



THE  
30  
MOST  
COMMON  
FICTION  
WRITING  
MISTAKES

(And How To Avoid Them)

*Jack M. Bickham*

**THE 38 MOST  
COMMON  
FICTION WRITING  
MISTAKES**

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**(And How To Avoid Them)**

*by Jack M. Bickham*

## **The 38 Most Common Fiction Writing Mistakes (and How to Avoid Them).**

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## FORWARD

THE PRELIMINARY SECTION of a book is often labeled a "foreword." But in a book involving fiction technique, the word ought to be "Forward."

Why?... To emphasize two vital points: *All good fiction moves forward; all good fiction writers look ahead.*

In more than twenty years of teaching courses in professional writing at the University of Oklahoma, I think I've encountered almost every difficulty an aspiring writer might face. (Once, I had a young male student who was both deaf and blind. He required a companion in the classroom to touch her fingers against his hand during my lectures to spell out my words.) But by far the most common—and crippling—problem for students over the years was the tendency to write static copy that didn't have forward movement. And the second most common problem was the habit of looking backward—at past mistakes and disappointments, or at worries about the part of the story already written—rather than *ahead*, where all the potential... all the challenge... all the excitement and triumph... have to be.

So, despite the fact that I've chosen to write this book from what seems a negative stance, telling you what you shouldn't do, please don't fall into the trap of thinking negatively, or backwards, about your writing. My hope is that by seeing a common error stated boldly in the section heading, you will look harder at your own copy to see if you might be committing the same mistake. But my message is positive—*always*. In every section you'll find a common mistake described, but you'll also find how to avoid that error, or build in a strength as a replacement for a previous weakness.

Nothing can erode your powers more than a negative attitude.

Nothing can cripple your fiction more than looking at it backwards, as a static artifact or "done deal" rather than a living, forward-moving, dynamic series of inventions.

So you'll be reading a lot of "don't" statements in the following pages. But that's partly just to get your attention. Remember, behind every negative is a positive.

Just as behind every rejection there's a triumphant sale—if you'll just persevere.

So let's move on, now... *forward*.

—J. M. B.

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# 1. DON'T MAKE EXCUSES

---

WRITERS ARE A FAVORITE subject for cartoonists, from Charles Schulz of *Peanuts* fame to those who contribute to *The New Yorker*. (You can't blame them for picking on writers; we *are* sort of weird.) Over the years I've haphazardly collected such cartoons, and some of my favorites are taped to the door of my office.

One of these shows a nonwriter telling a weary novelist at an autograph party, "Gosh! I know I could write a novel too, but I've just never found the time!"

Another, in two panels, is titled, "Writer's Block." The first panel shows the writer standing idle in his writing room; that panel is captioned "Temporary." In the second panel, the erstwhile writer is standing in the doorway of his fish store; that panel is captioned "Permanent."

A third cartoon shows a writer at his typewriter, telling his wife, "I just can't start until inspiration strikes." Subsequent panels show him in the same position—nothing done—and getting older... and older... and older.

I don't know how funny these cartoons *really* are, but I like them because they illustrate the primary habit that separates the writers from the pretenders. The world is brimming over with people good enough to make a living as writers. Thank goodness—for those of us who are working, and don't need any more competition—most such talented people spend their creative energies making excuses, and never quite get around to the job at hand.

If you are serious about the craft of fiction, you must never make excuses for yourself. You simply cannot allow yourself to:

- Say you're too tired.
- Postpone work until "later."
- Fail to work because you're too busy right now.
- Wait for inspiration.
- Plan to get right at it "tomorrow."
- Give up because (editors) (agents) (readers) (critics) are unfair. (Fill in as many as you want.)
- Tell yourself you're too old (or too young) to start.
- Blame others in your family for your lack of free time.
- Say your job is too demanding to allow you any other activity.
- Tell yourself that your story idea isn't good enough.

Or any of a host of other excuses you may dream up for yourself.

No. Let's get this straight right away: Writers write; everyone else makes excuses.

Nothing short of a genuine tragedy in your life should be allowed to intrude into your regular work as a writer of fiction. Do you really think successful writers have unlimited time, face no other demands on them, are always peppy and eager to face the keyboard? Of course not! Writing can be tremendous fun, and wonderfully rewarding. But writing is hard work.

Let me repeat.

Writing is hard work.

Nobody really enjoys hard work day after day, week after week. Everybody wants sometimes to get away and play, or just be lazy. When a project such as a novel is going badly, the writer never wants to face her day's stint at the keyboard. At such times, excuses come easily. But the professional simply does not let herself off so easily. All the excuses, all the complaints, all the alternatives to work, must be fought through; the real writer *will work*. And regularly.

Consider: If you write only one page a day, by the end of one year you will have a 365-page novel. Take the next year to rewrite it at the same pace, and you will have a finished novel to show to an agent or editor, which is about the same output that many best-selling novelists have.

If, on the other hand, you make excuses for yourself half the time, then at best it will take you *four* years to have a book ready. That's too long.

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And if you make excuses for yourself three-fourths of the time, you will probably lose so much momentum that you'll never finish your project at all.

Consistent, persistent, even dogged work, day in and day out, is the professional's way. And if at the end of a long period of dogged work, your story happens to be rejected, you can't afford to use the rejection as an excuse to quit producing, either. All writers produce some unassailable work. All writers get discouraged, tired and worn down. The good ones don't make excuses. They keep going.

Let me suggest a simple device that may help you avoid the trap of falling into excuse-making. Find a cheap calendar, the type that has a small open block for each day of the month. At the end of each day, write down in the day's block two things: 1. the number of hours you spent at the typewriter or word processor, working on your fiction project; and 2. how many pages you produced (rough drafts or finished, makes no difference) in that working day.

For those days when you don't have anything in terms of work to report, type one double-spaced page of excuses, date it carefully, and file it in a special place. Make sure your excuses fill at least one page, about 250 words. You must do this without fail every time you don't work.

I guarantee you one thing: If you follow this system religiously, you'll soon get so sick of writing down your flimsy excuses that you'll either start investing your time in writing that's more creative, or you'll quit.

In either case you'll have stopped kidding yourself.

No excuse is good enough. Think back to that young man I mentioned in the "Forward." Blind and deaf, *yet he wrote everyday!* You can do no less if you really want to succeed.

## 2. DON'T CONSIDER YOURSELF TOO SMART

---

IT'S POSSIBLE TO SABOTAGE your fiction by being too smart for your own good—by being a smart alec. Even before you begin writing your next story, you should examine your attitudes toward yourself, your readers, your own work and contemporary fiction. It could be that these attitudes are damaging your work without your realizing it. Ask yourself:

- Do you consider yourself more intelligent than most of the stories and novels you read?
- Do you believe contemporary fiction is sort of beneath you in terms of intellectual attainment?
- Do you figure your readers—when you get them—will be dumb compared to you?
- Do you revel in Proust, adore T. S. Eliot, think there has never been a really great American novelist, and sneer at everything in the popular magazines and the best-sellers lists?

If so, I congratulate you on your self-satisfaction, but warn you that such smug condescension will be the death of you as a writer; at best you'll one day publish obscure little short stories in giveaway magazines for other small-college English teachers like yourself, at worst, on your death bed, you'll whisper to your sister the location of your hidden treasure trove of unpublished fiction, and breathe your last in the vain hope that future generations will revere you like they now do Emily Dickinson.

Wouldn't it be a lot better not to consider yourself so smart? To try to figure out what contemporary readers like—then to work to give them the best stories of that type they ever read?

Condescension is a terrible thing. Readers sense it and are turned off by it. The good writer writes humbly, never in a condescending manner, as if to lesser mortals. As the sign said on many newsroom wall in the olden days, "Don't write down to your readers; the ones dumber than you can read."

And in terms of fiction, that statement is absolutely true, because fiction does not come from the head; it comes from the heart. The job of the fiction writer is to plumb the depths of human emotion and then to portray them... re-create them... stir them. Bigness of heart—compassion—is far more important than bigness of IQ.

If you consider the public a great unwashed that's somehow beneath you, then, I beg you to work on changing your attitudes. You can't write down to your readers. They will catch your insincerity in an instant and hate you for it.

To put all this another way, consider this:

If you're extremely smart, you're lucky. But if you *are* that intelligent, one of your hardest jobs may be to keep a snobbish attitude out of your work. And you don't have to be that smart to write wonderful fiction... if you're sensitive and caring enough.

You might even consider putting the following reminders on the bulletin board in your writing room:

- Never write down to your readers.
- Don't assume your reader is dumber than you.
- Never—ever—sneer at published work.
- Think you're too smart to sell? Baloney!
- Come down to earth! That's where the readers are.



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### 3. DON'T SHOW OFF WHEN YOU WRITE

IF YOU HAVE A SPECIAL area of expertise—if you're a nurse, for example, or a lawyer—your specialized knowledge may be a gold mine you can use as background for your stories. Fiction readers love learning about new things as they read a good story.

If you have a rich and extensive vocabulary, that may also prove to be a useful tool. Or if you happen to be a widely read person, or more cultured and schooled in the arts than the average citizen, this too may help you when you write your fiction.

But just as a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, too much erudition may be fatal to your fiction if you succumb to the temptation to show it off.

Good fiction writers never show off or dump in abstruse knowledge for its own sake, or purposely use big words when simpler ones would do. They constantly seek ways to work in necessary background information in as unobtrusive a way as possible, and they remember that readers get irritated quickly if a writer's style sends them to the dictionary once or twice every paragraph.

You must remember that readers do not read your story to hear how smart you are, or how complicated you can make your sentences. If you insist on showing off in your copy, readers will flee in droves. It's possible to put even very complex ideas in relatively simple language, and it's equally possible to tell your readers a great deal of fascinating information without making it sound like a self-serving show-off act.

Here's an example of the kind of thing you must *not* do:

In an obscurantist deluge of extraneous verbiage as an outgrowth of an apparent excessive effort to manifest extraordinary intellectual attainment, the aforesaid man impacted adversely on the totality of his audience in a veritable paradigm of irrelevance.

What the writer was trying to say was:

The man tried to impress people by talking too much, but nobody liked it.

You might want to examine yourself—and your copy—for smart-alecky stuff like this. You might also comb your copy for specialized terminology that might be written more simply and clearly. The information you've put in the story just to show how much you know, rather than because it really contributes to the story.

For nobody likes a smart aleck, and fiction readers can sniff one out a mile away.

## 4. DON'T EXPECT MIRACLES

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A DOCTOR SPENDS FIVE to ten years learning how to be a doctor. Why, then, do people think they can learn how to be a professional writer of fiction in a week or a month—or even a year?

The writing of fiction is very deceptive. Like riding a bicycle, it looks easy until you try it. But whereas the bicycle gives you quick and painful proof that riding it isn't quite as easy as it appears, writing is more subtle; your very first story may look good to you—even though it's almost certainly unpublishable on later reflection.

You came to this book because writing interests you, and you're probably doing some of it. To the task you brought some language skills and a desire to tell stories. Your language skills may be quite good. (I hope so.) You may have wonderful ideas for stories, and you type well, etc., etc.

Does any of this mean you know how to write fiction? Unfortunately, no. The writing of fiction—except in the case of that very rare genius—is a difficult job. It involves the interactive working of dozens of specific, hard-won techniques. It may become an art, but only by first being consummate craft.

Yes, if you have a modicum of talent, you can learn how to do it. But it may take you years.

But, why should that be such bad news? If the task were easy, everybody in the world would be a writer, and your achievement would mean little. Setting out on a difficult course is exciting, and the conclusion can be the triumph of a lifetime.

You may find that it takes many manuscripts... and a lot of time... to learn the ins and outs of the techniques involved in handling viewpoint, or writing developed scenes, or the like. But as you learn each bit of the craft, paying for your knowledge in hard work and the passage of time, I guarantee that you'll grow more excited about the pursuit... more awed by the beauty and logic of how fiction works.

It's worth the time. Expect no overnight miracles, but have faith. If you persevere, the chances are very good that you will achieve some success.

Conversely, if you get disgusted or discouraged, expecting overnight fame and fortune, you're certain to fail. Absolutely.

Write in your journal, or in some other permanent record, your goal as a writer five years from today. Assuming (as is true) that a writing career proceeds by small steps forward—write where you hope ideally to be as a writer four years from now. And in three years. And in two. And by next year, this time.

Put that list of hopes aside somewhere safe. Get to work. Be patient, but press yourself to work hard. Make notes of your insights and learned skills as you come upon them. Then, a year from now, compare where you were (now) with where you will be by that time. You'll be surprised and pleased.

Maybe you won't be a selling writer of fiction yet. But you'll be a lot closer and able to see your own progress.

## 5. DON'T WARM UP YOUR ENGINES

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OFTEN, WHEN I START to read a story written by an inexperienced writer, I am reminded of those cold winter mornings long ago in Ohio when I sat miserably beside my father in the old Buick, in the dark garage, waiting for the engine to warm up before driving away from home.

In those days it was considered good form to warm your engine before driving the car. Multiviscosity engine oil was far in the future, and the theory was that the motor should idle a while under no strain while the heat of ignition warmed the oil so it could circulate more freely, providing better lubrication.

Those days are long gone. But, amazingly, fiction writers still do the same kind of unnecessary and wasteful thing in starting their stories.

"Why," I may ask them, "have you started your story with this long, static description of a town (or a house, or a street, or a country scene)?"

"Well," the beginning writer will reply, puzzled, "I need to set up where the story is going to take place."

Or I may be forced to ask, "Why have you started this story by giving me background information about things that happened months (or even years) ago?"

"Well," the poor neophyte will say, "I wanted the reader to know all that before starting the story."

Such static or backward-looking approaches to fiction are probably lethal in a novel, and are certainly fatal in a modern short story. Readers today—and that of course includes editors who will buy or reject your work—are more impatient than ever before. They will not abide a story that begins with the author warming up his engines. If a setting needs to be described, it can be described later after you have gotten the story started. If background must be given the reader, it can be given later *after* you have intrigued him with *the present action of the story*.

I've had the horrific experience of standing in the doorway of a room at a magazine publishing house where first readers go through freelance submissions, deciding whether the stories should be passed on to an editor for further consideration, or sent back as a rejection at once. Sometimes a reader would slit the end of a manila envelope and pull the manuscript only halfway out of the envelope, scanning the first paragraph or two of the yarn. Sometimes—*on the basis of this glance alone*—the story was either passed on to an editor for consideration, or tossed into the reject pile.

Do you think that you're really going to get past that first reader with an unmoving description of a house or a street? Do you imagine that that reader, going through hundreds of manuscripts every day, is going to pass on your story if it begins with stuff that happened twenty years ago?

The chances are very, very slim.

Moral: Don't warm up your engines. *Start the story with the first sentence!*

How do you do that? By recognizing three facts:

1. Any time you stop to describe something, you have *stopped*. Asking a reader to jump eagerly into a story that starts without motion is like asking a cyclist to ride a bike with no wheels—he pedals and pedals but doesn't get anywhere. Description is vital in fiction, but at the outset of the story it's deadly.
2. Fiction looks forward, not backward. When you start a story with background information, you point the reader in the wrong direction, and put her off. If she had wanted old news, she would have read yesterday's newspaper.
3. Good fiction starts with—and deals with—someone's response to threat.

Let's look a bit further at this No. 3, because it tells us how our stories should start.

As human beings, it's in our nature to be fascinated by threat. Start your story with a mountaineer hanging from a cliff by his fingernails, and I guarantee that the reader will read a bit further to see what happens next. Start your story with a child frightened because she has to perform a piano solo

before a large recital audience—and feeling threatened, of course—and your reader will immediately become interested in her plight.

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It stands to reason, then, that you should not warm up your engines at the outset. You should start the action. What kind of action? *Threat*—and a response to it.

Every good story starts at a moment of threat.

Does this mean you are doomed to spend your writing career looking for new and dire physical threats? I don't think so, although some fine writers have thrived by writing fiction dealing with literal, physical threat and danger. But you don't have to write about physical catastrophe to have a fascinating threat in your stories.

Think back a moment over your own life. What were some of the times when you felt most scared, most threatened? Perhaps it was your first day of school. Or at a time when there was a death in the family, or a divorce. Perhaps the first time you had to speak a line in a school play. Or when you tried out for a sports team. Maybe your first date? When you changed schools? When the family moved? When some new people moved in next door to you, and you didn't know if you would like them? When you were engaged or married, or when you started your first real job? When you were fired from a job? Or promoted to a better one?

All stressful events. All threatening, even though many of them were happy occasions. Now, why should that be so? Isn't it strange that happy events would be threatening?

Not at all. Better minds than I have pointed out that we human beings like to feel in harmony with our environment and our situation in life. Each of us carries inside a view of ourselves, our life, and the kind of person we are. When things are going well, we feel in harmony with everything around everyone around us, and we aren't threatened. But enter *change*—almost any change—and our world has been shaken up. We feel uneasy.

Threatened.

Nothing is more threatening than change.

From this, it stands to reason that you will know when and where to start your story—page one, line one—when you identify the moment of change. Because change is where the story starts.

A bus comes to town, and a stranger gets off.

The boss calls an employee: "Please come in here. I have something important to tell you."

A new family moves into the house down the block.

A telegram is delivered to your door.

The seasons change, and you grow restless... uneasy.

It is at this moment of crucial change, whatever it may be, that your story starts. Identify the moment of change, and you know when your story must open. To begin in any other way is to invite disaster:

- Open earlier, with background, and it's dull.
- Open by looking somewhere else in the story, and it's irrelevant.
- Open long after the change, and it's confusing.

Begin your story now. Move it forward now. All that background is an author concern. *Readers don't care.* They don't want it. The reader's concern is with change... threat... how a character will respond *now*.

"But I really like that stuff about Grandpaw and Grandmaw, and how things were in 1931!" I hear you protest "I want to put that stuff in!"

Not in this story, you can't—not if this story is set in present times. Maybe you can work a little of it into the story later, but starting with it will kill you. (If worse comes to worst, you can write some

other story about the 1930s, where the old stuff can become present-day stuff in terms of the story assumptions.)

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Remember what the reader wants. Don't try to inflict *your* author concerns on her. You must give her what she wants at the start, or she'll never read any further.

And what she wants—what will hook her into reading on—is threat.

The most common variety of which is change.

Test yourself on this. In your journal or notebook, make a list of ten times in your life when you felt the most scared or worried.

My list might include my first day at college, the day I entered active duty with the air force, my first formal speech before a large audience, and my first solo in a small plane. Your list might be quite different. But our lists, I'll bet, will have one thing in common. Both will represent moments of change.

Having realized this, you might want to make a second list, this one of ten changes that you think you might make good opening threats in stories. It's perfectly all right to build upon some of your own real-life experiences here. It's equally okay to make up threatening changes.

In either case, I suggest that you keep this list, and the next time you catch yourself sensing that the opening of your current fiction project is bogging down or going too slowly, compare your problem opening with your list of ideas in terms of depth and seriousness of the change you're dealing with. Maybe you'll find that you've backslid into warming up your story engines instead of starting with the crucial moment of change that really gets the yarn under way.

## 6. DON'T DESCRIBE SUNSETS

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READERS NEED DESCRIPTION in the stories they read to visualize settings and people—really "get into the action." But sometimes writers get carried away and go too far in trying to provide such description; they stop too often to describe such things as sunsets, thinking that pretty prose is an end in itself—and forgetting that when they stop to describe something at length, the story movement also stops.

A friend of mine, the late Clifton Adams, was an enormously gifted writer of western fiction, short stories and novels. In one of his prizewinning western novels, he devoted several pages to describing a sunset. It was an amazing departure from established norms in professional fiction.

Yet in this isolated circumstance it worked. Adams had set up the story situation in a way that told the reader of a dire threat as soon as total darkness fell, a band of desperadoes planned to attack the hero's lonely frail camp and do him in. For this reason, every word of the sunset description was relevant—and painfully suspenseful.

Only in such a special situation can you devote great space to description, no matter how poetic it may seem to you. One of the standing jokes among writers and publishers is about the amateur writer who devotes precious space to describing a sunrise or sunset. All you have to do, in some publishing circles, is mention something like "the rosy fingers of dawn" and you get smiles all around. Such descriptions usually are a hallmark of poor fiction writing.

If you've been reading this book straight through from the front, you already see why this is so. Fiction is *movement*. Description is static. Trying to put in a lengthy description of a setting or person in fiction is a little like the dilemma facing physicists when they try to describe the nature of the electron. As one distinguished scientist once put it, "You can describe what an electron is at a given moment, but if you do, you don't know exactly where it is; or you can try to describe where it is, but then you can't say exactly what it is."

Part of what he was saying, I think, was simply this: to describe something in detail, you have to stop the action. But without the action, the description has no meaning.

Therefore, whenever you try to inflict on your readers a detailed description, your story stops. And readers are interested in the story—the movement—not your fine prose.

Does this mean you should have no description in your story? Of course not. Description must be *worked in* carefully, in bits and pieces, to keep your reader seeing, hearing, and feeling your story world. But please note the language here: it must be *worked in, a bit at a time*, not shoveled in by the page.

I am certainly not the first person to warn about "poetic" descriptions and how they stop a story. And yet they continue to appear again and again in amateur copy. Such segments prove one of two things: either the writer has no understanding of the basic nature of fiction, or the writer is so in love with her own words that she allows arrogance to overcome wisdom. "Fine writing" almost always slows the story's pace and distracts readers from the story line itself.

And note, please, that description can be something other than writing about a tree or a sunset. Beginning writers sometimes make the mistake of stopping everything while they describe a *character's thoughts or feelings*. This often is every bit as bad as the rosy fingers of dawn.

Of course you should and must look into your character's head and heart. And some of your insights must be given the reader, so she can know about the character, sympathize with the character, identify with the action. But in good fiction—even at novel length—such descriptions of the character's state of mind and emotion are usually relatively brief. The accomplished writer will tell (describe) *a little* and demonstrate (show in action) *a lot*. Modern readers want you to move the story, not stand around

discussing things.

In this regard, you may want to think about your fiction *delivery systems*. There are different ways to deliver your information to your reader. They have characteristic speeds:

- *Exposition*. This is the slowest of all. It's the straight giving of factual information. Nothing whatsoever is happening. You're giving the reader data—biographical data, forensic data, sociological data, whatever. Some of this has to go in your story, but there's no story movement while you're putting in your encyclopedia info.
- *Description*. Almost as slow. Again, some is necessary. But watch it.
- *Narrative*. Here we have characters onstage in the story "now," and their actions, give-and-take, are presented moment by moment with no summary and nothing left out. This is like a stage play, and much of your story will be in this form, as we'll discuss in a later section. This kind of storytelling goes very swiftly and provides continuous movement.
- *Dialogue*. Story people talking. Very little action or interior thought. Like a fast-moving tennis match, back and forth, point and counterpoint. When the story people are under stress and talk in short bursts, this is tremendously fast and forward-moving.
- *Dramatic Summary*. The fastest form of all. Here you have dramatic stuff happening, but instead of playing it out moment by moment, as in narrative, you choose to add even more speed by summarizing it. In this mode, a car chase or argument that might require six pages of narrative might be condensed into a single light-speed paragraph.

If your stories seem to be moving too slowly, you might analyze some of your copy, looking at what form of writing you tend to use. It could be that you are describing too many sunsets (in one form or another) and never using any dialogue or dramatic summary. On the other hand, if you sense that your stories whiz along at too breakneck a speed, perhaps you need to change some of that dramatic summary into narrative, or even pause (briefly!) now and then to describe what the setting looks like or what the character is thinking or feeling.

In this way, you can become more conscious of your tendencies as a fiction writer, and begin to see which tendencies help you, and which tend to hold you back from selling. You can learn better to calibrate your shots in terms of pacing your yarn, selecting the delivery system that's needed for the desired effect, and keeping the yarn moving.

## 7. DON'T USE REAL PEOPLE IN YOUR STORY

---

ONE OF MY NEW WRITING students, a gent we shall call Wally, came by my office the other day with the first pages of a new story. I read the pages and then handed them back to him.

"Wally," I complained as gently as I could, "these characters are really not very interesting."

Wally frowned, not understanding.

I tried again: "Wally, these characters are dull. What they are is flat and insipid. They are pasteboard. They have no life, no color, no vivacity. They need a lot of work."

Wally looked shocked. "How can these characters be *dull*? They're *real people*—every one of them. I took them right out of real life!"

"Oh," I said. "So that's the problem."

"What?" he said.

"You can never use real people in your story."

"Why?"

"For one reason, real people might sue you. But far more to the point in fiction copy, real people—taken straight over and put on the page of a story—are dull."

Wally sat up straighter. "Are you telling me my friends are dull?"

"Of course not!" I told him. "That's not the point. The point is that in fiction real people aren't vivid enough. Good characters have to be constructed, not copied from actuality." Wally was discouraged. But I tried to explain it to him with something like this:

One of the toughest jobs we ask of our readers is to see characters vividly and sympathize with them. Consider: all your readers have to go by are some symbols printed on a sheet of paper. From these symbols, readers must recognize letters of the alphabet, make the letters into words, derive meaning from the words, link the meanings into sentences. From that point, readers must make an even more amazing leap of faith or intuition of some kind: they must use their own imagination to picture—physically and emotionally—a person inside their own head. And then they must believe that the imagined person is somehow real—and even care about him.

Readers need all the help they can get to perform this arduous imaginative-emotional task. They have a lot to see through to get the job done even imperfectly.

To help them, you can't simply transcribe what you see and know about a real person. You have to *construct* something that is far bigger than life, far more *exaggerated*. Then, if you do your job of exaggeration extremely well, your readers will see your gross exaggeration dimly, but well enough to think, "This constructed character looks like a real person to me."

Good fiction characters, in other words, are never, ever real people. Your idea for a character may begin with a real person, but to make him vivid enough for your readers to believe in him, you have to exaggerate tremendously; you have to provide shortcut identifying characteristics that stick out all over him, you have to make him practically a monster—for readers to see even his dimmest outlines.

Thus, even if you start with some real person, you won't end up with him as your character.

For example, if your real person is loyal, you will make your *character* tremendously, almost unbelievably loyal; if he tends to be a bit impatient in real life, your character will fidget, gnash his teeth, drum his fingers, interrupt others, twitch, and practically blow sky high with his outlandish, exaggerated impatience. In addition, you may find that it helps your creation if you take one or two other real-life people and add *their* most exaggerated impatient characteristics.

What you will end up with, if you do well, will be a dimly perceived construct who no longer bears any resemblance to the real person with whom you started. Because good characters are in no way like



real people ... not really.

In addition, to create a fictional character, you will give him some highly recognizable tags that are—again—more exaggerated than anything we'll ever encounter in real life. Thus our impatient character will also be nervous. Hell smoke, a lot. He'll always be lighting a cigarette, asking for a match, putting out a cigarette, puffing smoke. His habit of drumming his fingers on the table will be shown often, as another tag of impatience and nervousness. He'll interrupt people and be rude—push past others to get into the elevator, give snappish answers to questions, honk his horn at the driver in front of him the instant the light turns green, and so on. And all these tags that you devise will be waved often, not just occasionally, as they might appear in real life.

Good fiction characters also tend to be more understandable than real-life people. They do the things they do for motives that make more sense than real-life motives often do. While they're more mercurial and colorful, they're also more goal-motivated. Readers must be able to understand why your character does what he does; they may not agree with his motives, but you have carefully set things up so at least they can see that he's acting as he is *for some good reason*.

In all these ways fiction characters are not just different than life. They're better. Bigger. Brighter. More understandable. Nicier or meaner. Prettier or uglier. And ultimately more fascinating.

I can almost hear your silent protest: "But I want to write realistic fiction." Good. So do I. Yet, to convey an illusion of realism, you as a good fiction writer can never transcribe real people; you must build your characters, taking aspects of real people and exaggerating some angles while suppressing others, adding a bit of Charlie's choleric nature to Archibald's pathos, tossing in some of Andrew's brittle way of talking, salting with your own list of tags that you made up from your imagination, sticking on the motives, plans, hopes and fears that you made up as the author for this character because they're what you as the author need to have in this particular stew.

Even the *names* of your characters are constructed. "Brick Bradley" by his very name is a different character from "Percy Flower" "Mother Theresa" can never be the same kind of person as a "Dolor LaRue" Even your character names are constructs, not reality.

And consider *character background* In real life, a young woman may come out of a poverty-stricken rural background and still somehow become the president of a great university. Except in a long novel, where you might have sufficient space to make it believable, you would have a hard time selling this meshing of background and present reality in fiction. Chances are that in a short story you would make up a far different background for your female university president, perhaps constructing an early life as the favorite or only daughter of a college professor mother and physician father. (In short fiction, characters and their backgrounds are almost always much more consistent than people in real life.)

Motivation? Again, fictional characters are better than life. In real life, people often seem to do things for no reason we can understand. They act on impulses that grow out of things in their personalities that even *they* sometimes don't understand. But in fiction there is considerably less random chance. While good characters are capable of surprising readers—and should sometimes do so for verisimilitude—such characters are always understandable on fairly simple later analysis.

To put this point another way, in real life people often don't make sense. But in fiction, they do. The author sees to that.

Just as she sees to many other things about her characters, remembering always that fiction people are *not* real people.

It's just one of several ways that fiction surpasses and improves upon life. And that's a good thing, isn't it? After all, if fiction were really just like life, why would we have to have it at all? What need

would it meet? Who would care about it?

~~We spin tales... make up story people. None of it is real, and therein lies its beauty. In your stories~~  
as in all the stories ever told, you must hold the magnifying glass up to your people and events for  
readers to appreciate them at all... and thus briefly enter a private world, largely of their own  
imagining—made *vivid by your crafty help*.

## 8. DON'T WRITE ABOUT WIMPS

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FICTION WRITERS TOO OFTEN FORGET that interesting characters are almost always characters who are active—risk-takers—highly motivated toward a goal. Many a story has been wrecked at the outset because the writer chose to write about the wrong kind of person—a character of the type we sometimes call a wimp.

You know what a wimp is.

He's the one who wouldn't fight under any circumstances.

Ask him what he wants, and he just sighs.

Poke him, and he flinches—and retreats.

Confront him with a big problem, and he fumes and fusses and can't make a decision.

Now, in real life there are a lot of wimps. You and I have both been wimpy far more often than we would like to admit. We get confused, we get scared, we get far too ambivalent, and we just sit around and wait to see what might happen next.

To put it another way, in reality—in the real world—much of what happens is accidental. "Isn't life funny!" we exclaim, after fate has taken a hand and something has worked out by itself, seemingly. And so we stagger on, major life changes just sort of happening, and we often don't take the bull by the horns because we can't even figure out where the damned bull is.

That's reality.

But fiction isn't reality, as we said before, it's better.

So, in most effective fiction, accidents don't determine the outcome. And your story people don't sit around passively. (Now and then you'll find a story in which what I've just said is disproven; but I'm talking about *most* successful fiction. Most readers don't want their stories to tell them life is random. They want to hear just the opposite. They want to believe something. What they want to believe is that trying hard can pay off, and that people are in charge of their own fate.)

That's why wimps—spineless drifters who won't or can't rouse themselves to try—usually make terrible fiction characters.

Good fiction characters are fighters. They know what they want, they encounter trouble, and they struggle. They don't give up and they don't retire from the action. They don't wait for fate to settle the issue. In good fiction, *the story people determine the outcome*. Not fate. This is just another of the many ways in which fiction surpasses life and is better than real life.

Look at it this way: A good story is the record of movement. A good story is movement. Someone pushes; someone else pushes back. At some level, therefore, a story is the record of a fight.

If you accept this premise, then it's obvious that you can't invest the action and outcome of your story in a wimp. He'll refuse to struggle, won't push back when shoved, and will run and hide at the first opportunity.

"I just can't make anything happen in my story," you'll hear another writer complain. Or, "I've got a good idea, but can't seem to keep it moving." Or, "Something is wrong with my new story; it seems dull, and the characters are lifeless." In all such cases, the real problem is not with plot, but with the kind of central character the writer has chosen to write about. Jerk that wimp out of the story and put in someone who will press ahead like the movie characters that John Wayne used to play, or the ones usually portrayed today by someone like Clint Eastwood. Now something will start happening!

Does this mean that every character has to be as violent and headlong as a Clint Eastwood movie character? By no means. Just because a character is strongly goal-motivated and active doesn't mean he has to be a superhero. A character may be active—refuse to give up or stop trying—yet still be

scared or sometimes unsure of himself In actuality, such a character, who acts despite worry or fear, stronger than the one who simply plunges onward without doubt or thought.

---

How do you build a strong character who will act and not be a wimp? In the first place, you determine to do so. You throw away any wrong ideas you may have about the quiet, contemplative, sensitive, thoughtful character, and recognize that it isn't very interesting, watching somebody sit in his easy chair and *ponder things*. Your character has to be a person capable of action, and that's for starters.

Now, having decided that you'll write about someone who is willing to do something rather than sit around and await the workings of fate, you have to nudge him into action. How do you do that? By hitting him with that threatening change we talked about earlier.

At this point, you put yourself in your character's shoes and begin to give him a game plan. This is his response to whatever threatening change now faces him. He does *not* give up or whine; he decides to do something to fix his plight. He sets out with a *goal*. He is committed. Attainment of his goal is essential to his happiness.

All well and good. Having come this far, you have started to build your story as a quest. Virtually all contemporary fiction, at some level, is the record of such a quest. The "Indiana Jones" thrillers that worked on the big screen because they were pure quest (in the third such adventure, it was literally a quest for the Holy Grail). Your story may involve a lesser goal, literally speaking, but it can be no less vital to your character.

- *Something has changed.*
- *Your character is threatened.*
- *He vows to struggle.*
- *He selects a goal and starts taking action toward it.*

And you have a story under way.

It sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Then why do so many writers make it so hard?

Why, for example, do they let themselves get so tangled up in background information that the character has to sit around for page after page, while the author does a core dump of old information? Why do they let the character worry and fume for page after page instead of *doing something*. Why do they plunge into Freudian analysis of the poor guy instead of letting him get off the couch and get on after it?

Confusion of confusions, all is confusion when you forget, even briefly, and allow your character to act like a wimp. Male or female, young or old, lovelorn or treasure-bound, your central story person has to *act*. And he has to confront at least one other story person who is also decidedly un-wimpy, so there can be a struggle. The minute somebody quits or retires from the action even temporarily, your story dies on the vine.

We're talking here mainly about major characters in your story. But even minor characters may suffer from passivity. You should examine *all* your characters to see if making them stronger-acting might make them also more vivid and interesting. For the wimpy character usually tends to fade into the woodwork and be dull.

Now, this may sound like I'm arguing for only one kind of story, an action/adventure. Nothing could be further from the truth. While a strong, goal-motivated character is easier seen in such a yarn, the effective character in even the quietest modern story will almost always be a person capable of action. In a romance novel, for example, the young woman may seem unwilling to face the man to whom she is attracted and may even deny her own feelings and actively avoid him. But please note that she is taking action, even if it is sometimes negative. In a psychological story about a man assailed by self-

doubt and uncertainty, he will realize that he has a problem and see a doctor or take a pill or discuss with a friend or write a letter or *do something*.

---

So that—to repeat for emphasis—every story is the record of a quest. An active character working about will form some goal, based on his plight and his motives. He will *work* toward that goal, not sit back passively. And—wonder to behold—his active selection of a goal will be picked up by the reader and used as a basis for suspense.

Any time a character forms a goal-oriented intention in fiction, the reader will turn the goal statement around and make it into a *story question*—and then begin worrying about it! This is an activity at which the reader is wonderfully adept. You give your un-wimpy character the goal of finding his lost sister, and the reader instantly worries, *Will* he find his lost sister? Or you give your character the specific goal of winning a better job, and your reader immediately worries, *Will* she get the better job?

From this process of reader-translation—character goal to story question—comes reader worry, or to give it another name, suspense.

Let me suggest that you look hard and long at the kind of characters you typically tend to write about. Are any of them wimps? Do they whine or sit around passively or "wait and see"? If so, they may be at the heart of your problems as a writer of fiction.

How do you get them going? First you change your assumptions about what makes a good fictional character. Then you present them with a pressing problem. Then you decide what they are going to do about it—*now*. And finally you keep them moving, continuing to struggle; you never allow them to give up or retire from the story action. They move and they press and they keep on, always questioning after their goal, whether it's a date to the high school prom or the Holy Grail.

Same thing, ultimately. Because whatever it is, it's essential to your character's happiness, and *the character will not give up*. He's determined; he's going to try and try again. He's going to fight to maintain control of his life—and determine his own destiny.

I like him, don't you?

I care about him already, don't you?

## 9. DON'T DUCK TROUBLE

---

IN FICTION, THE BEST times for the writer—and reader—are when the story's main character is in the worst trouble. Let your character relax, feel happy and content, and be worried about nothing, and your story dies. Pour on all sorts of woes so your poor character is thoroughly miserable and in the deepest kind of trouble, and your story perks right up—along with your reader's interest.

The moral: Although most of us do everything we can to avoid trouble in real life, we must do just the opposite as writers of fiction. We must seek out ways to add trouble to our characters' lives by putting just as much pressure on them as we can. For it's from plot trouble that reader interest comes.

There are many kinds of fiction trouble, but the most effective kind is *conflict*.

You know what conflict is. It's active give-and-take, a struggle between story people with opposing goals.

It is *not*, please note, bad luck or adversity. It isn't fate. It's a fight of some kind between people with opposing goals.

Fate, bad luck or whatever you choose to call it may play a part in your fiction too. Adversity—think snowstorm that keeps your character from having an easy drive to the mountain cabin, for example, or the suspicious nature of the townspeople that complicates your detective's investigation—is nice, too. But these problems are blind; they are *forces* of some kind that operate willy-nilly, without much reason—and so are things that your character can't confront and grapple with.

In other words, it's all well and good to have your character leave his house in the morning and slip and fall on a banana peel, thus making him feel bad all day. But such an event comes out of nowhere for no good reason; like real-life events, it makes no sense. It is caused by nothing much and leads to nothing special.

Adversity in all its forms may create some sympathy for your character. But your character can reasonably try to understand it, plot against it, or even confront it in a dramatic way.

Conflict, on the other hand, is a fight with another person. It's dramatic, onstage now, with the kind of seesaw give-and-take that makes most sporting events—many courtroom trials—exciting stuff. When in conflict, your character knows who the opponent is and has a chance to struggle against him. In conflict, your character has a chance to change the course of events. In taking the challenge and entering the fray, your character proves himself to be worthy as a story hero: he's trying to take charge of his life... determine the outcome... *win*.

Thus, if you're a wise writer of fiction, you spend a good deal of your plotting hours devising ways to set up more fights. In real life you might walk around the block to avoid meeting Maryanne, the neighbor who always wants to start an argument with you. In your fiction, you may walk your hero a mile just to get him into position so he *can* have a fight with the person who most irritates him.

The calmer and more peaceful your real life, the better, in all likelihood. Your story person's life is just the opposite. You the author must *never* duck trouble—conflict—in the story. You seek it out because that's where the excitement and involvement—as well as reader sympathy for your character—lie.

Please note that *conflict* does not necessarily mean an actual physical fight, although sometimes it certainly may be exactly that. Conflict may be any of the following examples:

- Two men argue in a board meeting, each intent on convincing the members of the board that he should be named president of the firm.
- A young woman pleads with her father to accept into the family the man she loves.
- Two cars race along a highway, the driver of one intent on forcing the other off the road.
- A detective persistently questions an uncooperative witness, trying to dig out information that would help solve a murder.

- A man maneuvers in a dark alley, trying to slip away from an armed pursuer whose occasional small sounds give away his position.
- Lovers' quarrel.
- A man and woman discuss whether to buy a new car. He wants if she doesn't.
- A woman reporter tries to get information for a story from a derelict on skid row, but he keeps slipping away from the subject, into reminiscences.
- Daniel Boone fights a bear.

Of course you will think of many more examples, once you have it clear in your mind that conflict always means a fight, at some level.

How do you make sure you have a fight and not some form of blind bad luck?

You make sure two characters are involved.

You give them opposing goals.

You put them onstage now.

You make sure both are motivated to struggle *now*.

Virtually all the high points of most stories involve conflict. It's the fuel that makes fiction good. Nothing is more exciting and involving. And—please note—"fiction friction" of this kind is another example of how fiction is better than life.

In life, you might walk out of your house in the morning and get struck by lightning.

Blind luck, meaningless, against which you are powerless. Life is like that. *Dumb!* But in fiction the character has the power: he can control his own destiny, or at least thinks he can.

He *will* struggle, if he's worth writing about, and will encounter endless fights. The outcome will depend on him—not on blind luck.

A lot better than life sometimes is, right?

Of course.

## 10. DON'T HAVE THINGS HAPPEN FOR NO REASON

---

ONE MORNING NOT LONG ago, my student Wally came by the office with part of another story. Sipping my second cup of coffee, I read what he had brought to me.

"Wally," I said finally, this story doesn't make sense."

"What do you mean?" Wally asked.

"I mean your characters don't seem to have any background motivation for their story intention here, they constantly seem to be running into other people and information strictly by coincidence and they often do or say things for no apparent immediate reason."

Wally looked blank. "That's bad?"

"Wally, it makes your story totally illogical!"

"Wait a minute," Wally protested. "I don't have to be logical. I'm writing fiction!"

It's a fairly common misconception, this one of Wally's. Since fiction is make-believe, says this line of reasoning, then the most important thing is to be imaginative and original—and so anyone who tries to argue for logic and credibility in a story must be trying to thwart somebody's artistic genius.

The truth, as you've probably already begun to see, is just the opposite. Because fiction is make-believe, it has to be *more logical* than real life if it is to be believed. In real life, things may occur for no apparent reason. But in fiction you the writer simply cannot ever afford to lose sight of logic and let things happen for no apparent reason.

To make your stories logical, and therefore believable, you work always to make sure there always a reason for what happens.

For one thing, you always provide characters with the right background—upbringing, experience, information—to motivate them generally in the direction of the action you want to show them taking.

A character, if she is to act with seeming reason, must come from a personal background that qualifies her to accomplish your plot action. You must set things up so that her general background—family, upbringing, education, health, whatever—make it seem reasonable that she would act as you want her to act in the story.

As an extreme example here, let's say you want your character to preach a sermon some Sunday in a Southern Baptist church, citing the life of Christ as the perfect type for all to emulate. Only a slow thinker would fail to put *something* in the story earlier to show how the character was either brought up in a Christian home, or went through a religious conversion to Christianity. Thus the general background must be given, or else the character's actions may seem to come from no logical origin.

Following the same example a step further, remember that the general background may not be enough. Your readers will also want to know the more recent event or events that have given your character the motivation to do what she is doing right now. Thus, in the example cited, you might have the Christian woman's minister husband fall suddenly ill, which prompts her, in desperation, to fill in for him after the congregation has already assembled. Or you might set things up so the sermon is to be some kind of test set up by the church's governing board. Whatever you pick, you will pick something that will explain how and why she got up there in the pulpit now, doing what you the writer want her to do in the way you want her to do it.

(Do you want her to be nervous or calm? Sad or happy? You'll need to provide recent cause for these desired aspects of her performance, too.)

A great many stories tend to be unbelievable because the writer just shoved a character onstage to do something without thinking through how and why the character got there. You must constantly examine your story logic to make sure you have not inadvertently committed the same error.



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