters, especially the Lead, the stronger our desire to follow them through an entire novel.

The greatest intimacy is achieved when we are privy to the thoughts and feelings of the character. When we get to go inside their heads.

Thoughts

When you render a character's thoughts, you are providing a direct link to what makes him tick. It's secret knowledge. The other characters don't know the thoughts, but the reader does. For this very reason, thoughts are powerful tools in fiction. But because of their power, they must be used judiciously.

You need to pick your spots carefully. Some of those spots would include the following:

- moments of great emotional intensity
- crucial turning-point scenes
- beats where the character must analyze a situation
- challenges that cause the character to reflect on herself
- impressions upon meeting another character or arriving at a location
- scenes where the character is alone and reacting to actions that just happened

There are two ways writers show the thought life of characters: italicized and nonitalicized.

The italicized way looks like this:

Margie burst into the Red Canary. She paused a moment and cased the joint. *Where is he? Is he hiding? I'll bet he's hiding.* She went to the bar and sat.

The reader instantly knows that what is in italics is what Margie thought. Notice two things here. First, the thoughts are written in present tense. And second, there is no attribution, as in: *Where is he? Is he hiding?* she thought. The attribution is usually superfluous.

When using italics, the words are always the words the character is thinking in the moment. Note that italics are harder to read, and for that reason you should keep these relatively short. The other way to do it is simply to use the attribution without italics:

Margie burst into the Red Canary. She paused a moment and cased the joint. Where is he? Is he hiding? I'll bet he's hiding.

A variation on thought rendition is to give us the thoughts in past tense, so it flows along with the narrative:

Margie burst into the Red Canary. She paused a moment and cased the joint. Where was he? Was he hiding? It was a good bet that he was hiding.

Notice that you don't need an attribution here. Because we see the action first (Margie bursting in), we know that the thoughts are hers.

Sitting behind his drawing board in the third bedroom of his development house in Pinecrest Manor, he asked himself, What the hell do I want out of life?

I want to be happy, of course, but that's pure rubbish. Everyone wants to be happy.

—*Strangers When We Meet*, by Evan Hunter

The above examples are in third-person point of view. First person, of course, offers endless opportunities for thought life because you're in the head of the character from the start. She is the one who is doing the narrating:

I walked into the Red Canary and looked for him. I kept thinking *He's hiding. I know he's here somewhere, but he's hiding.*

I walked into the Red Canary and looked for him. I kept thinking **he's hiding. I know he's in here, but he's hiding.**

*

I walked into the Red Canary and looked for him. I kept thinking, *You're here, aren't you, Bob? You hiding, Bob? I know you. You're hiding.*

Find a spot in your manuscript where the character is thinking. What style have you chosen? Play with it. If you've used italics, try it the other way, and vice versa.

Can you do away with an attribution by showing the character in action, followed by the thought?

~~Try compressing the thought as much as possible. As an exercise, expand the thought beyond a reason. Write quickly and fill a whole page with inner life. Then pick the best lines to keep.~~

FIRST-PERSON POV WARNING

When writing in first-person point of view, there's a great temptation to let the character go on and on about her thoughts and feelings. This can slow down the story, even one that is "character driven." Compress thoughts and feelings as much as possible.

Feelings

Fiction is an emotional exchange; at least it should be. The reader primarily feels a story, living vicariously through the character. When the character feels something we can relate to, that creates empathy, a powerful bonding agent.

Jerry Cleaver calls emotion the "active ingredient" of fiction. "Fiction is about people who are desperate, driven, in crisis," he writes. Character emotion establishes empathy, sympathy, and identification.

And, as he was looking, it happened again to him. It was something that had started with the first warm days of spring. All colors seemed suddenly brighter, and with his heightened perception, there came also a deep, almost frightening sadness. It was a sadness that made him conscious of the slow beat of his heart, of the roar of blood in his ears. And it was a sadness that made him search

for identity, made him try to re-establish himself in the frame of reference in time and space.

—*Cancel All Our Vows*, by John D. MacDonald

Feelings can be directly described, as in the above example. You can also show feelings through actions. Hemingway was a master at this.

In his short story "Soldier's Home," a young man back from World War I is having trouble getting back in tune with his family and home town. One morning at breakfast his mother is giving him something to talk to. The young man "looked at the bacon fat hardening on his plate."

That's a perfect picture of his inner life at the moment, and a metaphor of his life's prospects.

You don't always have to render the feelings of your characters, but you must know what they are in every scene. That way, the actions and dialogue will have an organic complexity that breathes life into fiction.

Add layers of feeling to your characters by answering questions like the following. These may be expanded or adjusted the more you learn and grow as a writer:

- What does your character yearn for? What does he think about when he's got time to dream?
- What's stopping the character from getting what he yearns for? Come up with a list of several possibilities.
- Choose one of the obstacles to the character's yearning. Now think up a scene where the character is faced with that obstacle. The obstacle is strong. How does the character react?

Here's how that might play out. The character, Frank, is a middle school science teacher. He yearns to do something adventurous, like skydiving. What stops him? Some possibilities are:

- his own fear of flying
- his domineering father
- lack of money

Let's say it's his domineering father. Write a short scene where the father tells Frank he's stupid to even think about jumping out of a plane.

How will Frank deal with it? One thing for sure, he won't be a wimp. No wimps!

He has to do something.

Suppose you have him scream at the father in defiance. Or storm out without speaking, determined to live his own life. This is how you push past the mundane in your characters and scenes.

Use Inner Life to Show Character Change

The best plots show us not only actions, but the effect of the actions on the characters, especially the Lead. Use inner life to give us a window into how the character is changing.

In Stephen King's *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, the lost girl Trisha knows that her mother will soon be frightened by Trisha not being with her. King writes:

The thought of her fright made Trisha feel guilty as well as afraid.

That is one line of interior life, and the story goes on. Later, we get a much more detailed look inside Trisha:

The world had teeth and it could bite you with them anytime it wanted. She knew that now. She was only nine, but she knew it, and she thought she could accept it. She was almost ten, after all, and big for her age.

I don't know why we have to pay for what you guys did wrong! That was the last thing she had heard Pete say, and now Trisha thought she knew the answer. It was a tough answer but probably a true one: just because. And if you didn't like it, take a ticket and get in line. Trisha guessed that in a lot of ways she was older than Pete now.

Showing inner change can be implicit or explicit, but you as the writer should know what your characters are feeling at every stage of the novel.

THE PULL-BACK TECHNIQUE

Often in your first draft your major characters, your Lead in particular, won't "jump off the page." Won't seem all that unique or worth following. You may have created some great plot moments for the Lead to suffer through, but to increase reader interest you need an interesting character.

To deepen the character during revision, try the pull-back technique:

1] Spend some time brainstorming about your Lead. Make a list of main character traits that come across.

2] Now, take each of those traits and ask yourself, what, is an action absolutely outrageous and extreme the character might do under the full sway of that trait? Force yourself to come up with a list of at least five actions.

3] If you've let yourself go, you'll have two or three very surprising actions. These actions are likely not worth putting into the manuscript. Why? Because they're so over the top they probably throw off the balance of the character or plot. But you've tapped into some good stuff here. Can you still use some of it?

4] Yes. Just pull back 25 percent. This is a technique I learned as an actor. It was very easy to overact emotional scenes, to go too far. When I learned the 25 percent pull back, it made a tremendous difference.

Here's how the process might work. Let's say I have a lawyer who is struggling to make it and has a criminal matter he needs to handle. The evidence is not falling his way. He faces recalcitrant witnesses. He's having personal trouble, too. His fiancée has just broken up with him.

One of his traits is speaking his mind when he's angry. Perhaps being a little too honest. Now ask, what is something the character might do under full sway of this trait? I come up with a list

- yell at a judge
- scream at TV cameras outside the courtroom
- call a policeman a liar in open court

I need to press these further:

- throw a law book at the judge
- throw a chair through a window
- cut the D.A.'s tie off with scissors during the trial

That last one came out of nowhere but is the most original in my mind.

Now, I have to assess this. I decide that if my lawyer literally performs this action, it would impact the plot too much. It would make the character a little too over the top. So I pull back 20 percent. How?

Maybe he bumps into the D.A. outside the courtroom and, after an exchange, grabs his tie and throws it in his face. That's pulling back, and it works here.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Your hero walks into a bar (this is not a joke!). He needs some information from the bartender. A beefy man, the bartender is cleaning a glass with a cloth. Hero shows a picture to the bartender, asking him if he knows who the guy is.

"Yes," the bartender says, then blows into the glass. He gives your hero a name and your hero walks out.

And your reader yawns and puts down the book. What's happened here is something we've seen innumerable times. A cliched minor character—doing cliched things—who adds nothing to the tension of the story. He's used to convey information only, to give your protagonist a link so he can move on to another scene.

It's an opportunity wasted. Because minor characters can add *spice* to your novel, that extra space that distinguishes the best fiction. So put a little effort on your minor characters. Here's how.

Allies and Irritants

Supporting players should serve one of two purposes in a story. They either help or hinder the main character. They are *allies* or *irritants*. If they aren't one or the other, what are they doing in the story except taking up space?

Consider Peggotty in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. She's David's beloved nanny who reappears at various times to offer him much-needed support. She is an ally.

By way of contrast there is Miss Murdstone, the cruel sister of David's stepfather. She is, of course, an irritant, someone standing in the way of David's happiness.

Neither character is wasted. Each functions to illuminate a different side of David's character.

When you conceive a minor character this way, you open up wonderful plot opportunities. In *Carrie*, Stephen King uses an irritant early in the book:

Tommy Erbter, age five, was biking up the other side of the street. He was a small, intense-looking boy on a twenty-inch Schwinn with bright red training wheels. He was humming "Scooby Doo, where are you?" under his breath. He saw Carrie, brightened, and stuck out his tongue. "Hey, ol' fart-face! Of prayin' Carrie!"

Carrie glares at Tommy and makes the bike fall over, hurting Tommy.

He has clearly irritated her, but he also serves another purpose—as a premonition of Carrie's later telekinetic revenge. This character is put to the best possible use.

Make sure this is true even for the "cogs," those characters who are necessary to move the story along: doormen, cabdrivers, bartenders, receptionists—the people we meet every day, and who you

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