The Writer's Tune-Up Manual

Exercises That Will Scrape the Rust Off Your Writing

Revised and Expanded Edition

by Craig A. Hart

Introduction

Welcome to *The Writer's Tune-Up Manual*. If you're like most writers, the one thing you want most of all is to improve your craft. Everybody, from already established writers to the greenest newbie out there, can stand a little tweaking of the brake lines, an oil change, or new air filter. The goal of this little book is to scrape the rust off various aspects of writing by providing targeted exercises. This book is designed to help you hone your craft by doing the very thing you want to improve: writing!

We've arranged the book into five sections: Character, Plot, Point of View, Dialogue, and Description and Setting. In the paperback version, we provide a little space for notes, but you'll need some scrap paper or a laptop for the Kindle book.

Are you ready to scrape the rust off your writing? Good! Let's get started.

How To Use This Book

We've arranged this book in the form of an "importance sandwich." Before you get hungry, let

me explain.

The first section, which includes ten amazing exercises, is designed to tackle character creation and development, the most important aspect of writing. Characters are the lifeblood of any good book.

Following that are three smaller sections that cover point of view, dialogue, and description and setting. While these are all important, they play second piccolo to character.

The fifth and final section is the second big one, plot. There are ten exercises for plot development. By mastering character and plot, you give your book a fighting chance and without character and plot, no book can survive.

Feel free to skip around and tackle whatever area you wish to shine up first, but I do recommend visiting the two larger sections at some point.

Now let's get writing!

CHARACTER

Gullible Character

Write up to 500 words beginning *and ending* with this character statement sentence: "She believed everything she was ever told."

Try to create a character arc throughout the piece so that the ending sentence, although identical, means something entirely different from the opening line. How does this character change? How do things look differently to her after more life experience? Try to get inside her head and see things from her perspective.

I'm not gonna lie, this is a tough one, but should illustrate the importance of the character development arc.

> "A writer is someone for whom
> writing is more difficult
> than it is for other people."
>
> - Thomas Mann

"No, Not Them Again!"

So we all know the cliché characters: the Irish cop, the prostitute with a heart of gold, the writer with a drinking problem, and so forth. Clichés often exist for a reason, of course, and sometimes it's okay to use a tried and true character. But not always. Populate your stories with *only* stock characters and there won't be any reason to read your tales over anyone else's.

For this writing exercise, create and describe three different characters, each of whom possesses at least one stereotyped character trait. For the rest of the description, however, abandon the norm and make

each character as different from what the reader might expect as possible. It doesn't necessarily need to hold together; this is just practice. The point is to begin breaking down the tendency most of us have to devise old, worn-out characters.

EXAMPLE

Sean, a beefy, red-faced Irishman, is a twenty-year police veteran who always complains about his aching feet. **He loves attending Broadway musicals and has a secret Hello Kitty collection in his basement.**

Spend at least 100 words describing each of your three characters. Who knows, you might even end up using them!

"There is nothing to writing.
All you do is sit down
at a typewriter and bleed."

- Ernest Hemingway

Dynamic Character

Write 500 words beginning with this sentence: "He hadn't always been this way, but he recognized and appreciated the change." Be creative and try to think outside the box. What is this change? Does "he" appreciate it for the right or wrong reasons?

> "There are three rules for
> writing a novel.
> Unfortunately, no one knows
> what they are."
>
> - W. Somerset Maugham

Eye of the Beholder

This is a three-part exercise, totaling 300 words. Use the first 100 words to describe a character's physical appearance. Use the second 100 words to describe a character's personality traits. Now use the final 100 words to describe **how others see this character.** You may find it helpful to shift POV (point of view) between the first two sections and the third. It's okay. You can do it this time.

"When I write,
I feel like an armless,
legless man
with a crayon in his mouth."

- Kurt Vonnegut

Out of Character

In real life people do occasionally act out of character or do things we wouldn't normally expect them to do. In fiction, there should be a good reason for a character to do something outside of the ordinary. If there is a story featuring a cowardly character, they can't do something incredibly brave at the end unless there has been a progressive character arc throughout the text. There needs to be a motivation for the change.

Write a short scene featuring a character with a well-defined personality (cowardice, anger, greed, kindness, etc.) Include examples that demonstrate the personality. At the end of the scene, have your character behave in a way completely opposed to how they would be expected to act. Notice how this seems jarring and false.

Now think about what elements you could incorporate to show why the character might act in a manner opposed to his personality. Did something change in their life? Did someone with great influence lead them to alter their thinking? Write a short addition to the scene to suggest why the character behaved as they did.

"Write what disturbs you,
what you fear,
what you have not been
willing to speak about.
Be willing to be split open."

- Natalie Goldberg

The Fear Factor

Often a book will focus on a character's struggle with oneself. This falls into the category of a Man v. Self plot theme, but can also refer to the development of character. A story that traces a character's progress from one place to another (usually non-physical) can be just as much a piece of character arc than anything else, although it is often used as the main plot, particularly in more literary

novels. In Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, the title character wears a mask to hide his disfiguration, a metaphor for deeper psychological wounds, and struggles to extend and receive the emotion he's never felt: compassion. The Phantom is afraid of showing himself vulnerable, as this has resulted in past pain and suffering.

Use an existing character (or create a new one and take the time to develop it) and put them in a situation in which they must face their worst fear. How do they naturally react? Likely, they recoil from whatever the situation is. Now create a list of events that may result in the character reacting differently. Rewrite the scene with these events in mind. Do they provide enough motivation for change? How did they change the character's perception?

> "Your intuition knows
> what to write,
> so get out of the way."
>
> - Ray Bradbury

The Foil

In literature, a foil is most often used to illustrate or heighten awareness of a certain aspect of the main character. Sometimes it is difficult to notice or pinpoint a specific trait or quality until it is set against an opposing backdrop. Light only exists because of darkness and vice-versa. Without one, we would have no concept of the other. This technique is particularly useful in character development, although it has appeared in various manifestations and employed to varying degrees of effectiveness.

For this exercise, create a character that is the opposite of your main character or, at least, less than or different from your main character in the way(s) most vital to the story. If a main selling point of your main character is physical strength, you likely won't want a sidekick who is just strong or stronger. Or perhaps this new character possesses bad traits that are opposed to those lofty ones which your main character champions the most. As examples, think of Dr. Watson/Sherlock Holmes and Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter.

Once you've devised the characters, write two short scenes. In the first have your main character give a

monologue about their most important qualities or goals. Boring, isn't it? Now write another scene in which the main character and the foil argue about the earlier monologue. Notice how this gently forces the reader to become active in the story and choose sides, thereby becoming more invested in your story.

> "Writing is not necessarily
> something to be ashamed of,
> but do it in private and
> wash your hands afterwards."
>
> - Robert A. Heinlein

Mr. or Ms. Perfect

Perfection should generally be avoided in a character. Real people, such as your readers, aren't flawless and chances are they are not going to be able to fully identify with a character who is. They might even get annoyed and put your work down altogether. Reading about a character with no faults or vices is like reading a sermon…there's a reason why sermon anthologies aren't typically found on *The New York Times* Bestsellers List.

Within 300 words, create a new character by detailing their failings. You'll likely be tempted to temper the description with redeeming qualities, but resist the urge. Give at least five faults. They can be socially perceived vices, like smoking or gambling, or perhaps personality traits, like a raging temper or deep selfishness.

Once you're done listing the faults, read over them and see how you feel about this character. Do you hate them? Feel sorry for them?

Now write a similar, but separate, character sketch, only this time list exclusively good qualities. Examine your feelings about this character. Do you envy their piety? Or perhaps want them to fall down a deep well? Does it feel like they are wagging their finger at you?

Put the two exercises together, combining character traits (you don't have to use all of them) and come up with one master sketch. Notice how much deeper the character feels once there are both good and bad aspects to their personality. This is the bedrock for creating interesting, fully-rounded characters.

> "A non-writing writer is
> a monster courting insanity."
>
> - Franz Kafka

"We'll Call You"

An important aspect to creating believable characters and then using them to populate your story is to know your characters. Admittedly, part of a story arc, especially one that is character-driven, is the change that happens to a character's belief system, motivation, worldview, or goals, but it can be helpful to know a something about your characters before even beginning the story.

In this exercise, select two of the main characters from your planned project and have them interview each other for a job. It can be any job, but one that requires a lot of information might be more useful (and more fun). Perhaps they are applying for a position in national security, such as the CIA, FBI, or some other equally paranoid organization. To up the pressure, maybe even have them being grilled by their mafia mentor, where one wrong answer will mean a broken kneecap or worse. Choose one

character to be the interviewer, the other to be the interviewee. Then switch places. Try to ask at least twenty questions per interview, because that has a nice ring to it. Where have I heard that before?

> "That's what fiction is for.
> It's for getting at the truth
> when the truth isn't
> sufficient for the truth."
>
> - Tim O'Brien

The Worst Day Ever

Take your main character, or any other character you want to know better, and put them in the middle of the worst day they've ever had. Have it start as nothing more than a bad hair day, but gradually ratchet up the pressure by have increasingly terrible things happen. By the end of the scene have their nightmares come true. The point of this exercise is to learn how your selected character will react under pressure from stress and extreme circumstances. Write at least 500 tortuous words and watch your character wriggle and writhe. One you've finished playing God (for now), read

back over the scene(s) and evaluate the character's reactions. Do they seem realistic? Do they follow a consistent and believable pattern of increasing stress? For example, you don't want your character flipping out over a red light, but then watching calmly as an alien ship sets fire to the entire town with lasers.

POINT OF VIEW

A Few Words

A common mistake in writing is the inadvertent shift in POV (point of view). We all know what POV is, of course. In simple terms, POV determines whose perspective we get on the story and how much information we are told. There are all kinds and combinations of POV, but the ones most commonly known are first, second, and third person.

First Person = "I"
I walked across the street.
Second Person = "You"
You walked across the street.
Third Person = "He/She"
He/She walked across the street.

First and third person are by far the most commonly used methods of POV, as they tend to work better than second person. There are two main reasons for this. First, it can be difficult for a reader to identify with second person. This may seem contradictory,

since second person by definition includes the reader directly. In reality, however, it's a really tough sell to make the reader believe they are actually doing and being subjected to what is happening in the story. It is much easier to make a reader cheer for a third party with whom they can find some manner of connection. Also, second person is hard writing. Few writers can do it well enough to overcome the barriers inherent with writing in this POV and to turn second person into an asset. For these reasons, it's probably better to steer clear of second person altogether, unless you have a specific, very good reason for using it.

> "A young writer is easily
> tempted by the allusive and
> ethereal and ironic and
> reflective, but the declarative
> is at the bottom of
> most good writing."
>
> - Garrison Keillor

Who's Lookin' At What?

Now that the sermon is over, it's time for the actual

writing exercise, part of which is going to have you completely ignore what you just read.

Write three different paragraphs, each about 100 words long and each employing a different POV. Describe some type of action, like an automobile accident or something as simple as purchasing a pack of gum. At the end, think about each individual process.

1. Which one was easiest for you?
2. Which one do you think speaks loudest to the reader?
3. Which one has the most potential for detail?
4. How difficult would it be to write an entire story or book using each POV?
5. What are the individual benefits and drawbacks of each POV?

"Writing is the only profession
where no one considers you
ridiculous if you earn
no money."

- Jules Renard

What Did Your Food Ever Do To You?

Write a 250 word piece about your favorite food. But wait! You have to write it from the food's perspective. A little personification is in order here. How do you feel about being the favorite? Is it a good thing? Are you flattered? Annoyed? Do you have plans for escape or revenge? Do you have dreams and ambitions of your own?

> "A great writer reveals the truth
> even when he or she
> does not wish to."
>
> - Tom Bissell

Commitment Phobia

One of the troubles with mixing POV is that it can beg the question, "Hey, how did that character know that?" If you're writing in first person, it's unbelievable to have the narrator say, "She had a headache," unless the "she" in question had earlier stated it. Otherwise, the narrator is assuming knowledge they shouldn't have. You can certainly write something like, "She rubbed her temples, as if

fighting an oncoming migraine," as this is something clearly observable. The problem with this approach is that you end up using a lot of boring, noncommittal language, like "as if," "seemed," "appeared," and "guessed." In writing, concrete details are always better and this type of language can really water down a great story.

Write a scene in which a first person narrator visits a hospital ward and tries to describe how the patients are feeling, based on observable clues. Make sure not to assume knowledge, but instead use description and words or phrases such as "seemed" and "as if" to remain firmly in your first person narrative.

Once you're done, look back over what you've written and circle all uses of noncommittal language. Now rewrite the scene and replace at least half of that language with concrete information. Try using the patients' own dialogue, such as, "I feel like my legs are falling off!" or feedback from the nurses and doctors.

"A professional writer
is an amateur who didn't quit."

- Richard Bach

The Internal Struggle

Now that we've examined first person from the perspective of a passive observer, let's look at a way in which it can be fiercely effective. Using the hospital ward from the preceding example, choose one patient and have them describe to the previous narrator how they're feeling and what they're experiencing. Be as descriptive and graphic as you can.

Once you're done, look back and notice how much more effective first person POV is when used to describe extreme circumstances happening to the narrator, as opposed to an outside party.

"That's all we have, finally,
the words, and they had
better be the right ones."

- Raymond Carver

The Happy Trio

This final exercise in the Point of View category is designed to help you decide which POV will work best for you. Some writers find they are comfortable with only one, while others choose based on what most aptly fits their current project. The only way to know which camp you fall into is to take them all for a test drive.

Write a scene that involves a dinner party and populate this party with more than three characters. Now choose three characters to use as your POV guinea pigs. Name one First Person, another Second Person, and the final one Third Person. Now have them arrive at the party at the same time. Give each viewpoint its own paragraph, but try to make the transitions as fluid as possible.

EXAMPLE

I arrived at the party along with two other people, one an attractive woman wearing a decidedly distracting dress, the other a sketchy-looking fellow with a scar over one eye and a monocle jammed in the other. From outside it sounded like the party was in full swing and I thought I heard the dulcet tones of a live jazz band.

You climbed the steps, holding the hem of your dress up to avoid ripping it with your new Louboutins. Although you tried to remain focused, your eyes drifted over to the striking gentleman on your left, the one with the tailored dinner jacket and five o'clock shadow. The other man, the one actively trying to get your attention, should have been denied entry. He looked like one of those anonymous English lords down on his luck; the monocle did nothing to save his image.

He couldn't wait to get into the party and find the buffet. There must be a buffet. With shrimp. He reached up and adjusted his monocle, wondering how anyone could ever get used to them. If he didn't have a black eye halfway through the party…

You get the idea. Carry on in this vein, alternating paragraphs as you take your three characters into the party. Write at least two more paragraph sets. As you write, take notice of which paragraphs seem more natural and which feel like the proverbial pulling of teeth. Once you've completed the exercise, read back over what you've written and decide which one sounds better for the piece as a whole.

DIALOGUE

A Few Words

Effective dialogue is vital to fiction writing. Poor dialogue can kill an otherwise well-constructed story by interrupting pacing and creating clunky transitions.
Things to avoid while writing dialogue:

1. Overuse of tags (he said, she said)
2. Abuse of exotic tags (exclaimed, interjected, murmured, etc.)
3. Pointless conversation
4. Awkward exposition

"If you don't have time to read,
you don't have the time
(or the tools) to write.
Simple as that."

- Stephen King

Tag, You're It!

Write a scene of 500 words that shows a man and a woman having a conversation. The topic of the conversation is up to you. It can be about anything. The majority of the scene should be dialogue, limit your description of setting. You are only allowed two tags for each speaker. Two "he saids" and two "she saids." Use other ways to make it clear who is speaking each passage of dialogue.

EXAMPLE

Instead of writing, "'I don't know why they make this software so complicated,' he said," perhaps you could write, "He crossed his arms and huffed in frustration. 'I don't know why they make this software so complicated.'"

In the second sentence it is just as clear who is speaking as in the first sentence, but without the "he said" tag. By using an alternate method to show who is speaking, you are offered the opportunity to further describe his attitude. Of course, you shouldn't *always* use this method, but it is a good skill to practice if you want to avoid having a "he said, she said" convention on every page of your manuscript. Unnecessary tags slow down a story and

create distractions for the reader.

"You must stay drunk on writing
so reality cannot destroy you."

- Ray Bradbury

Tag Spotlight

Writers, particularly new writers, often employ exotic tags to spice up their writing. It makes sense on a certain level. Those same writers were probably told in a creative writing class to avoid word repetition and use vocabulary. Therefore they use tags like interjected, exclaimed, guffawed, etc. Yet they miss the point when it comes to dialogue tags. Tags are not supposed to be the center of attention. They are there to provide clarity in regards to the speaker. Nobody has read a story and marveled at how creative the dialogue tags were. They have, however, gotten bogged down and frustrated by those same tags. Anything that distracts from the story you are trying to tell should be promptly and mercilessly dealt with. This is not to say that you can *never* use any tag but a simple "said," just that tags should be handled with care and always take a

backseat to other devices.

To illustrate the danger of fanciful tagging, write a scene in which several people are talking. Never use the "said" tag. Instead, use exotic ones like interjected, exclaimed, and guffawed. Read it over and notice how the tags end up vying for attention over other aspects of the scene. Now rewrite that scene using only "said" tags. Which ones works better? You might even play around with adding in *one or two* non-said tags to see if they add or detract.

> "I know I was writing stories
> when I was five.
> I don't know what I did
> before that.
> Just loafed, I suppose."
>
> - P.G. Wodehouse

Tattletale

A creative use of dialogue can effectively add variety to a narrative. It is a variation on the adage "show, don't tell," except that knowing the showing

actually comes in the form of telling. Wait…what? Before I confuse myself, let me set up an example. Below is a bit of narrative.

Jack walked into the room and his friends noticed a pronounced limp that hadn't been there yesterday.

Now here is that same narrative, but reworked with dialogue.

Jack walked into the room where his friends waited. "Where'd you get that limp?" one of them asked. "You didn't have that yesterday."

Same content, different presentation. And it isn't even a matter of which one is better, simply that combining stylistic choices can mix up the narrative and help retain the reader's interest. By using dialogue to "tell," you can break up the "show."

This is a simply two-step exercise:

1. Write five lines like the one in the first example (no dialogue).
2. Rewrite all five lines, replacing the narrative with "telling" dialogue.

"The job of the writer is to
take a close and uncomfortable
look at the world they inhabit,
the world we all inhabit,
and the job of the novel
is to make the corpse stink."

- Walter Mosley

Say Whaaat?

Field trip! I think you've been cooped up long enough. For this exercise, you'll need to get out of the house and take a drive. Go somewhere local where there are plenty of people who will be talking and having conversations. We'll need to meet both of these criteria. For example, the mall has lots of people, but they are typically walking around from place to place. Since this exercise will require you to eavesdrop, it may be difficult to follow someone's conversation on the move without looking suspicious and/or getting arrested. Starbucks and the local diner are both good choices.

After staking out your area, tune in to a nearby conversation and begin writing down what the speakers are saying. Did you remember to bring a

pen? Try to get a variety of sentences—both statements and questions.

Once you've gotten some material, choose a few sentences to replace with completely made up dialogue.

EXAMPLE

Person One: I love the coffee here.
Person Two: It's just, like, so good. How long have you been coming here?
PO: Since I broke up with my boyfriend.
PT: You broke up with Chaz? What did he do?
PO: He asked for a threesome. With you.
PT: That pig! I'm glad you said no.
PO: Yeah. He's moving out today.

Now let's replace a sentence. Notice how it completely changes everything about the scene, including the relationship between the two speakers and the possibility for conflict in the story.

PO: I love the coffee here.
PT: It's just, like, so good. How long have you been coming here?
PO: Since I broke up with my boyfriend.
PT: You broke up with Chaz? What did he do?

PO: He asked for a threesome. With you.
PT: That pig! I'm glad you said no.
PO: *silence*
PT: You did say no, right?

> "You can't blame a writer for
> what the characters say."
>
> - Truman Capote

Adverbally Speaking

A pitfall in writing dialogue is the tendency to use adverbs to modify the tag, as in "he said angrily" or "she said loudly." There is an excellent reason why so many people do this and that is because it is much easier to write this way. It's the same reason writers often tell instead of show—it's simpler. As humans, we are programmed to seek out the shortest route to a predetermined goal, but in writing this affinity is a death wish. Simply put, it's lazy writing and handling these elements well can go a long way toward setting your work apart from the pack.

Let's examine a sample scene.

John entered the bar. "Where is she?" he shouted angrily. "Bring her out to me!"

A diminutive man turned cautiously on his bar stool. "Who you talkin' about, mister?" he asked shakily.

"My wife, that's who!" John retorted loudly.

Now let's rewrite this section and remove all the dialogue tag modifiers.

John burst through the bar door and shouted, "Where is she? Bring her out to me!"

A diminutive man sitting on a stool facing the far wall peered back over his shoulder. His voice shook. "Who you talkin' about, mister?"

John's voice increased in both pitch and volume. "My wife, that's who!"

While neither of these writing samples are destined for the Pulitzer, you can no doubt see the difference between them. By replacing the adverbs with more colorful language you can create a much more lush scene and improve your dialogue at the same time.

Now it's your turn. Write a scene of 300-500 words that includes a lot of dialogue. Write it quickly and try to use as many tag modifiers as possible. Don't stop to think about the quality of the writing.

Once you are finished, go back over the scene and remove every adverb, rewriting that area until it conveys the same intent. Do this exercise often enough and soon you will find that avoiding the easy adverb solution will become instinctual.

NOTE: I'm not one of those hardnosed types who claim that you should *never ever ever* use an adverb. But knowing the danger of overuse and being able to avoid it will allow you to make wise decisions concerning adverb inclusion.

DESCRIPTION AND SETTING

A Few Words

Description and setting, like many writing elements, are two-edged swords. They are essential to a story, but can easily take over the entire narrative or, at the least, bog down otherwise sparkling lines with useless information. It doesn't help that certain writing principles are pounded into the heads of beginning writers, like "show, don't tell." In general, this is a good rule of thumb, but like everything else it has to know its place. Sometimes telling is a needed shortcut where showing has no real bearing on the tale. The key is to use description and setting to fill in the background in certain scenes without making the setting the main focus (unless it is supposed to be for good reason, e.g. the antagonist is the weather, as in the movie *The Perfect Storm*. In this case, setting is vital).

Successful novelist and the author of *Plot & Structure* James Scott Bell says, "Unless the weather plays a significant role in your story, don't mention

it. I mean it." While we don't necessarily need to take it that far, Bell makes a valuable point. Talking about the shining sun, singing birds, and waving grass may seem picturesque and too tempting to resist for many writers, but such details may not be necessary. In a field where conciseness and brevity are increasingly valued, the ability to write bare bones is essential. This is not to say you can never include these types of detail. Sometimes it is useful to set up a scene and its background this way. However, one should be aware of the fine line they are treading by doing so. Once you are aware of this, you stand a much better chance of using such techniques effectively and avoiding damage to your story.

> "Don't tell me the moon is
> shining; show me the
> glint of light on broken glass."
>
> - Anton Chekhov

"Just the Facts, Ma'am"

The line below is an example of "telling." Rewrite it as a scene, using the "show" technique. Include

as many details as you can. Then compare the two and edit your scene down to include only details that help move the scene along.

The man walked into the gas station and robbed it.

> "The beautiful part of writing
> is that you don't have to
> get it right the first time,
> unlike, say, a brain surgeon."
>
> - Robert Cormier

Avoid Clichés Like the Plague

Ah, the dreaded cliché, the bane of a creative writer's existence. In fact, writers are warned against clichés so often that the rule itself has drifted dangerously close to becoming just that. Of course, clichés, like stereotypes, often—but not always— exist because there is at least some truth to them or they have proven useful in some way. Unfortunately, this means they have become painfully predictable. Phrases that used to be so deftly turned and once fell from the pen of some early scribe as profoundly as Newton's apple…oh,

sorry. I got a little carried away. The point is that, although clichés were once lovely and unique, they are no longer. Using them now means risking your credibility as a writer. Describing someone as a "fish out of water" or a "diamond in the rough" can cast doubts on your wordsmithing skills and bore the reader to death at the same time. This isn't to say that you must create an entirely original simile, metaphor, or other descriptor for every instance, simply that a writer should be keenly aware of what they're writing. Because these catchphrases have become so embedded into our language, we often use then without realizing it.

What follows is a list of clichés. Use your scrap paper to rewrite the cliché, all the while retaining the original idea or intent of the phrase. Keep in mind that we aren't trying to create new classics, so don't stress too much on the quality of your revisions. This exercise is simply designed to begin training ourselves to notice clichés and learn to rewrite them. After some practice, we can begin to do this without even thinking about it.

EXAMPLE

The old lady was as mad as a wet hen.

The old lady was as mad as a rancher at a vegetarian convention.

Clichés

1. His grandfather was as old as time.

2. She knew that she shouldn't bite the hand that fed her.

3. He had been caught with his pants down.

4. They both looked like death warmed over.

5. She was as pure as the driven snow.

Extra Credit

Come up with five more clichés on your own and correct them just as you did the first five.

> "An artist is someone who can
> hold two opposing viewpoints
> and still remain
> fully functional."
>
> - F. Scott Fitzgerald

Through Different Eyes

Setting, description, and character are often related. Fully developing characters will involve creating individual voices. One great way to do this is by using description. Different characters will describe setting and events in different ways. Whether this exercise will build strong description through character development or build round characters through descriptive techniques may be up for debate. We'll call this a twofer!

Choose three different characters. Because the focus of this exercise is description, you can use characters you've already created.

Now describe a scene through the eyes of each character. Choose something that offers plenty of opportunity for detail and try to bring each character's individual voice into the description. Focus less on the voice, however, and more on how different voices offer different options for descriptive narration.

SAMPLE SCENES

1. The aftermath of a Civil War battle.

2. The landscape in a fantasy world.
3. The world's largest fair or circus.
4. A royal wedding.
5. A sea battle during the Golden Age of Sail.

> "If a story is not about the hearer,
> he will not listen.
> And here I make a rule -
> a great and interesting story is
> about everyone or it will not last."
>
> - John Steinbeck

No Longer In Kansas

Few things are as frustration for a reader than thinking they are one place when they are really somewhere else entirely. Exposing the setting of your story early is vital in terms of keeping a reader interested. Knowing where—and sometimes when—they are gives the reader a sense of being grounded and makes it easier to invest in the narrative. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, just like any other. For example, there are stories that capitalize on the deficit in knowledge by ramping up the tension and suspense. Usually the

main character shares in the reader's ignorance, such as a character waking up in a state of amnesia or in the back of a moving vehicle. *Who am I, where am I?* These can be effective techniques. Even so, using them sparingly is critical. Readers have a limited amount of patience and have been known to revolt by stubbornly refusing to finish the book.

Cleverly constructed suspense novels prologues aside, it is essential to let the reader in on the secret as quickly as possible. In most novels, within the first five pages the reader should know where the story is taking place and, if historical or futuristic in nature, *when* it is taking place.

Unless they know better from the advertising copy, a reader is going to assume that whatever they're reading is set in contemporary times. Imagine the jolt they will get when they finally learn on page fifty that the story is actually taking place on a distant planet or in France during the reign of Louis XV. (Also, if you've managed to write fifty pages without including any telling details then I might suggest a few revisions!)

Write three short scene openers, fewer than 250 words each, each set during a different time period (either past or future), and in a different location.

See if you can work the setting into each opening.

> "I am irritated by my own
> writing. I am like a violinist
> whose ear is true,
> but whose fingers refuse
> to reproduce precisely
> the sound he hears within."
>
> - Gustave Flaubert

The Adjective Collector

Adjectives can be your fun-loving friend. They can also be that friend who comes to visit and won't go home, no matter how pointed the hints you drop. As with adverbs, a writer needs to rule their flock of adjectives with an iron hand. Long, flowery passages built on a foundation of adjectives will crumble under a reader's inspection like a sandcastle before an incoming tide. Adjectives can often be replaced by a stronger noun and, if possible, should be. A strong noun is always better than its adjective equivalent, just as a strong verb is always better than a competing adverb. For example, instead of saying "It was a large dog," say "It was a St. Bernard." And

there we killed an adjective and beefed up the noun—specific and much more interesting.

Look around the room you're in and list the first ten items you see: book, desk, etc. List them on a piece of paper. Now write at least 300 words incorporating as many of these items as you can, but this time give them more specific titles. Book becomes *The Lost Continent* by Bill Bryson and desk becomes a Sauder Cherrywood Cornerstone. Avoid generalities wherever possible. If a character writes on a piece of paper, write "Daisy wrote on a single piece of white Hammermill 24 lb. paper with a Pilot Rollerball Gel pen."

Once you are finished with this horribly tedious process, go back through and revise your work, editing for clarity and specificity while removing the belabored tone. With practice you will begin to recognize quickly and naturally which details bring life to the party and which ones just won't go home.

PLOT

A Few Words

Plot, simply put, is what happens in a story. A good plot typically hangs together, with one plot element (event) building on another until the final climax, after which comes what is called "falling action" and denouement, which is essentially the resolution of the plot and where the writer would tie all of the loose ends together. The resolution should occur much quicker than the rising action. Think of plot as a car gradually accelerating until it reaches its top speed and then slamming on the brakes. It doesn't stop immediately, but will (hopefully) stop much faster than it took to accelerate.

> "Writing is like sex.
> First you do it for love,
> then you do it for your friends,
> and then you do it for money."
>
> - Virginia Woolf

Outlining

One way to stay on track with plot is to construct an outline, either before writing to help with the process or after to make sure the plot holds together. For this exercise, make an outline that demonstrates the basic process of plot. Make a list of events, each building on each other to reach a final climax. Then finish up by adding a couple of resolving scenes.

EXAMPLE

The Case of the Missing Wallet Plot Outline

1. Man discovers he is missing his wallet.
2. Man goes to police.
3. Police refuse to help him.
4. Man turns into a vigilante.
5. Man tracks down thief.
6. Man and thief have a showdown. (Climax)
7. Man takes thief to police. (Falling Action)
8. Man explains how he solved the case. (Denouement)

This is a very simple example and no one should use this particular plot, but it does illustrate the process. One can see how the action escalates through the first five steps, coming to a head with the sixth.

Seven and eight represent the falling action or resolution.

> "Writers will happen in
> the best of families."
>
> - Rita Mae Brown

Tension

Without tension your readers will fall asleep. Fortunately, a lack of tension is easy to spot and even easier to fix.

Write a scene of dialogue between two or more people. Make them all genial and agreeable. When one person says something, have all the others agree. Write about 250 words of this drivel. After grabbing an energy drink to stay awake, read back over the scene. Terrible, isn't it? Now delete half of the scene and, at the point of deletion, have someone disagree with whatever it is the previous speaker has said. It doesn't matter what. Pretend that everyone in the scene has abruptly become crazy ape drunk and truculent to boot. Write an additional 250 words. The result may not make any

sense and, for now, it doesn't have to. But isn't it so much more interesting?

You can use this technique for any part of a story. If things get boring, make something outrageous happen. Think about sitcoms and soap operas. Just when things are winding down, what happens? Somebody either turns up pregnant or gets caught in an affair. Mystery writer and novelist Raymond Chandler is credited with saying, "When in doubt, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand." It's not a bad idea. Keep that story moving!

"Making a decision to write
was a lot like deciding
to jump into a frozen lake."

- Maya Angelou

Echo, Echo, Echo…

One of the most effective ways to create a sense of cohesiveness in a story is to use what I call "the echo." This is when an object, a piece of dialogue, an action or event is repeated or revisited later in the narrative. In a mystery, for example, a seemingly

unimportant detail can show up later to be the key to the murder. But echoes don't always have to be earthshattering. They can be as minor as a repeated sentence or even a tiny element like a color or sound. Whether the reader picks up on them or not, echoes create an atmosphere of consistency and, for those who are really paying attention, can elicit more than one "Ah!" moment.

This exercise will require two scenes and a little bit of extra imagination. Write one scene detailing the contents of a room. It can be any type of room, as long as you populate it with enough items so that you don't run out of objects to describe. Go into a good amount of detail. If you choose a living room, tell us what kind of fabric is covering couch, the design on the rug, and the color of the curtains.

Here is where the extra imagination is needed. Pretend that the scene you've just written is the opening to a story, that the rest of the story is all complete except for the final scene.

Now write the final scene, choosing one of the detailed items from your first scene to revisit. Use it to create an echo by explaining its importance. For example, if you chose the couch, perhaps it is important because the main character's mother

overdosed on it years earlier or perhaps there was a music box in the first scene that is now shown to symbolize a character's lost youth or opportunity.

Understandably, these two scenes are probably not going to hold together very well, since the glue, the intervening narrative, is entirely missing. The point of this exercise, however, is to get you accustomed to using echoes in your writing or, at least, make you more aware of them in what you read.

> "Writing fiction is the act of
> weaving a series of lies
> to arrive at a greater truth."
>
> - Khaled Hosseini

Element Soup

"Where do you get your ideas?" This may be the most common question asked of writers. Perhaps not coincidentally, it can also be the most difficult to answer. Writers don't always know the source of their ideas. And often the ones they can trace are linked to such bizarre birthings as to make them all but unshareable.

Yet the ideas must come, and when they don't writers are plunged into a creative drought known to many as writer's block. That's really all writer's block is: a dearth of ideas. I've read certain authors who deny the existence of writer's block, who claim it is nothing but laziness or an excuse. To these authors I will only say that perhaps they should spend less time feeling smug and more time counting their lucky stars. Most writers, at some time and with varying frequency, experience that panicky feeling that comes with the realization that "I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO WRITE!"

The purpose of this next exercise is to help you when those times hit by giving you a foolproof method of devising a storyline. Keep in mind that the storyline devised might be the worst idea you've ever heard. But the point is to get you writing something, anything, without regard for quality. That will come once the slump has been vanquished.

This method, known as Element Soup, is just what it sounds like: a random concoction of story elements.

Step One – Choose your characters

Open your Facebook account and choose the first person in your Timeline. I just checked and it was my friend Paul.

Step Two – Choose your situation

Open your favorite online news source (Yahoo, CNN, HuffPost) and grab the first headline. For me it was the following from Yahoo: Ancient Egyptian Statue Mysteriously Rotates at Museum. This just seemed too easy, so I went to CNN to try for a harder one: Immigration Overhaul Clears Senate Test. Better.

Step Three – Choose your conflict

Here we have three main options: man vs. man, man vs. nature, or man vs. self. To choose which to use, check the clock. If it's between 12 and 4 (am or pm), use man vs. man. If it's between 4 and 8, use man vs. nature. Between 8 and 12, use man vs. self. It's just after 8 o'clock as I write this, so my conflict is man vs. self.

Now you have the basic elements of a story: character, situation, and conflict. Now just add in a few spices, such as motivation, to bring the whole

thing together and you're ready to write. Here is my element soup with added spices:

Paul is a U.S. congressman who is ideologically opposed to the immigration bill. However, he has been offered a sizeable chunk of money to vote in favor. In debt from a gambling addiction, Paul could certainly use the money and lives in fear of his addiction becoming public knowledge. Will Paul sell his principles?

"I try to leave out
the parts that people skip."

- Elmore Leonard

Cliffhanger

Cliffhangers have long been used to keep an audience coming back for more once a specific sequence is complete. An early film series, *The Perils of Pauline*, became well-known for using dramatic, unresolved events at the end of each weekly installment so viewers would come back the next week to learn how their spunky heroine would

escape disaster. Pulp fiction magazines used the technique, as did radio programs in the 1930s and 1940s. Television soap operas have carried on the tradition into present day.

The reason so many mediums used the cliffhanger is because it worked. And it still does. The cliffhanger makes it clear that something important is at stake (an essential part of plot) and gives the audience a feeling of unrest until they find out what happens next.

Learning to use cliffhangers effectively will greatly increase the readability of your work. Of course, the cliff in question doesn't always have to be life and death. You don't always have to end each scene and chapter with a lady in distress tied to railroad tracks as a train barrels toward her. Too much of this and it loses its appeal, causing the audience to keep reading in the hopes that the lady will get run over by the train so they can *just move on, for God's sake!*

To begin practicing cliffhangers, choose a situation with something at stake.

1. If Jerry doesn't find the money the mafia is going to kill him.
2. If Sandra can't manage her drinking problem,

her marriage is over.

3. If Jerry and Sandra can't save their marriage, the mafia is going to kill them.

You get the idea. Come up with a serviceable scenario and then write an opening scene. Build your scene as you normally might, complete with exposition. Then ratchet up the tension. If you're writing about Jerry, for example, have the mafia tire of waiting and confront him about the money.

"We're tired of waitin'," Vinny said, his voice like a box of rusty nails. "Where's the money?"

"I...I couldn't find it," Jerry said. He squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the inevitable blow to the face. When it didn't come, he half-opened one eye to see Vinny scowling at him, arms akimbo.

"You're disappointin' me, Jerry. I vouched for you with the boss. You know what I gotta do." Vinny pulled a pistol from his waistband.

The final sentence makes a great ending point for a chapter or scene. Hey, even I want to know what happens to Jerry. Oftentimes you'll be tempted to keep writing the scene, because you're caught up in it! But learn to use restraint. Discipline yourself to

stretch out the suspense. When you think you might have gone far enough, go just a little further.

You can use the cliffhanger in your own writing over and over again with a wide range of scenarios. The one used above is a life and death situation, but as mentioned earlier it doesn't have to be; any continuing action will do. The point is to give your reader a reason to turn the page.

> "No passion in the world
> is equal to the passion
> to alter someone else's draft."
>
> - H. G. Wells

Thou Spelunker

spe·lunk·er *noun* \spi-ˈlən-kər,ˈspē-ˌ\ : one who makes a hobby of exploring and studying caves. (Merriam-Webster)

In this instance, the "cave" is your plot and the spelunker is you. The argument could be made that your readers are also spelunkers, but *you* have to go there first and lay down the bread crumb trail so the

rest of us can find our way in and out.

Like an iceberg, the majority of a cave is out of the natural line of sight. It's hidden from view. And yet, it is what makes an iceberg an iceberg or a cave a cave. Without this secret portion, an iceberg would be an ice cube and a cave would be a pothole. Not very interesting, are they?

Applied to your plot, this means that most of it is hidden, out of plain sight, but yet guides the story and impacts the reader. This happens in the way of motivation, backstory, and subplot. None of these should take over a story and yet without them no story is worth reading.

When I was younger I read a book by a much more experienced writer who said that plot is a verb. In other words, action was the key to plot. I get what he was saying. As it turns out, however, plot is more complicated. Stringing together action scenes will never result in a gripping tale. It doesn't matter how many sharks are closing in on the stranded swimmer if I don't *care* about the swimmer or their fate.

It might sound like this is more about character than plot. And, in a way, this is true. But as I have since learned, plot *is* character. Your plot will never be any

better than the characters who populate it. Learning to connect the two is the key.

Come up with a scenario like the one in the previous exercise. You can even reuse that one if you prefer. Now isolate the characters, e.g. Jerry and Vinny. What makes them act as they do? In Jerry's case, he is searching for the money to save his life. But how did he get into such a predicament? Is it a gambling debt? And, if so, why does he gamble? Did his father gamble before him? Is he prone to addiction? Or perhaps he did it to help some noble cause, such as his sick mother who needs an operation they can't afford. The answers to these questions are vital to understanding Jerry as a person. The same goes for the villain in the scene, Vinny. (As a side note, it is just as important to humanize your "bad" characters as it is your "good" ones.) Why is Vinny a mobster? You can't get away with just saying, "Because he's an asshole." There must be a reason.

Now come up with those reasons. Write a story-centric biography of your major characters, meaning you should write everything you can think of about them that has anything to do with the story. Follow the threads where they lead you and soon you will know more than you ever wanted to about these characters.

Keep in mind that you don't have to include everything you find out in the story itself. Use your own good judgment on what elements to include, but a writer cannot know his characters too well and that familiarity will begin showing up in your writing. And your writing will be the better for it.

> "Get it down. Take chances.
> It may be bad, but it's the only
> way you can do anything good."
>
> - William Faulkner

Keeper of the Secrets

Crime writer T. Jefferson Parker is credited with saying, "When my story stalls out on me, I've played my hand too soon." Whether or not this exact issue would plague you, the early reveal is certainly to be feared. As an extremely wise and insightful fellow once said (wink), "Secrets soon revealed cause reader to close book." If I learn the person responsible for the murder halfway through, there's no reason to continue, especially if that was the main reason I was reading *in the first place.* In a

story with subplots, it is important to remember the main purpose of the tale. A few years ago I picked up a book by Frank Peretti, *Monster*, the story of a woman lost in the wilderness. She soon discovers she is being stalked by an unknown creature. The storyline became: What Is The Strange Creature? That was what I cared about. Less than a third of the way through the book, it was revealed...and it meant her no harm. Waaa...waaa...waaaaa.... Did the story pick up again after that? I'll never know, as I put the book down and didn't pick it back up.

The only way to truly learn this is to *do it.* Much of it is simply developing the literary muscle and discipline necessary to put off that Big Reveal that is demanding to be written. This is especially trying for those of you who make up complete outlines or devise the ending to a story before you've even begun. One way to make sure you don't accidentally blow it is to just go ahead and write it. There. Done. Now you can write the rest of the story in peace and lead up to it as leisurely as you need to.

Aside from the ending sequence, however, there are mini-climaxes that will happen throughout a good tale and these benefit equally from a well-timed reveal. This exercise is less about how to perform the reveal itself, since you probably already know

that, and more about breaking any possible habit of revealing too early.

Write down a list of five major events: a sudden death, a job termination, and so on. Choose two of your favorites and write at least 250 words for each, showing a character dealing with the immediate aftermath. Avoid showing progression in the scene. Stay focused on the character's initial reaction. Now include a 100 word addition to each scene, in which you wrap up the issue at hand and make every alright again. Wretched, isn't it? We didn't even get a chance to properly greet the disaster before peace, that snooze-fest, descended on us again.

Of course, this is an incredibly truncated version of the Early Reveal, but it shows what can happen in larger works. You have plenty of space in a novel. Don't be in a hurry. Pace yourself. You keep the keys. You are in control. Dose us with those revelations using a careful, steady hand.

"Early on I set out to write
the next Great American Novel,
and then later on I set out
the silverware and
enjoyed my dinner in silence."

- Jarod Kintz

Force Their Hand

Your characters won't always want to get themselves into trouble. Sometimes they'll want to stay where it's safe and comfortable, much like the rest of us. At these times you cannot allow yourself, as their creator, to show any mercy. If your characters aren't in trouble or facing some manner of hardship your story will come to a grinding halt. The health of your story comes first; your characters are just going to have to invest in a good medical plan.

What do you do when your characters want to hide under their beds? Sit back and think of five things that would make you want to hide under *your* bed. Snakes? Foreign invasion? The supernatural? Now choose the one that gives you the biggest goosebumps and figuratively, unless it's a giant spider, drop that directly on your character's head.

Write a scene, half of which shows your character at peace: drinking coffee, singing in the shower. Then bring on the terror. Finish out the scene with your character grappling with this new disaster.

Another way to jar your character into trouble is to make the ordinary become terrifying. "Oh, look! They're in a lovely flower shop. Too bad those tulips have razor sharp fangs!" Or maybe, "That little girl just got a new kitten! A shame that it's really a demon!" Train your writer's mind to expect the unexpected and then inflict the results on your characters. They'll hate you for it, but the rest of us will love your stories.

"It took me fifteen years to
discover that I had no talent
for writing, but I couldn't
give it up because by that time
I was too famous."

- Robert Benchley

Deus Ex Whatnow?

In 1898, H.G. Wells published a science fiction

novel titled *The War of the Worlds*, in which he described a Martian invasion of Earth. In Wells's book, the Martians make quick work of human defenses and all seems lost. Then, quite suddenly, all of the alien creatures die of bacteria against which they had no natural immunity and Earth was saved.

This type of ending is what is known in literature as *deus ex machina*, which described simply is a fortuitous resolution to a problem previously considered unsolvable.

The first step in this exercise is to come up with five *deus ex machina* endings, such as "And Sally was rescued by a passing steamship." Choose two of your favorites for the next part of the exercise. Now create an event or series of events that will change these flabby endings into ones taut with purpose.

If I wrote an entire book about Sally being trapped on a deserted island, brought her to the verge of death by dehydration, and then abruptly ended by having her spot a steamship rounding the bend, readers would be within their rights to feel a little cheated. "*I* could have thought of *that*," they might say. In the interest of avoiding the wrath of these readers, let's run Sally's story through the above exercise.

Situation: Sally is stranded on a deserted island.

***Deus Ex Machina* Solution:** Sally is rescued by a passing steamship.

Created Events: Perhaps Sally's father is the owner of the steamship line and she knows that a steamship is scheduled to pass that way. She can be rescued *if* she is able to make it to the highest point on the island in time.

We now have a level of control via the character. *If* Sally can make it in time, *if* she can get a fire started...a treasure trove of problems present themselves to the character. Maybe she gets lost on the island, maybe it starts to rain just as she begins the fire. Exciting stuff! And as a bonus, that clanky *deus ex machina* is dead. Granted, this will take either some clever pre-planning or a hefty rewrite, but both of those are okay! The rewrite is going to have to happen anyway. There isn't a *deus ex machina* that can't be killed during a good rewrite.

> "People who write fiction,
> if they had not taken it up,
> might have become
> very successful liars."

> - Ernest Hemingway

The Final Curtain

So you've finished the first draft of your novel. Excellent! But it's not quite time to pass out the cigars just yet. This final exercise is handcrafted to make sure your plot is up to snuff. After the first draft is the time to smoke out any problems with your manuscript.

To do this you can run your story through the Plot Organizer, which acts as a checklist to allow you to make sure all your plot points are in a row. In order to do this, go through your manuscript scene by scene. Write a summary of the scenes on individual notecards and give each one a coded letter.

M: Main Plot Idea
S-1 (2, 3): Subplot Idea(s)
CD: Character Development
RA: Rising Action

RS: Resolution of Subplot(s)
C: Climax
RM: Resolution of Main Plot
FA: Falling Action

If you can't find a scene that corresponds to one of these codes, **WARNING:** Your Plot Is Incomplete! These are all vital elements to a rounded, solid plot. Additionally, if you find scenes that don't fit one of these codes, consider whether or not they are needed. If you have all these covered, then you have a serviceable plot. That doesn't guarantee it is a *good* plot or the best you can do, but without these elements your story is on shaky ground, indeed.

BONUS CONTENT

Welcome to the expanded section of the book! What follows are SIX brand spanking new character specific exercises you will find nowhere else but right here.

- Everybody Loves Somebody
- He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not
- Character Sketch
- Asking the Right Questions
- Giving the Right Answers
- Conflicting Desires

Everybody Loves Somebody

Everybody loves somebody. It's not just a Dean Martin song; it should also be true in your writing. And by love, I don't just mean the bow chicka wow wow. We're talking about meaningful relationships or the *desire* for a meaningful relationship. This includes romantic love, friendships, or even workplace politics.

Everybody has designs on someone else. A man

wants to date a certain woman because she's stunningly attractive; a salesperson wants to have lunch with a prospective client because getting that account will increase their status at work; a couple with children wants to be friends with another specific couple because they have connections with the dean of an exclusive private school.

Everybody loves somebody. And they always have reasons for loving them. They aren't always as selfish or shallow as the ones mentioned above, but they always exist. And finding what they are will always help you understand your characters and their motives. In fact, exploring these motives will sometimes even help you create deeper levels of conflict and tension within your writing.

EXERCISE: To see this in action, make a list of characters from a previous work-in-progress. Then create a bubble map that includes each name and use a line to connect each party with a direct relationship. On each line, write the motivation for the relationship. Try to think beyond the superficial. For example, instead of a wife being motivated toward her husband by "love," write something else, such as "passion," which opens up some real possibilities: where did this passion begin? was it a shotgun wedding? is the passion still there?

Or you could write something else entirely, such as "money." This also suggests opportunities, such as what would happen if the husband lost his wealth. Go through your characters and their relationship motives, and see what develops.

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

Romantic disappointment, angst, the stormy love affair...no, we're not talking about the latest episode of your favorite soap opera. We're talking about your writing! Don't be insulted; I'm not comparing your writing to that of a soap opera. But there is something the soaps can teach us about writing: romantic conflict.

Closely connected with romantic conflict is the love interest. It's universal in successful literature. I know, you're probably thinking of several exceptions at this moment, but stop and think again. Even stories without the obvious wife or girlfriend or other human lover have a love interest. A love interest can be an inanimate object, as long as it is the object of the main character's affections and personal attention. Most of the time, however, we are dealing with a human entity of some sort: male or female, legitimate or illegitimate, safe or dangerous.

Getting back to soap operas, however, take a look the next time one is on your television screen. And, if you don't normally watch them, make it a point to do so at least once. You don't have to know the characters or follow all the plot threads or pay any attention to the weakness of the overall storyline. Just watch the romantic interactions. They're interesting and they do their job well. And what is their job? Keeping the viewer watching. And considering how long some of these shows have run, you have to think they're doing what they are designed to do.

Now that you've watched an episode or two, take a moment to read a little Raymond Carver or Kate Chopin or something to refresh your mind, and then replay the romantic scenes of the episode in your head. This time, however, consciously remove all conflict from the interactions.

EXAMPLE: A husband comes home and confesses that he has been hiding something from his wife: a complete second family in a neighboring city! A violent fight breaks out, the wife demands a divorce, and the husband packs an overnight bag.

REIMAGINED SCENE: A husband comes home

and confesses that he has been hiding something from his wife: two tickets to Jamaica! They hug and go on to have a relaxing vacation, after which their love is stronger than ever.

snore

Sorry, I fell asleep while writing that, because it's boring! No one wants to read about that much happiness. This is a good example of how real life often does not translate to the written word. The new scene would be amazing in reality, but in literature it turns into a snoozefest. We need conflict to make our stories appealing to readers. And, no, you don't have to sacrifice art to do that. In fact, your art will be stronger for it.

Here is your challenge: list five different romantic interactions, such as a one night stand or blind date. Think about what might go wrong in each of those instances. For example, a detective might have a one nighter with someone he later learns is the sister of his prime suspect. Next, choose one item from your list and turn it into a full scene of at least 500 words. Pour on the conflict. Don't worry so much about realism. After you're done, rewrite the entire scene, but remove all conflict. I guarantee you won't need 500 words and I recommend a cup of strong coffee.

Character Sketch

A great thing about being a writer is that you become God to as many individuals as you want. In your omnipotence you can create, destroy, and run the lives of these little creations to your heart's content. "In the beginning, writers created their characters." Or something like that. Of course, many of these creations will end up defying you and doing their own thing, but until then it is up to you to give them a good start in their literary lives.

One of the ways to accomplish this is to create what is known as a character sketch. In this sketch you will lay out the basic details about the character in question, giving them physical, emotional, and psychological characteristics. You will determine their line of work, their family connections, their hopes and dreams. In short, you will create (or learn) everything there is to know about them.

It is impossible for a writer to know too much about their characters. No piece of information is too small or too obscure. Keep in mind, of course, that you will not be using all of this data in your actual work-in-progress. Overanalyzing your characters in the course of a narrative is a quick and effective way

to kill the story. However, the better you understand the people you are writing about, the more believable your writing will be and the greater the connection your readers will have for the world you are sculpting.

To begin writing your sketch, jot down any basic details you already know, such as gender, name, and age. Then go to the next level and write down their vocation and education history. Explore their immediate family. Begin asking yourself questions about this character. What is their relationship status? Do they get along with their family? Do they like their job? Are they happy, depressed, intelligent, creative? What are their secret desires? What is their ultimate goal in life? What is on their bucket list? By asking (and subsequently answering) these and other questions, you will begin to know your character.

Write at least 500 words about a character. Don't worry about being tidy; feel free to brainstorm and free write. You might be surprised at the story ideas that begin to emerge simply through developing your characters!

Asking the Right Questions

When developing characters for your work-in-progress, it's important to ask yourself the right questions about them. You don't necessarily have to ask them all at once; a character can develop throughout the piece. And, generally, this is the best way of doing it. Yet it is important to get an early grip on who this person is, even if you don't know everything about them. It becomes increasingly important the more prominent the character is going to be in your story.

This isn't simply about physical characteristics. In fact, unless it's a significant one, such as a limp that will ultimately pin the murder rap on the main suspect, physical description can easily become dull and plodding. It isn't necessary and is often little more than distracting to list hair and eye color, and to describe every facial feature in painful detail down to the last pore.

There are some things to figure out about your characters, however, and they all have to do with making character a driving force in your work. It ultimately will not matter if your character is five-ten or five-eleven, or whether their nose is Roman or Greek. It probably won't even matter what their

favorite food is. These are not crucial questions to answer.

"So," you may ask, "what *are* the crucial questions? How do I ask the right questions?" Go back to the beginning of the last paragraph; the right questions are the ones that, once answered, can make your characters driving forces in your fiction. One way to know which is which is to ask yourself another question: "Does the story change based on the answer to this question?" For example, if you decide to ask the question, "What color eyes does my character have?" ask yourself if it matters if they are brown or blue. If it doesn't, then you are asking the wrong question. You can also ask yourself, "Does the answer to this question help me understand my character?" And I don't mean in an "able to describe her to the police" kind of way. I mean in a "we've been married for fifty years" kind of way.

Here are some examples of "right questions" to get you started.

What does your character want from life?
Whom does your character care about?
What motivates your character?

These questions (and many more) can help you

know your character on a much deeper level and this knowledge will become apparent in your writing, not just in how you present the character, but in how deep your overall work becomes. Remember that characters are the blood in the body of your writing. And the health of your writing depends on the strength of your characters.

EXERCISE: Make a list of between five and ten "right questions." Then take a past work of yours and reread it with those questions in mind. By the end of the piece, would the reader be able to answer those questions? Would you?

Giving the Right Answers

Earlier in this book, I mentioned asking the right questions and gave some guidance about how a writer could begin doing that. But asking the right questions doesn't do much good, unless the right answers can be given or, at least, hinted at strongly. For example, if we ask what motivates our character and then fail to provide an answer, the argument could be made that it would have been better to not have broached the subject at all. This doesn't mean you have to handhold the reader and spell everything out in literal black and white. Readers tend to resent that. But giving them some guidance

is always nice. Readers are much smarter than many writers give them credit for, but they can't read your mind. Just your words.

How a writer presents the answer is also important. Simply inserting a line that says, "Jim was motivated by the death of his mother" probably won't cut it. In this case, the tired old adage "show don't tell" holds firm. It would be a much more engaging answer to the motivation question to demonstrate the effect of the mother's death on Jim throughout the course of the work. Remember: answers to the big questions do not need to be given quickly or concisely. In fact, the bigger the question, the more time may be spent giving the answer.

EXERCISE: For this exercise, I'm going to assume you've completed the previous one, "Asking the Right Questions." If you haven't, perhaps take a few minutes to turn back and do it. Done? Excellent! Now take the questions you concocted for the earlier exercise. Choose one and answer it concisely. Take that answer and list five ways or scenarios in which you could demonstrate this answer in a new piece of writing. Do this with at least two different questions.

EXAMPLE

Question: What motivates Jim?
Answer: The death of his mother.

1. He has an unusual attraction for older women.
2. He keeps a disturbing number of photos of his mother around his apartment.
3. He demonstrates anger whenever other people mention their living mothers.
4. He is depressed on Mother's Day.
5. His mother died of cancer and he becomes obsessed with cancer screenings or perhaps with supporting organizations that fight the disease.

Conflicting Desires

In an earlier exercise, we mentioned conflict. Romantic conflict, to be precise. This exercise is quite similar to that one, in that it focuses on conflict. While the previous one spoke mostly about intra-relational conflict, this time we're taking a closer look at inter-relational conflict. A fight between a single couple would be an example of intra-relational conflict. While it may be precipitated by events outside the relationship, it's largely confined to that sphere of influence. Inter-relational conflict is something that happens on a

wider scale. The classic scheme of a "love triangle" could be considered an example of inter-relational conflict. Whenever you begin devising your written relationships, it's always a good idea to keep them within the context of the larger world that you have created.

Taking the example from the earlier exercise, what caused the man to create an entirely separate life, complete with secret family, in that neighboring city? Is he unhappy at one of the homes? Is he trying to hide another identity? Why didn't he just divorce the first wife? Why does he feel the need to live in secrecy? All of these questions suggest conflict. For some reason he does not want to (or can't) leave the first family, but he desperately wants a different one. That's real conflict.

Conflict can also be a bit more subtle than that. A kid in school might like his nerdy pals, but still crave the attention of the popular crowd, a desire that leads him to hurt those who are truly his friends. A product of a broken home might struggle with pleasing a mom and dad who have conflicting wishes or parenting styles.

EXERCISE: Make a list of five different scenarios involving conflict. Choose one and write a scene of

up to 500 words in which the conflict climaxes (for example: a betrayal is discovered or a choice between two desires is made).