



IMPROVE YOUR WRITING SKILLS – Part 2

Tips for Students, Budding Authors and Writers in General

WRITING – STORIES AND NOVELS

Not everyone enjoys writing, but there are still some who read a book and think: I could do that. How hard can it be? Actually, writing a short story or a novel is within the capabilities of anyone with a reasonable level of literacy, but there is a bit more to it than simply jotting down a few ideas from an inventive imagination; and if the ultimate goal is to see it in print, it will have to satisfy the publishing industry's standards. Here are some tips that may help enhance your enjoyment of writing, and give pleasure to anyone who reads your work.

The Basic Story Guides:

First of all you need a story. You may have a vivid picture in your head of an exciting or explosive incident. That's a start at least, but where does it go from there? Remember that a story is generally a slice of life, not an entire lifetime and your idea has to fit in somewhere as part of that – it isn't the be-all and end-all. Something or someone made it happen, and there will be consequences. Before even starting to wade in, there is something you should ask yourself about the events in your story: WHEN? WHERE? HOW? WHY? Find answers to these self-explanatory questions and you have the makings of a good story.

How a Master Storyteller handled it:

John Steinbeck knew how to engage his readers. He seemed to enjoy portraying ordinary people in ordinary situations. His true gift lay in the ability to introduce complications and resolutions that made his tales anything but boring. Perhaps he drew on personal experience for a simple scenario, then asked himself: what turn of events can I introduce that will dramatise the situation? I think he might have pictured a good ending first, then worked his way towards it; and I believe he may have employed this tactic to produce his classic tale, "Of Mice and Men". I'd like to use this as an example.

The Paradigm:

This is the plan from start to finish and you will need one to keep the story moving in the right direction. In a literary sense, the paradigm of the main storyline is like a spinal column. It is flexible to a degree, but always leads from start to finish in an uncompromising way. All important aspects are plotted along this line; some close, others running roughly parallel at a distance, yet re-joining the rest for the conclusion. It is, in effect, the formula listing all of the elements necessary for a good story set out in a step-by-step progression leading to the finale. A very simple paradigm is like a 3-act play and usually works well in most circumstances:

Act 1 - the setup:

Using the storyline "Of Mice and Men", Steinbeck sets the scene and introduces the main characters. George is small and world-wise, whereas his buddy, Lennie, is big, strong and stupid. He relies on George to find them work and lead them to a rosy future together. They secure a job on a farm. So far, so good. It transpires that the manager who hires them is an arrogant bully with a wife who is attractive and loves to flirt. Here is trouble in the making.

Act 2 - the main body of the story:

At some point, Lennie catches a mouse which he wants to play with. Naturally, it tries to escape, so Lennie holds it tighter and, not knowing his own strength, it dies. Later the manager's wife teases Lennie, but when he touches her and she tries to pull away the big man's instinctive reaction is to tighten his grip. Consequently, the flirt suffers the same fate as the mouse.

Act 3 - the ending: Lennie is now in serious trouble, a complication that needs to be resolved somehow. George comes to the rescue, but not in a way that would please every reader. He realises that Lennie will be charged with murder and sent to prison where he couldn't survive; so, despite his deep feelings, he sees no other option than to end his friend's life - not a happy-ever-after ending, but it did wrap up the story nicely.

In many instances, deciding on a good ending first can make writing the rest much easier because you know where you are going and just have to get there. A writer may choose to wind up a story neatly with nothing more for the reader to think about other than whether the ending appealed to them. Then there's the ploy of leaving a reader to decide either what really happened, or what happens next – which works as long as it doesn't seem like the author couldn't decide how to finish the story. Whatever the type of ending, it must suit the mood of the storyline.

Content:

EVERYTHING YOU MENTION IS A VEHICLE TAKING THE READER TO A PRE-ORDAINED DESTINATION. ANYTHING EXTRANEIOUS IS IRRELEVANT AND CONFUSING. IN SIMPLE TERMS: IF IT DOES NOTHING FOR THE STORY, TAKE IT OUT!

Descriptions:

Don't try to describe anything or anyone in too much detail. Just provide sufficient for the reader to understand the relevance of locations, items within scenes, and the importance each element has to the story. Letting readers fill in the blanks helps them paint a picture with which they can identify and relate to on a personal level. In doing so, they become a part of the story they are reading and will enjoy it all the more.

Characters:

There is usually a hero or heroine who is confronted by a villain. The bad guy may not be an actual person: circumstances cause problems, so too the hero's own attitudes, hang-ups and background. Along the way, other characters may need to be introduced to carry the story to its conclusion. Too many, however, can be confusing as it is difficult for the reader to remember lots of names and the importance each has in the scenario. Avoid going into details about personal appearance, except when a specific physical feature adds to the story, or differentiates one character from another in a meaningful way. Unless necessary for some reason, try to avoid similar-sounding names: e.g. Johnny and Jimmy, Layla and Lola.

Story-telling is not Reporting:

And then... and then... and then... This is not story-telling and there are better ways to relate progressions. A book is different to a movie in the respect that there are no pictures supporting the words, but any descriptive passages only need to stimulate readers' imaginations. Read books of popular authors to see how they do it. Also, beware of becoming boring with too much repetition, especially by detailing similar events that have already been described. A single blow-by-blow battle or a steamy love scene early in the story is often enough to excite readers to want more – provided it's well written – but make them wait! Use innuendo, reflections of past snippets, or resultant consequences to keep the pot boiling. Always save the best till last.

Basic Sentence Structure:

The old-fashioned way still works - TIME, MANNER, PLACE: e.g. *'It was early morning when Joe posted the missing-person flier on the library window.'* Changing it is fine, as long as it is realised that the emphasis also changes: e.g. *'When Joe posted the missing-person flier on the library window, it was early morning.'* This might be used to add importance to the time, perhaps being followed by: *'Come midday, there were fifty throughout the town. By six that night, Joe had run out of posters and was exhausted.'*

Length:

A story should only be as long as it needs to be. Don't use padding to make it longer. If it does seem too long, go through and edit out any unnecessary waffle, especially purple prose: this refers to text which may contain big words that few will understand, or flowery narrative that an author might like because it sounds good and wants to keep in. Never be too possessive! If it doesn't fit, trash it! Think about it like clothing - would you wear your favourite Marilyn Manson T shirt to a church social?

The Fiction Writer's Edge:

Take an ordinary situation, then ask: WHAT IF...? David and Goliath, Meet Joe Black, Pet Seminary, Little Red Riding Hood, etc. These scenarios seemed unlikely to occur or impossible to resolve happily. Sliding Doors posed the questions: what if she got on the train? What if she didn't? What if you got up one morning and the Sun didn't rise? A good writer can make anything seem possible.

For an example, take a look at my short story, "A Gift From The Grave," the idea for which was born of a simple thought: what if someone discovered a secret drawer in an antique writing desk...?

Who is The Writer?

1st person is ideal for walking through a story, seeing everything as it happens; and personal opinions can help the reader understand the narrator's viewpoint better. It is, however, limited with respect to events occurring somewhere else at the same time which can only be described when they are eventually discovered. Also, what other characters may be thinking can only ever be assumptions.

2nd person is a reporting mode best kept for relating past events that the writer or a character has experienced, either in part or whole, and is now reviewing - like the boy doing the narration in the movie "Mad Max".

3rd person is the easiest with the widest scope. Using this method, the writer is all-seeing and Godlike, able to know every character intimately, including what they are thinking; and can relate current, even future situations that the 1st and 2nd persons might have no knowledge of. **When in doubt, stick to the 3rd person; and use past tense.**

Style:

This is about you: the way you write, but more importantly, how you like to write. Choose or develop a style that you feel comfortable with, otherwise your words will be forced and stilted. Should you decide to experiment by trying a specific style that satisfies a particular market, be prepared for adverse criticism. Trying to be someone you are not rarely works.

One last piece of advice – make your story real by becoming a part of it. Believe it, live it; and be determined that it has to be told!

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