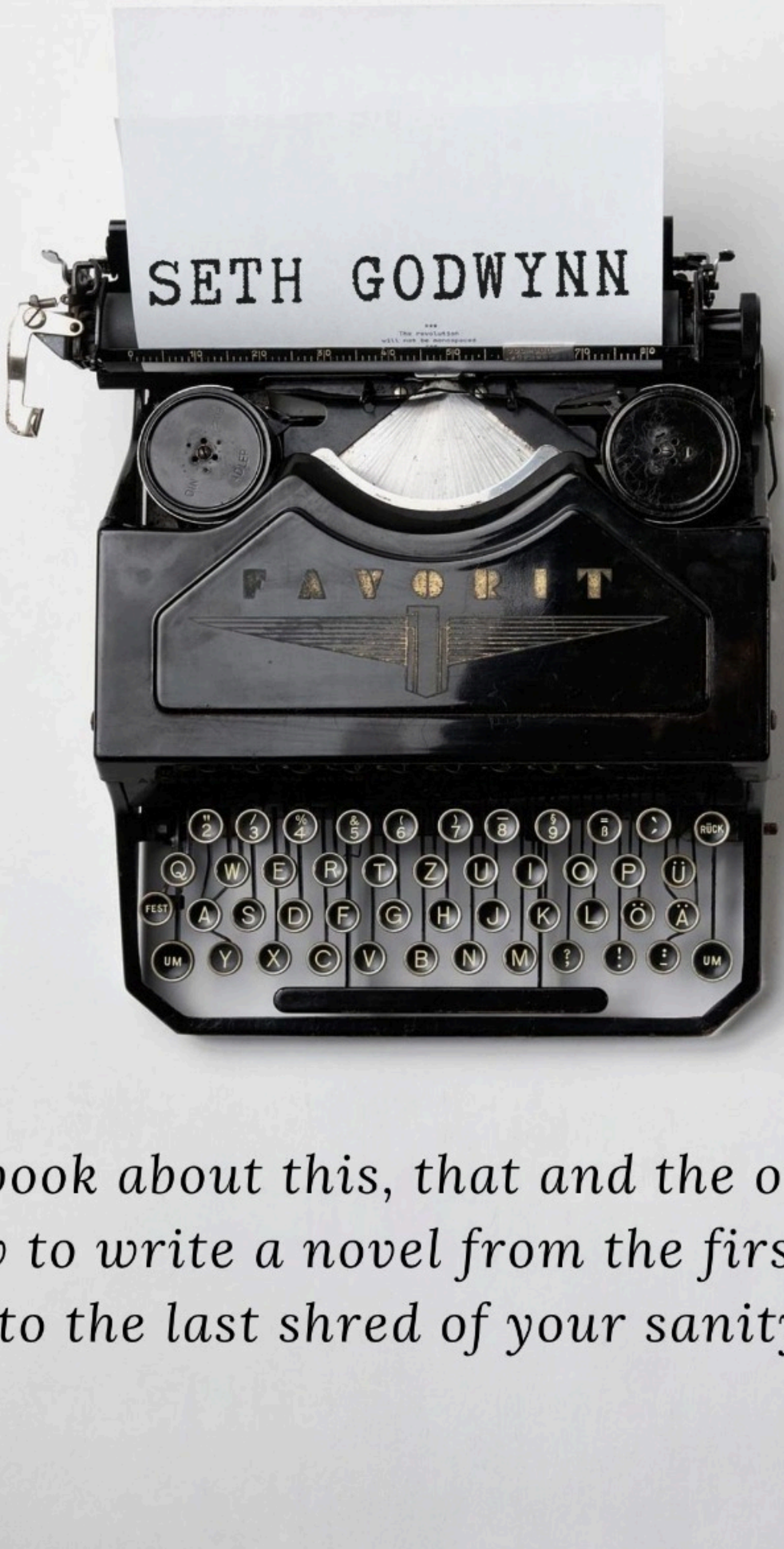
A NOVEL APPROACH

There Are No Shortcuts!



A book about this, that and the other.
How to write a novel from the first idea
to the last shred of your sanity.

A NOVEL APPROACH

Compiled by
Seth Godwynn

Characters and events portrayed in this book—including at times the author—are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living, dead, or imagined, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Introduction

A person can grow from a young, vibrant and curious child into an old, dull and uninterested adult in a surprisingly short time. Most people age horrendously, their hopes and dreams washed away by the crushing reality of living in a world where people are needlessly mean to one another. I believe there is a lot of truth in the pearl of wisdom which suggests that an artist is a child who survives.

An author is someone whose imagination is still somewhat in control and screaming at the back of their mind for attention. These sad, twisted people feel the need to create something and undertake a journey to improve the quality and scope of their work.

This journey is like swimming against a tide that is powerful enough to engulf entire continents. If the world hasn't shattered your imagination and crushed your soul, then the process of writing novels and getting a book to an audience will. However, a real author doesn't care about all that because they have a very poor grasp of reality. To them it's not just worth it – it's inevitable. A writer is a writer and can never really be anything else; they create because they have no choice but to do so.

The path to becoming a writer is a long and difficult one. It will involve reading the great works of those who have gone before you; it will require an understanding of grammar and language, as well as the literary techniques that will form your toolbox, and it will require you to open your perspective to accept that the world is a larger, greater place than you ever imagined. A truly great writer's works will be fuelled by experience, research and wisdom.

During this process, you will grow and change, developing into a wiser, smarter and better version of yourself, and quite possibly developing a few mental health issues along the way; you may already have several.

Sadly, many people think that the only thing it takes to create a best-selling novel is an idea and a laptop. It's a great deal harder than that: it takes time and practice to master this art. This book is an introduction and nothing more. It covers some of the points and gives you a place to begin your journey. It shows just a small part of the pool you have begun dipping your toe into. In these pages you'll find advice, pointers, grammar clues and exercises to get you on your way. It wouldn't be possible to include everything you need to know and it wouldn't help you if it did. As a writer it's your job to stand out from the crowd, finding your own voice among a chorus of people who are echoing the opinions of others while believing them to be facts. As a writer it's up to you to find your own method of expressing your most balanced, objective truth.

This book is just the beginning, but it should set you off on your journey towards achieving your dreams. It should help to show that there is more to creating a really good piece of creative fiction than most people realise. We'll look beyond the surface narrative at how to put together something you can be really proud of. We'll also look at some of the tools at the writer's disposal and how to use them most effectively. At times it can be a difficult, challenging and lonely path, but we walk it anyway, secure in the knowledge that the effort will all be worth it in the end[1].

Seth Godwynn

[1] Edgeverse makes no promise that this will be worth it in the end.

Writing a Book
—Why?—

There are only three possible reasons why someone might choose to write a book: you have to; you want to; or you have suffered a sudden blow to the head. Writing a book, you see, is not an entirely fun undertaking. It means many hours spent staring at a computer screen in isolation, and it means pouring your innermost thoughts out for the whole world to see. It's like being dreadfully unattractive and having to walk around slowly in invisible clothes while people try to hit you in the face with balloons filled with their own faeces. You would have also paid for the balloons. Worse still, it means that those inner-most thoughts and the fruits of your labours will be scorned, trodden on and beaten down right in front of you. It means that if you manage to finish your book, chances are that nobody will read it, nobody will understand it and nobody will even care that you exist. With all that in front of you and not much behind, the likelihood that your motivation for writing is a head injury seems the more reasonable explanation. If that's not the case, then that leaves only two, equally horrible possibilities: you either want to write a book, or you have to.

Some crazy people want to be authors. They want to spend a significant chunk of the valuable time they've been allotted on this Earth to create something for the sole benefit of others. They feel they have something to say, some idea that has to be conveyed; a story that has to be taken out of their head and presented to an eager and excited audience. Some people, perhaps less crazy but no less primed for disappointment, simply feel that they have to write. They have had some unusual event in their life that needs to be exorcised in the form of writing it down and moving on from it. The terrible truth is that most writers aren't either of these things; they're a twisted mixture of the two. They feel both the need and the desire to write. They long to create

something in story form for an audience who has absolutely no idea that this might be exactly what they're looking for.

Writing that book, making it correct, and then getting that book into the hands of an audience is one of the hardest things you will ever do. Along the way you'll invest your time, your efforts, your imagination and your mind. You will create. You will draw on personal experience and you will blend reality with your vision, into something you're proud of. Your finished product will be pulled apart, edited, corrected, sliced, blended and regurgitated back to you. It will feel as if your own child is being ripped to pieces in front of you, and you must smile and accept that this is happening with as much optimism as you're able to muster. Then, at the end of an almost insurmountable journey, you'll end up with something. It probably won't be what you started with. The characters will often barely resemble the ones you initially envisaged. The plot may have veered off at a wild tangent. The concepts, ideas and themes embedded in the story might have little bearing on what you intended. But it will be something. If you've done your job right, then the something you've got will be even better than what you'd originally intended.

Whatever you have left will be marketed. First, of course, you have to try to market it to the agents and publishers who have all sorts of agendas that don't mesh with the audience or with one another. They certainly have little bearing on the creative process. If you're lucky you'll get stock rejection letters. They come in waves from different corners of different countries on suspiciously concurrent days, with even more suspiciously identical wording. If you're less lucky, you'll get nothing at all. No part of that process feeds back to you, anyway. You won't know if it's the industry professional that's out of touch or if there's actually something wrong with your work because nobody will tell you. And if you actually end up going forwards from there and getting a publishing deal, which is less likely than waking up one

morning to find you've accidentally laid a solid gold egg, you then have virtually no chance of having anyone read it. You see, less than one percent of published books even make a profit. Most never even find their audience. Statistically, most authors make less than $10 in their entire career. Most people will probably find it's not possible to live on that for the rest of their lives. Despite that, some of us still do this. We have to. We have a burning need to tell the world how we see it, to entertain, educate or amuse, through the stories that we write. We can't live with ourselves if we don't find a way to do that.

I have met many writers who have never ventured beyond the initial chapter. They give up when the idea to write a book is the only idea they have. They never create the narrative; the characters don't come alive in their imagination. They want to write, but their motivation is never more than that. This book isn't for them. This is for the people with a tale to tell who will stop at nothing. This is for the people who will finish their book. This is a signpost on their journey. This book is for the authors of the future who will get there, no matter what.

This is for you!

Are You Ready?
—The First Hurdle Is Right Ahead of You—

So you know you want to write. You are well-read and you have an interesting idea for a story that won't sell the audience short, won't leave them feeling cheated. You have some life experience to draw on that will make your characters well-rounded and your plot believable. Does that mean you're ready to write a book that won't entirely suck? Sadly the answer is *no*. It takes a little more than that to get you from wanting to do something to being able to do it. It takes work.

Certainly some people skip ahead but most of us don't get the chance. I was fortunate enough to work in an educational capacity and ran a book analysis course, though sadly less fortunate in that I had no choice as to what books to cover. We were issued *The Duff* and *Divergent*. Neither of these were books were what I would call *inspiring*, both having been written by teenage girls who lacked the life experience and depth of character to create a compelling and realistic vision of the world, I thought.

Divergent was quite difficult to read, and the students agreed on that score. The underlying concept didn't quite manage to make sense and the world it was set in was poorly developed. It was set in the writer's hometown, although she had made it post-apocalyptic so that it looked the same, just with crumbling buildings. We never finished the book, as the class devolved into me running a daily stand-up comedy routine of picking holes in it while flippantly commenting on how appallingly unready the thing was to be handed to an audience. The general consensus was that it should never have been published.

The next time I had a pair of classes, reading both *Siddhartha*, a metaphorical journey towards Buddhist enlightenment which won a Nobel Prize for literature, and *The Duff*, the story of a fat girl who ends up screwing the hottest guy in school. My sarcasm bone went into

overtime. Here was another teenage fantasy with the realistic grounding and solid foundations of a rainbow floating on the ocean. What surprised us all was that *Siddhartha* was a pile of absolute garbage and we mercilessly tore it to pieces. There was no plot, the characters were poorly conceived, and ultimately there was no point to anything. Even more shocking than that, *The Duff* was actually pretty good.

It smartly encapsulated itself in the perspective of a selfish, spoiled girl, scornfully looking out on the world and judging it for not making adequate allowances for her own shortcomings. *The Duff* made good use of foreshadowing, it had strong metaphors and the story had reflective comparisons and connections with other, more compelling literature. It had benefited from the eye of a very gifted editor who had put several little comments in there for the more experienced reader to find. In the latter part of the story, the characters are reading a book in class and they observe that the characters are all unlikeable, shallow creatures but the story stands up because it's a window for the audience to look in on them. They might as well have turned to the audience and given us a little wink. I can't comment on the original source material before it went through the editing process but the finished product was polished, satisfying to a younger audience and, overall, it worked. It could have been better, but our class didn't close it and feel like we'd been slapped in the face, like we had with the other stories.

Can you do that? Well, no. You can't. Not yet. This is the moment that defines you as an author. Will you have it in you to go the distance? Can you go from where you are to where you want to get? Do you have the fuel in your tank to follow this incredibly long road? There is only one way to find out. You have to challenge yourself. You have to write.

When you learn to ride a motorcycle, it's a process for which there are no shortcuts. It isn't just a case of deciding to get on a litre-class sports bike and expecting to be perfectly fine. First, you should put in a few months on a very small bike. You learn how the roads work,

what the rules are. All the while you're getting used to the controls, learning to feel for what everything does and how it all is meant to work together. At that point you should be doing your own maintenance, learning to service the thing, changing your own oil, lubricating the chain and checking everything is where it should be. Next we go up to a larger machine and we get used to the power. It all begins again because motorcycles are fast and dangerous. A 250cc motorbike puts more performance at your fingertips than an average family car. Then, once we can handle everything it has to give, we go up to the next level, and start the whole process over again. As we go up, the bikes get more complex. Bigger engines mean more power, but they mean more complication too. We now need more maintenance and a better understanding of how things work. It means we're learning a lot of new things all the time. Eventually, after years of experience, we can ride anything. We've got the skills and abilities and we've put in the time to have earned the right to ride a really big, powerful machine.

That's the journey an author undertakes. If you want to write novels, you have to start somewhere. It doesn't matter where you start, but there is nothing that will help you learn to write better than actually writing. I've heard people talk about learning to write poetry but I'm not a fan of that path. Certainly, it's better than not writing at all, but if you learn to write poetry you'll get better at writing poetry. If you want to write stories, you have to write stories. Start with short stories but write stories that challenge you to go further.

Almost everyone universally looks down on fan-fiction but it's actually a really great way to get started. You can choose from existing material and learn to borrow the universe someone else has created. You already know and understand the characters so writing them is much easier. I began with a science-fiction fan series based in the *Star Trek* universe. I was a fan of the show when I was younger and I gave it a go. I set myself a goal of a new episode every month so I had to learn to

write on demand. I created my own characters and increasingly tried to push the stories in my own direction. Fan-fiction is fine, so long as you understand that for most people it's just a hobby. For an author, it's only a learning process. Don't get too stuck into it, and aim to outgrow it soon. It's like riding a bike with training wheels: as soon as you have your balance, it's time to take them off and move on.

Don't be afraid to show other people your work, but don't expect compliments either. As an author, I was incredibly lucky to have a collaborator (and friend) who was bluntly honest with me. It's largely thanks to him that I improved. At one point there was a weakness in my grammar and punctuation and he sent me a *Thomas the Tank Engine* book, telling me to read that and learn how to get it right before annoying him again with the same mistakes. We need to hear that sometimes. None of us are as good as we hope to be and we never will be unless we hear about how to improve. Develop a thick skin – you're going to need it later on.

I was once chatting with an author online. He asked me to swap material. Sure enough, I sent him a draft of a book I was working on and he sent me a short story he'd written for a competition; both sci-fi comedies. At first, he gave me very positive feedback, which was great. I read his story and then just sat there, staring at a wall. How could I tell him just how incredibly awful the story was? It had no logic and no plot, it was difficult to make sense of and it was grammatically poor. In the end I emailed him with constructive suggestions of how I would change things up and added the caveat that I was only offering my opinion. He went crazy at me! He told me my book was rubbish and he hated it and then decided not to submit his story for the competition, blaming me for destroying his confidence. I told him I was sorry he felt that way and wished him well. I said it was clear he was a young writer and he had time to get better. He replied that he was a late middle-aged college

lecturer. A person like that isn't going to make it! Sure enough, a decade later, he's not got a single short story published anywhere.

You can't close yourself off to constructive criticism; you have to embrace the opinions of others, but make sure those opinions are valid. We don't want grammar advice from a young child any more than we want plotting and character development advice from an old person who only reads romance novels. We must be open to advice and we must filter it wisely.

Another online writer asked me for my opinion. She sent me a short excerpt of her work and it was the most cringingly awful thing I had ever read. Apart from the technically appalling level of writing, I struggled to even make sense of what it was about and had to ask for some frame of reference because, as best as I could make out, the story was about a group of cats who had stabbed another cat with a knife and who was bleeding out during an emotional moment where he was lying on the floor being cradled by his girlfriend in a scene that went on, pretty much, forever, much like this sentence. She explained that yes, it was about a gang of cats armed with knives and guns. She further explained it was fan-fiction about a musical, but she'd changed a few of the names so it was OK. She was confident she was going to get a publishing deal and was proud that she'd created something really special on her first try. I tried to explain some of the issues but she wasn't interested in getting anything but praise.

Sadly, as an author, everyone wants to come to you with their ideas and explain how they're working on creating the next big thing. A gentleman I worked with did just that. He had an idea for a great science-fiction story about the sun and the moon, or something or other because he couldn't quite manage to explain what he had in mind. In two years, he managed to present one single paragraph of material, and most of it was unintelligible. This is a terrible example of what happens

when you just aren't ready to create a book yet. You can't build a house without solid foundations.

Another man I worked with did the same. He might have been different because he'd suffered through a violent assault that had deeply impacted his life. He wanted to express those emotions through fiction and asked me to help doctor the plot into a useful shape. We spent the morning doing just that but, a year later, nothing had come of it beyond a hollow brag that he'd spent several days writing but it wasn't ready for people to see yet. These are all examples of what happens if we throw ourselves into it when we're not ready. We fail, and that failure costs us any progress we might be able to make. We've lost before we even have a chance to begin.

Finally, one more person asked me to read his work. He was an English teacher working with me. He was a wild eyed, intellectual reader with substance abuse issues and a history of interesting experiences. He handed me a bunch of handwritten and typed pages, barely in any logical order. I told him I would read them when I got a chance, but couldn't quite get around to it. Frankly, it's bad enough telling someone online that they're not as good as they think they are, let alone having to do it with someone I have to work with every day. In the end, he cornered me and I had no choice. Hesitantly I read his work, two short stories.

The first was about a graphically described geriatric sex act, the second a violent murder. They were awesome! His command of the English language was spot-on, his plotting was sharp and his characters leapt off the page. He had a solid understanding of human nature and he knew how to lead the audience into his narrative. He was an example of a genius writer held back by a lack of belief in himself. I couldn't get his confidence up to a point where he'd put together a book while most people think they can just churn out the next big thing while sipping on a cup of coffee on their first attempt.

The truth is somewhere in the middle. If you were to throw your leg over a modern sports bike and ride off with no experience you would die. Many people I know did just that, thinking that they had mastered a 250cc and they were now ready for a full-sized machine. They crashed and they burned. It doesn't matter what path you take to get there, but nothing takes the place of practice. Write. Write on demand, use the internet to publish your short stories, write for fun, enter competitions and create fan-fiction. Just make sure you are writing constantly and that you're always challenging yourself to do better.

Ideas
—Where Do Ideas Come From?—

People love it when you reveal that you write books. They ask a lot of questions. Suddenly they want to know what genre you write in, they want to know what you're working on right now and they want to know who your inspirations are.

The worst of all of these questions is 'Where do you get your ideas from?' I try to explain that they come from some dark twisted place deep down in my unconscious where horrible things happen. If Carl Gustav Jung and Nicola Tesla are to be believed then that place is a remote part of the universe where all human consciousness stems from, some plane of reality we can only filter a little part of ourselves through, while we remain trapped on this physical plane of existence. While they're looking at me funny, I can usually make good my escape. But where do ideas actually come from?

I was a good writer at school. It was a lively little spark inside me from a very early age when my stories were always the ones to be read out in class. As I grew, my obsession with science-fiction grew with me until I found myself at school one day, chatting to an old friend. I had seen a sci-fi movie over the weekend and we were discussing it. I told him it was garbage with a storyline you wouldn't find if a highly gifted detective went looking for it. I said, in a cheap, throwaway sarcastic comment that even I could do better. That wasn't some ten-year-old's idle brag, it was a statement on how poorly written the thing was. My friend cursed my life by saying in reply, without a shred of sarcasm, 'Prove it.' Perhaps it was that very thing that launched me off on the never-ending journey of banging my metaphorical head against a very literal wall. Perhaps it was my own inability to back down from a challenge, perhaps the damage had been done long before and my flimsy house-of-cards grip on reality was looking for any tiny gust of wind to

make it all come crashing down. In any case, that was what set me off. I went looking for my own story to tell and it took me decades to find it, but how did that happen?

We're all gifted with an unconscious mind. While we're concerning ourselves with the business of not falling off of ladders and worrying about if members of the opposite sex finds us attractive, that part of us is out there, getting jobs done. It sifts through our memories, our inspirations and our attitudes. Ideas are little fragments of things we've seen, thoughts we've had, words we should have spoken, actions we should have taken. The brain puts all this together and comes up with answers to our questions.

If our mind is full of garbage, so our ideas will be. But if our minds are sharp, well-read, clear and concerned with concepts and dreams that mean something, then those ideas might be too. You wouldn't expect to eat ice-cream, beer and pizza for a year in preparation for a marathon, no more than you can expect to watch big-budget movies, read comic-books and believe rhetorical nonsense, and still have an informed opinion of your own that is sufficient to create a worthwhile novel. Preparing your mind means stepping back from mainstream trash culture and learning to really think for yourself. It means taking control of your mind, understanding what you really think, then exploring why you really think it. It means going deeper to challenge the foundations of the structure of what you hold to be true.

You need to read, and read a lot. You need to push yourself beyond your abilities. You need to grow and expand yourself so that you've really got something to say that just might be worth listening to. I once read that the best and most effective method to help you remember your dreams is to keep a diary of them. You need to have a notebook and pen beside the bed and you must write down your dreams every time you wake up. You have to teach and condition your brain that those dreams are worth recording, and your brain will respond, making

the memories clearer and sharper, just as you would expect to condition your body through exercise.

The brain, in fact, does work just like a muscle. The more you use it, and the harder you push it, the better, faster and stronger it will be. Work will improve it, and you right along with it. Once you've taught your brain that you're looking for good ideas, and you're feeding your brain a healthy diet of intelligent concepts and smart writing, most of the work is done for you. Your brain will start putting these things together for you and the ideas will naturally start coming.

The next part of becoming a writer is living a life worth talking about. Really interesting stories don't come from people who have never left the house. Get out there, meet new people, have diverse experiences, ride motorcycles or marry a horse.

If you are serious about becoming an author, look for a moment at the great ones from history: Charles Dickens, who grew up in prison as his family couldn't afford to pay their debts and who spent his literary career trying to highlight the plight of the impoverished. Look at George Orwell who became a journalist and was involved in open warfare. Writers of this calibre didn't hone their craft by watching what everyone else was doing and then doing more of it, with each new copy losing some of the clarity, originality and point of everything that had gone before. We don't get better by recycling and adding to what's already been done, and we don't make anyone else better either. As authors, it's our responsibility to do something a little more than just entertain; we need to bring something new and fresh to the minds of our audience, at least if we want to get a second publishing deal!

So, where do the ideas come from? The simple answer is they come from a clear and intelligent mind. They come from hard work, reading the kind of books you aspire to write, and many hours of research into the things you want to write about. Good ideas come from meeting people who spark creativity. They come from listening, from

imagining how things could be, what might happen. In short, good ideas come from you, so your job, and your journey, begins by being the best version of yourself that you can be.

What To Write About?
—Exploring Beyond the Limits—

If you've got this far into the book then there's a pretty good chance that you already have an answer to this question in mind. There's likely to be something already inside your head, bursting to get out. But choosing what to write isn't as easy as it sounds. It's never a good idea to write with the idea of commercial success in mind because writing rarely brings you that.

For instance, *Fight Club* was a very successful movie, starring Brad Pitt. Pitt was reportedly paid something like $14 million dollars for his portrayal of the protagonist's imaginary friend. He wanted the part so badly he had his front teeth chipped. He wanted it after reading the book, and listening to the director's vision for the adaptation. In any case, he wanted that role and he wanted it for reasons that went beyond a pay check. Chuck Palahniuk, the author of *Fight Club*, was reportedly paid only $140,000 for the rights to the story. So the person who lived that life, who sweated blood and tears to create something that ended up being a story worth telling was considered thousands of times less important than an actor playing just one of the characters. Don't get into this with the idea of financial gain being your driving force, it won't work out that way. It just won't.

That said, it's important to remember that you will have to sell that book if you do end up writing it. You have to sell it, not just to a flawed and broken publishing system but to an equally flawed and broken audience. You have to consider what it is that people want to read. We have to keep in mind that we're writing primarily for ourselves, but we must also consider the audience that we want to pick up our books.

Science–fiction might be the genre of the mind, but it sells quite poorly in an anti–intellectual age where comic–book movies are the

latest big thing. It's a tough genre to sell your work in. A lot of agents and publishers won't even entertain you. Romance fiction is a good seller but it's a soulless, empty genre. Is there any point being an author if you have to create something that you can't be proud of? You have to weigh up making the book accessible against considerations of actually enjoying writing it. I'm a firm believer in the idea that we should enjoy what we're doing. The quality of the work will be undeniably higher if you have a strong vested interest in, and a passion for doing it.

There are even more considerations when choosing your first book. As a first work, you shouldn't aim too high. Too many wannabe authors aim to create the next great piece of literary fiction as a first attempt. Invariably it fails miserably. If that happens, you'll be disappointed and disenchanted. Often your career ends right there in the tattered scraps of your broken dreams. We should aim high, certainly, but we have to temper our goals against realistic hopes. It's wise to leave all dreams of creating the next big thing to one side on your first attempt and instead focus on the overwhelmingly daunting task of just creating the very best novel you can possibly write. But how do you do that?

There's an old cliché about writing what you know. That is probably the best piece of advice an author will ever get. Every one of your characters is a version of you, every plot line is a thing that has either happened to you, or something that's been created inside your mind. Ultimately we can *only* write what we know. For a first–time writer, the advice holds even more value. It's best to take something that we do know about and build on that. You could take a mixture of your most interesting friends, put them into a unique situation and ask, 'what if?' Or you could take a genre you're excited by and send it off in a different direction that's uniquely yours.

Start with yourself, your own experiences, and build on that. As you gain confidence and ability, then you certainly should branch out and try different things, but as a beginner, it's best to start with

something within your comfort zone. If you work in a shop, write about life in a shop, throw in some interesting situations and characters and see where it goes. If you have super–powers then write about your heroic or villainous experiences.

Your stories need to draw on some emotion. A book worth reading has a point to make. If you're worth it as a writer then your reader will close your book, finished, and you'll have given them something to think about that will last longer than it took to complete it. Dig deep and find a way to express what it is about you that's worth saying. A book without a message is a hollow experience and is poison to its readers.

Let's Get Started
—Overcoming That First Hurdle—

Getting started on anything is usually the hardest part of the journey. Taking that step from planning, thinking and researching to actually making it work is difficult. At the beginning, it's best not to overthink it. Don't be too stuck into your plans; allow yourself as much flexibility as you can afford. The book in your mind when you start will never be the book you finish with. It will grow and evolve as you write and things will happen that surprise you. That's a good thing! When the characters start taking on a life of their own in your head, then they're becoming real to you. That means there's a much better chance they're going to feel real to your reader too.

The first line is what will make or break your book. It sells the idea to the audience. The whole first paragraph does the job of hooking the audience into the story you have to tell, but the first line leads to the next. Get it wrong and they won't keep reading.

Consequently, and counter–intuitively, you shouldn't really bother too much with it. Although that sounds like the rantings of a madman, it's important not to forget that your book, your story and your characters are going to change. The first line won't be the same by the time you finish as it was when you began. It won't have the same relevance or impact, and for that reason it's not worth spending too much time developing it at the beginning. You will return to it, edit it, reshape it and mould it into something almost unrecognisable by the end. What's most important is that you *do* start.

The first line has the unenviable task of opening the story, setting the tone, and it should leave an important question mark in the mind of the readers.

'It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times.'

This tells us a lot about what to expect in the upcoming story. It tells us the kind of language we can expect and the standard of the writing. It tells us we'll be dealing with the highs and lows of life, and the full range of the human experience. It also raises the question: what times are we talking about? We know very little of the scene and yet we find we want to know more. This is a great first line: it sells the story and makes the audience want to carry on reading. There are hundreds of others on the internet at the very tips of your fingers. Check them out and ponder how you can do better.

From the first line, you develop the first paragraph. Stick closely to the subject the first line addresses and expand the idea encapsulated in that sentence until you've captured the imagination of the audience completely. Your first paragraph will make them want to read the second, the second sells the page, and the page sells the chapter. Remember: at this very early stage you're writing for them: you're opening the door to your world and offering the reader a tantalising hint of the secrets locked behind it. You're inviting the reader into your own mind and welcoming them into your imagination. They have taken the first step and they want to carry on. You have to let them!

What would stop you reading? What kind of barrier might you encounter that would make you close it up and give up on it? Whatever the issue might be with you, it may be the same with others so consider that and keep such things out of your work, for now. Your first lines, paragraphs and pages should be an invitation to keep reading. The audience wants to be entertained, and you've got to promise them that they're going to find what they're looking for inside the pages of your work. Until you have the bulk of the work done, you yourself will not know what that is. Don't dwell too much on the opening lines at first.

Get the writing down, put in the work, and expect to go back and change a lot of it later. Don't worry about the bigger picture as you start out. Just make sure that you do begin. That's the important thing at this point, where most people stumble and the overwhelming majority fall down completely.

Research
—Knowing What You're Going On About—

When a movie is made there are many people involved in the process. There's a director crafting his vision and bringing together the skill and efforts of writers, actors, designers, technicians, cinematographers, sound engineers, effects teams and a myriad of others, all working together to create something. When a book is written there are only two people involved: you, and the person reading it.

Your job is to guide the reader in painting a mental picture. Just as you have drawn on your personal experience and imagination to create the scaffold of the work, the reader will pull details from their own mind. In this way, the story is unique to every reader: each character looks different; every backdrop is flavoured to their perception. No two people are alike, and no two experiences of reading your work will be the same either. With that in mind, you have a responsibility. It's up to you to write enough that your world comes alive in their minds. You have to have painted enough detail to make it seem real without smothering them and quenching the fires of their own imagination.

Some things work against you to break the spell. They can ruin the flow and drag the audience right out of your narrative. Sometimes making sure that doesn't happen is simply about keeping characters consistent: making sure they always work in a certain way and remain predictable to the audience, behaving realistically and without jarring the readers out of the story. In other words, it's about getting the details correct. We've all seen period dramas where a slight error could ruin a scene. Picture a pair of lovers, finally expressing their feelings to one another against a Victorian English backdrop when suddenly you notice an aircraft flying past, or a car hurtling by. Getting those details wrong reminds us that this is just fiction, a fantasy work of no great importance.

For us to really enjoy a story and immerse ourselves in it, we need to feel that it's real. As an author, it's your responsibility to let that happen.

Research is a key element of the writing process. Just as an actor might train for a role, hitting a gym to get the required physique and learning how to handle the equipment they'll be using onscreen, you must make sure you're able to correctly describe the processes happening in your story. This is another key reason why we should base a work on what we know best. Our descriptions will be richer, more engrossing and more vibrant, and our experience will lift the words off the page and help them to come alive in the minds of a reader.

However, some things can't be personally experienced. Stories often have elements of escapism, some genres more than others. Sometimes you have to draw on the descriptions of others; sometimes you have no choice but to imagine it for yourself. If you're talking about the use of something physically real, you need to speak with authority. The more that thing features in the story, the more proficient you must be in describing it. The key elements of your story require the most research and should be studied the most.

We live in an era where finding the answers to most questions has never been easier. If your characters use firearms then make sure you understand the use of them. Watch videos, read articles and get a feel not just for how the things work but how a person using them might react to them. Handguns, for instance, make an ear–splitting crack when they're discharged and usually buck much harder than you might expect. Most people have a strong and rational fear towards even handling them and are extremely hesitant to have one in their own hands. Some people love the feel of power, the rush when they wrap their fingers around one. You need a solid understanding of not just how those things work, but in how they work for your character. Different people use things very differently, so make sure that you have a solid understanding of how the machinery you're discussing relates to the character you've created.

If you are using things more mainstream and accessible than lethal, and highly regulated, weapons, then you really have no excuse for not finding out for yourself how they work and feel. If one of your characters rides a motorcycle, then you should do it too. That way you not only know how it works, but also how it feels, and you can express the emotional experience behind it. You could go to showrooms and sit on various machines, you could talk to riders, ask questions and find out from others how and why these things work, what they mean for the people who use and love them.

Finally, the characters in your book need to be researched too. What's it like to be them? I was working on a character once, a spy who was trained and conditioned to behave a certain way. To get under his skin, I adopted his physical exercise regime and went on training courses similar to the ones he would have had to experience. I wanted to find out how it felt to be him. Another character was a more wild departure from myself. To create her I spent time around people like her, listened to their stories and asked questions until I felt like I had an understanding of what it might be like to live their life.

Doing the right amount of research makes your work more vivid, vibrant and real. The effort you put in and the understanding you have will bring your story to life. It's the difference between the *Mona Lisa* and a stick figure drawn by a small child. Both might be the same, in real terms, in that they depict the appearance of a woman. One is the result of years of practice, of understanding and mastering techniques, of looking deeply into a subject until you finally grasp what it is to see through their own eyes. The other is just a crude representation, and the mark of someone beginning a journey, not of someone ready to take others along as a guide. Between the two, there is a world of difference.

Sadly for you, it doesn't end there.

Fitting in
—Knowing Your Place—

If you've got your novel in mind and it's starting to take shape inside your head, then there's another element you need to think through and prepare yourself for. Your research doesn't end with the details and minutiae of the world you're planning to paint in the imagination of your audience. You need to understand how your novel is going to fit into the market and who is going to read it.

The first stage in understanding your niche in the market is to work out what kind of story you're going to tell. Categorise it as best you can, work out the genres that best describe it, the themes and the tone of the tale you're trying to tell. While it's certainly true that the best work breaks some kinds of new ground, your work will still follow some formulas. It's important to know how to describe your story in the simplest terms possible. If you can't do that, the audience won't be able to find you either. Work out how best to break it down into terms the audience will be able to recognise and understand. Your work may cross boundaries, perhaps being best identified by multiple genres. That's perfectly fine. It's also important that you're aware of what it is you're hoping to create.

Once you're confident that you know how to categorise your work, you can begin the job of investigating what's gone before. Start using your favoured search engine to look into the best and worst of the types of other books that match your intended story. You should find the bestselling novels that seem similar to your work and read them for yourself, making personal notes. Pay attention to the key elements of the story, the way the characters work and how the plot fits together.

Once you've read the book for yourself, go online and look up reviews. See what critics thought of the book first. Critics tend to be quite biased and their opinions are often paid for. However they are the

best source of intelligent opinion and they're a great resource for you. Find out what they think of these books and see what they think worked well, as well as where there was room for improvement. They may give you ideas you'd never considered yourself. This can give you a very useful guide as to which parts of the story are the most important and where your energy needs to go. You must make a special effort to improve on the areas of other people's stories where they fell short.

Next, go to reviews by normal people who have bought and read the books. These are your actual intended audience and their opinions are gold. You'll see very highly rated reviews where the people who wrote them absolutely love the book. Look into why they loved it. Maybe they identified strongly with the protagonist, but whatever made this story come to life for them is an area you need to focus on for yourself. The low reviews are also very important. Some people deliver very poor reviews. Often these are just grumpy people with nothing better to do and being negative gives them a little sense of power. Take the worst of them with a pinch of salt. Likewise, if a review is very badly written, riddled with spelling mistakes and glaring grammatical errors, you should treat it warily.

From an author's perspective, the most valuable resources are the very well–written reviews from people who are judging the book fairly, but weren't too keen on it. Listen to their gripes; look at their arguments about what didn't work for them. This will give you a very good idea about where you can focus your efforts. The bestselling books in the category you're approaching may be fairly old. Things may have changed and the themes, characters and style might not have aged terribly well. In that case, make sure your own work addresses these shortcomings. The most common complaint against a novel may be that it follows a formula too closely, it fails to be imaginative or it fails to have new and interesting elements. People want to be entertained and

presented with something new and different. It's the most common area that stories fail to deliver on.

Eventually, you will need to take all of these things into account. Make a solid list of your own complaints, where you thought the stories were weakest and where they worked best. Make a second list of what the critics thought and do the same thing for the audience reviews. Once you've done that, you'll likely notice that the lists cross over a lot and many of the complaints, or the strongest areas, are shared by several lists. This will give you a scaffold to start building your story around. Focus on fulfilling the audience's expectations of what they want from your work, while addressing complaints about where other novels of a similar kind fall short. Don't be afraid to go further. Look at reviews from other good, and failed, novels and see if the praises and complaints match your expectations. You'll very likely find they do and you'll start building a very good idea of what your audience wants—and what it doesn't.

Another thing you need to have is a very good idea about who your audience is. This is much harder to investigate and research. You can certainly consider who your story is likely to appeal to and make sure you take that into account. A romance novel, for instance is statistically more likely to be read by a middle–aged female audience. Consequently, your protagonist is likely to be a woman of roughly that age, and she will probably be adjusted to fit the fantasy of who the audience wishes they were. She may be a woman who has focused on her career and is now successful, but alone.

A science–fiction story would generally appeal more to a male audience and would usually have a masculine and idealised male role model in the lead. The problem with this is that there generally isn't an ideal target audience that perfectly fits. Sci–fi appeals more to a male audience but a large portion of the audience is still female. The age

range of people who read these stories is also quite wide so adjusting to the ideal demographic is accordingly very difficult.

The simple, and undeniable, fact is that there's no such thing as an *ideal reader*. People of both genders, of all ages, races, religions and backgrounds read books. Books aren't meant to exclude anyone, they're meant to be a way to share our beliefs and experiences and so they are more varied than the narrow categories that society deems we put ourselves into with superficial labels. With this in mind, the best way to focus on your target audience is to start with yourself. You are the ideal person to read your work. You're so fascinated and involved in this kind of book that you've set out to write your own one. You are the person you should be aiming your work at, and while it's almost a cliché to say that you should write the books you would want to read, the idea does hold true.

So aim the book at yourself and the people that like the things that you like: the men and the woman, the rich and the poor, White, Black and Asian readers who are just like you and you know would appreciate this story. Those who will enjoy it, will enjoy it on the terms you wrote it.

Sometimes you have to know where your work fits in, but it's just as important to give it an identity of its own so stands out from the crowd.

Genre
—Showing Some Class—

What is a genre? The word itself entered the mighty English language from the far less mighty French, which is barely considered a language at all. It means 'sort' or 'kind' and talks about the socially agreed–upon mode of a thing, if those things were to be organised by type. In many ways, the genre is a nuisance to the writer but a benefit to the reader. It explains to your reader what the story will be about and will help them know what to expect from the work. To the author it might almost feel like a cage you are trapped in.

It's not unusual to cross from one to another and there really are no hard and fast rules to this. You should not see it as a restriction of what your work will be, but instead see it as a guide to help others know, in simple terms, what to expect when they open your book. In fact, the best stories are often the ones that defy the normal boundaries of social convention. Few stories will be set in a single genre; almost all will have elements of several. Even the classification of a thing that's designed to help with classification is often confusing and will attempt to defy its own rules. New genres pop up all the time and old ones shift around in meaning. Things change frequently and the whole thing is very dependent on the way people view them. No two people are quite the same.

Good writers have to deal with all this, and that might be part of why there are so very few of them. For instance, comic–book movies are extremely popular. In no literal sense is the movie screen littered with hand–drawn images. It's an evolution of the 'superhero' genre which used to focus on humans with unusual abilities. It's now widened to include unrealistic adventures and has morphed to constantly expand itself. However, the two terms, superhero and comic–book are largely

interchangeable. Comics themselves can be further divided into other popular genres such as drama, comedy and horror.

So it's really just a general guide. It's not a restriction on you in any way and shouldn't be seen as such.

Some of the more popular genres are detailed here:

Comedy—The comedy genre is a very popular one across all mediums. Everyone loves to laugh, and books, films and plays of this type try to achieve that result. For the most part, they're intended for entertainment and usually little else. Comedy is generally one of the more difficult things to write. Making people laugh isn't as easy as you might think and is a skill that is hard to develop. I have written comedies and can promise you that it's exhausting. These stories might include normal people in ridiculous situations, ridiculous or unusual characters in relatively normal circumstances, or they might find some other way to defy expectation in a humorous way.

This can be further broken down into different forms of comedy:

- **Satire** pokes fun at real situations. This is the province of stories that take the ridiculousness of the world we live in and feed it back to us in fictionalised and exaggerated forms.
- **Parody** attempts to take a more serious story but views it with a more sarcastic eye.
- **Black comedy** is the use of dark humour, finding amusement in things of a grim nature. This is where we find things to laugh about in death and murder or other taboo subjects that aren't usually considered at all funny.

There are many others. Comedy and humour is a very wide and adaptable classification and has always been popular. Most writing has

some kind of humorous element to it, even if it's employed sparingly just to break a moment of tension.

Drama—Dramas are more involving and tell a story that has some gravitas, most typically human interaction. They are tales of differences between people and are usually focused on a serious subject that they deal with respectfully. It's usually seen as the opposite of comedy, and it is therefore much easier to write. Of course, it can be further broken down and includes a wide selection of other subsets. Some popular types are daytime drama (often known as kitchen–sink drama), crime drama or legal drama. But, of course, anything with a serious plot that's driven by character and human interaction could be slotted into this genre somewhere.

Horror—Just as much as people like to be entertained and amused, they also like to be scared. This genre brings the reminder to the reader that the world can be an unsettling place. It attempts to frighten the reader by pitching relatable characters against overwhelming odds. There will often be a supernatural element such as ghosts, demons or monsters but, just as often, they will have an antagonist who's a crazy knife–wielding slasher. This is a dense genre and is easier than most to write in. Fear is a powerful emotion and is not as difficult to evoke in a reader as some others. The rules are relatively simple: you need a character, or set of characters that the target reader will empathise with, and something terrifying for them to come up against.

Fantasy—A fantasy is a dream. We know it's a flight of fancy and that the odds of it coming true are very much against us. On the plus side, this means that you are free to create anything you want and the scope is

virtually unlimited. Conversely, your imagination must be equal to the scope of the genre.

A lot of fantasy stories fail by not pushing the limits. This is the realm of dragons and monsters, magic and myth. For this to work you have to bring a little more interest to your imagined world than rehashing the most common tropes to fit your story. *Lord of the Rings* is probably the most well–known and successful. That story was told about humans from the perspective of someone smaller, looking up with almost child–like innocence. It twisted legends and myths and created a world with races that fitted together, tribes and clans that seemed steeped in their individuality.

It's not enough to create a fantasy word where a dragon comes to the castle looking for the princess. We've seen that; it's been done before. You need to go a little further and dig a little deeper. Challenge the reader with things they've never seen, propose concepts that they've never imagined before. *Harry Potter* is an example of this, where a young boy is taken into a world of magic and we follow along for the ride. As the author of this story has been in court ever since, defending herself against multiple charges of plagiarism, it also illustrates the importance of having fresh and creative ideas of your own.

Adventure—Adventure stories are higher in action and usually pitch the protagonist against overwhelming odds or put them on a difficult journey. They are less about the actions of a physical antagonist and more about the situation which causes problems for our main character. These are stories like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Maze Runner*.

Action—Action, by definition, is less of a literary genre and more likely to be seen on screen. It would be the kind of film where a muscular gentleman struggles to read a script while punching people for reasons so tenuous that it's really best not to think about them. It's not unheard

of to get good stories written in this fashion, where the focus is on the physical, rather than character or plot development but it's rare.

Romance—Another slightly less *literary* genre would be the area of romance. This is where boy meets girl, falls in love and then… well… that's pretty much it. A common variation on this is that girl meets boy. As women are generally the target reader for such writing, they tend often to have a female protagonist. In modern times it could be anything, such as a one–legged lesbian of colour meeting a lamp post, but the underlying elements hold largely true. It's about two people forming a connection, sparked from an initial meeting, and somehow succeeding in forming a relationship despite arbitrary obstacles that would be easily overcome by anybody else, throwing a series of spanners in the works. In these stories, more than any other, the antagonist is less likely to be villainous and is not unlikely to be the actual focus of the main character's romantic desires.

Western—Westerns are really just a historical drama that became so mainstreamed that it ended up establishing itself as a genre in its own right, rather like how comic–book movies have emerged from action films. These are set in America where cowboys once roamed the plains, shooting the indigenous population for reasons that are never adequately explained. Traditionally these stories have been fairly upbeat tales of heroism in a lawless place but they have darkened in more recent times to show a grittier, uglier side of how life during these times might have been.

Science–Fiction—Sci–fi has been called 'the genre of ideas.' It's any story that takes realistic scientific themes and uses them as a story element. Frequently they are set in the far future, often on spacecraft and

usually exploring the frontiers of the world in some way. Science–fiction can be almost indistinguishable from fantasy in many ways, except with a futuristic setting, or a mechanism where the unbelievable element is born from something that has been constructed. Science–fiction stories could easily be set in the past, with a focus on a technology of the time, or a future where all technology has been wiped out. This genre, more than any other, is most often subject to interpretation.

It's widely suggested that the term 'Science–Fiction' should only be applied to 'hard' science–fiction stories, those that have solid, plausible research and reasoning behind their narratives. These are stories like *Jurassic Park* that take the science of a given topic and build a tale around it, using grounded and scientifically sound reasoning. These stories *could* happen. The term 'sci–fi' is reserved now for soft fiction. These are stories where the setting might be futuristic but the technology and research take a secondary place to the story itself. These are often character–driven and might tell the story of politics or social changes through the perspective of a different world than we know. Stories like *Star Wars* do this, likewise *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner*, *Hunger Games* and a host of others. These are often looked down on, but if done well, they are still a means to tell an excellent story. *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*, for instance, do an excellent job of looking to the future and offering a warning about humanity losing its way, without dwelling on the inner workings of it.

It is certainly true that most writing of this type doesn't achieve this level; most of these stories don't meet the standard of the literary classics and simply use futuristic settings as a backdrop for recycled or lazy story–writing. This has caused a great deal of division between fans of this genre and there are often heated disagreements about it and about how stories should be labelled. In general terms, it seems to be accepted that good quality stories are referred to as 'Science–Fiction' while the pulp tales are referred to as 'Sci–fi'.

Within this category is a dizzying array of subsets. One of the more popular at the moment is Dystopian, for example. In these stories, the setting is after a disaster of some kind where the world has been reduced to a version we struggle to recognise. These are what–if stories that might be set after a terrible war, a plague or some other natural conclusion to our continued abuse of our home planet.

Of course, this is not meant to be an exhaustive list and it would probably be possible to write an entire book on the idea of classifications of types of stories. As an author, it's not your job to write things that are easily classified. It's your job to imagine something greater. We don't remember the writers who added their voice to the hordes of pulp fiction crime thrillers or the curators of the endless vampire stories; we barely remember any romance authors at all beyond the Brontës.

We remember Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Mary Shelley and George Orwell. We remember the authors who defined their genre, who changed the world, who added something new and fresh. Writing, more than any other form of expression, is an art. Yes, we can see paintings; yes, we can hear music, but writing is the art of transferring pure thought, unlimited ideas from one mind to the many. It's the most human expression of art there is, and the author, the writing, and the reader deserve to be treated with according respect.

Plots Part 1: the Story
—Losing the Plot—

What is a plot?

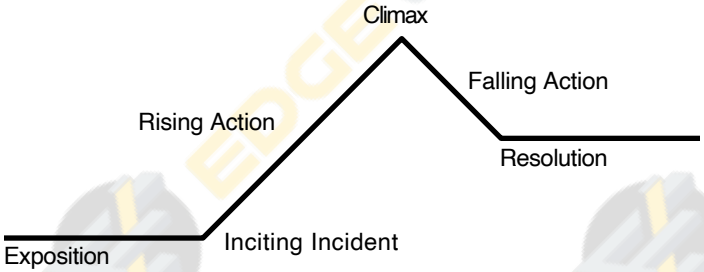
The plot is the backbone of your story; it's the tale you're telling. If you get it wrong, you're cheating your reader and selling them a hollow, empty illusion. The ending should feel like a reward, like a final moment of respect to the reader. Getting to the end of a well–structured novel should be slightly disappointing, since you never want it to end, but it should deliver on all the hopes that you have built up along the way. Understanding what the needs of your story are ensures you've got the right characters in order to tell it. Getting the plot straight in your head makes everything else make sense. It's the biggest, most important part of your story and if you get it wrong, nothing else will work.

I once read a book: a huge, hulking behemoth of a dark fantasy novel by a writer I had a lot of respect for. It was a good read with solid, interesting characters and twists and turns that kept it engaging. I was travelling while I was reading it but it was good enough that I looked forward to spending a few hours daily immersing myself in its pages. It was a long story, and towards the end it began to wander somewhat. A little too much of it was a little too familiar, whole swathes of ideas borrowed wholesale from his other works. But I could forgive that because the experience was still worthwhile and it was different enough to be engaging. Then I got to the end and the whole thing unravelled. The ending was almost exactly the same as the ending to one of his other works and wasn't a satisfying close at all. I had invested my time, money and energy into that novel and by the end, I felt like all three had been wasted. Without a satisfying conclusion, the plot was just a series of barely related things that happened. It just didn't work.

Getting that wrong meant I never picked up another book by the same author. I just gave up on him and carried on with my life. I don't

even know what happened to the book; I never waste them but I think I gave it to someone on the understanding I wasn't recommending it and forgot all about it. A well–known and celebrated author might be able to get away with it but we can't. This is the death of your career if you can't manage to write a story that makes your reader want to read another one. They won't recommend you, they won't look for more and they won't care. And you must never forget that there are countless other choices for them to make. Having the opportunity to get someone to read your book is a privilege and one you must never sell the reader short on.

So what is a plot? The plot is your storyline; it's the journey your characters undertake along the way to the finale. Freytag's Pyramid is a visual representation of the outline of a plot, and it holds true for all stories.



It begins with 'exposition' or 'introduction.' At this stage, we're showing the reader the world; we're leading them into the narrative and inviting them to meet the characters. We're explaining who, what and where everything is happening. All stories do that, they lead us in and show us the town, country or setting of the tale. They usually introduce the protagonist first, but not always, and they give some ideas of who they are and what challenges they're going to face. It lets us feel like we are familiar with the situation so that when things start to happen, we care about the outcome.

Next is 'rising action.' Rising action leads to the top of the pyramid. At the top, we find the climax. The climax is the bit where the story makes sense, or as it's often described, the moment of highest tension. It's the moment where all the threads of your plot come together. We reveal the point, our character triumphs, or the truth is revealed. It's the biggest, boldest stroke and the thing that everything else has always led us to. When we reach the climax, I want my reader to smile; I want them to rub their chin and shake their head. I want them to realise that, *of course* that was happening. I want a surprise for them to discover, not a cheat, or something horribly out of character but a reveal of something that was only suggested before. I want them to see that the machinery, the cogs and wheel of the engine of my plot were turning towards creating this. It's like stepping back from a painting and finally seeing the whole thing.

Rising action is everything that has led us there. From the introduction to the climax there must be challenges for our protagonist. They must overcome obstacles, they must find out what kind of a person they really are. A good tale takes the character on a journey, and the reader right along with them.

Plots should pitch the character against difficulties. Usually they will face adversaries who might oppose them but sometimes they might face a dire situation. As an example, they might be marooned on a desert island and have only to survive, but the odds stacked against them provide all the drama we need to stay invested. Mostly we might have some kind of villain, someone who provides opposition to the main character. They might work against one another until the climax when the situation finally comes to a head and the whole thing clashes together.

Falling action leads us to the resolution. Freytag calls it the 'catastrophe' and warns that the main character should not be spared, but more often this is adjusted to a *denouement*, or resolution. The

resolution is where we leave the situation. It's the close of our story and it's where we finally walk away from our characters. If you've done your job, it's the end of that story but not the lives of the people in it. In the mind of the reader they know what happens next, they have ideas about who goes on to do what, what might become of them and where the story of their future lives might ultimately lead. The reader should have closure, unless, that is, you're planning a sequel.

Fairy stories traditionally end with the words, 'and they all lived happily ever after.' You don't need to nail your story down that hard, of course. You need to leave the reader wanting a little more, and making up their own mind about what happens to your characters next. Your resolution is you wrapping things up. It's sweeping up after the party, just as the sun rises on a new day. The plot might be over now but you still can't short–change the readers. You should strongly hint at how things have ended, especially for your main characters. Have new friendships been formed, have situations been overcome? How has that impacted their lives, where do they find themselves now and what does their future hold?

This is the part of your story that contains the last line, and it's every bit as important as the first. Falling action is everything that gets us from the climax, back down to the last page of your book. When we see the pyramid the two lines appear equal but, in reality, they aren't. The characters go on a grand journey through the rising action and they tumble quickly down to the end. The falling action is everything that happens between the climax and conclusion and there shouldn't be too much of it. You've made your point, you've led your reader to the big finale and then you take them to the last moment as directly as possible. But there's a lot more to writing plots than just that.

William Shakespeare himself said that the stories come down to seven elements of plot. Most stories will have elements of these three:

1) A stranger comes to town.
2) A man learns something new.
3) A man sticks to his morals.

The first, **a stranger comes to town,** describes someone in a situation about which they are unfamiliar. Drama and interest come from them learning to adapt. We can view the tale in two different ways. Most commonly, the character would be a reflection of ourselves, a normal person from a conventional place that seems mostly normal to us. We put that person into a world that's strange or weird. In that way, we lead the reader into a place that's outside of their own experience. This works with science–fiction. In *Star Wars* we take the young farm boy Luke Skywalker who lives on an alien planet but is really just very ordinary. We relate to him because he's just a bored teenager and we understand how he feels. In the course of the narrative he's taken into a galaxy he doesn't fully understand and we're taken along for the ride.

It's the same with *Harry Potter* where a normal young boy is suddenly propelled into a world of magic and mythology which unfolds for us as the reader. The same is true in a host of crime stories where the darker, hidden side of life is revealed to us through the eyes of a character who has never seen it before. But the unprepared stranger story works just as well in reverse. We can take a unique, oddly diverse or amusing character and put them into our own world, just to see what might happen. This is a common comedy mechanism where we can draw humour at the inability of a person to adjust to things that are simple and routine to us.

A man learns something new is another very common idea for a plot. Coming–of–age stories, detective dramas and romances are full of just this sort of thing. It's where we take our main character and we send them on a journey where they grow and come out the other end as a better, or at least different, person. If we were to take our previous

example, *Star Wars*, this is especially true. If we take the original trilogy as a whole then the journey of the protagonist sees him go from a fairly average young man to one who has undertaken a journey to become something better.

These stories are about the discovery; they're about opening our eyes and revealing something important, usually resulting in our character being improved by the experience. In these stories, we usually end up with our protagonist being a quite different person by the end. This is the plot we use if we're selling an idea to the reader. We take them from where they are, to where we want them to be, facing the trials along the way that we want them to think about. This is the plot that we use if we're trying to teach them or show others our point of view. If we're trying to explain who we are, or what it's like, we would generally use this as a starting point.

The final common plot is **a man sticks to his morals**. This is another incredibly common form where our main character must face trials that challenge their morals but they hold fast, against the odds. This morality tale takes the form of countless famous works of fiction.

From tales as crude as *Batman*, where a disturbed and damaged individual takes on criminals against horrendous odds, always guided by his moral compass, right through to much more sophisticated tales, this is the one we demonstrate the strength to do what we know is right.

Most stories take the form of a blend of all three. However, this gives us a place to start, a thing to build our own unique plot up from. Along the way we can use our unique perspectives and experiences to create novel situations and outcomes for our characters to struggle through. The plot is the journey and each one must be different. It has to lead somewhere and take your reader to a place that leaves them satisfied with what's happened.

A good story doesn't have to have a happy ending, but it has to leave the reader feeling like the experience was worth it. If you drove

through a whole country in a car and it broke down right at the end, even if the rest of the ride was perfectly smooth, what would be the defining part? The fact that it failed, the fact it never quite reached its target, and it's the same with a plot. It has to get where it's going, and it needs planning, thought and care to do that.

Plots Part 2: Sub–Plots
—Different Routes to the Same Ending—

It's often not enough to have just one plot. Most novels and stories have multiple layers of sub–plots working together to achieve their end results; those end results hopefully being a masterfully structured story and a publishing deal.

A sub–plot is a plot of lower importance than the main storyline. It will be a second story moving along in the background. In most tales that are revolving around more than one character there will be several sub–plots to take into account. Each character will have their own journey, and if they develop then you'll need to show some of that to the reader. This means their journey will need plotting and planning and putting on the page.

In the 60s, it was common in television dramas not to have well–developed sub–plots. If you were to look at one of the original *Star Trek* episodes you'll see only the primary story being played out. There will be a situation, it will pose a threat or ask a question and the main characters will go on a journey to resolve the situation. That was all there was to it. It was rare to have anything else happen that ran alongside the main action, or diverted attention away from it. It was, of course, a product consistent with the realities of its time, that being that the lifetime of an episode was approximately its running time. It would (as far as anybody knew) be broadcast once, possibly twice with reruns, and then never be seen by human eyes again. Once you add in budgetary constraints, it's frankly surprising that they even bothered improving things. They were certainly not going to push the envelope in inventive storytelling under those conditions and they knew it.

What's interesting is that they tried as hard as they did and the boundaries were indeed gently pushed back. This is the difference between an expression of artistry that stems from the burning need to

tell important stories, and churning out something for mass consumption. The realities of syndication and constant re–runs had an impact on the expectation of quality. The later invention, and subsequent normalisation, of the home VCR in the early 80s changed everything. It now meant that TV shows could be recorded and watched at a later time, as many times as the viewer liked. People would pore over the episodes looking for details that had never been seen before, looking for hidden themes, or trying to squeeze every last drop of value from the show.

The writing became more sophisticated in response; it became increasingly common to have multiple parallel plots that worked together. This became the new normal in daytime dramas, stories that focus on the details of various characters' lives as they interact with one another. This further developed into the idea that these multiple story threads can be tied together. Of course, while this was new to the world of television drama, it was already well established in the wider world of storytelling.

The main plot will usually follow the actions of the protagonist. We follow their journey and see how they develop into their world. To establish this as the main plot we allow it the lion's share of story time. Most stories begin with the actions of the protagonist and their personal journey forms the backbone of the narrative. Sometimes we might prefer to begin with the antagonist, and that establishes the situation our main character will be dealing with. Whichever way it's presented, it sets up the main story so we can be clear what tale we're really being told.

In a well–written story the sub–plots won't be random. We don't want to tell a story about a group of friends who each go off and do something different. That would be a cluttered jumble of disconnected nonsense and not a story in the true sense at all. Instead, the sub–plots will generally be layered. Each character of lesser importance will have a plot of their own, a story to tell which is increasingly given less space to develop. So, if we've done our job correctly, the story will have a

main plot with a series of lesser plots all heading in the same direction and all winding up in the same place.

The plots can come together in many different ways:

Putting the pieces together

If you're working on a crime drama, you may be following the journey of a detective or someone else attempting to solve a puzzle. You might also follow the villain and the two plots will converge when the situation is finally resolved, usually with the detective catching her man. This is an example of a main plot and a sub–plot ending with the stories tying together, in terms of the actual actions of our characters. The two will actually meet and their journeys literally intersect at the finale of the tale.

Linked by theme

The plots can also be linked thematically. We might have several characters experiencing a similar event and dealing with it in their own way. In this case, the actions don't converge at all but their stories are connected through a common theme. While totally different things might be occurring, one thing is true of all of them: they are driven by the same force. For instance, we might be creating a romance novel following three friends all looking for love and going about it in totally different ways. In this case the physical actions of our characters aren't necessarily linked, but the journeys they undertake are of the same type. The fact that the subplots are connected to one another should make sense and be obvious to the reader.

Foreshadowing the main plot

If we want to plot even more skilfully then a subplot can foreshadow the main plot. We might be writing a dramatic tale where a subplot shows

the events about to unfold in the main story. If we do this then we might show the events using the theme or, more literally, showing a similar set of events playing out, hinting at what to expect later on. This is commonly used in police procedurals and other crime dramas. We are shown the protagonist's professional life and their personal life, in and out the office, so to speak, and the things happening in their personal life are an abstract reflection of the case they're working. At a key moment, the conflict in their personal life provides a major clue to the missing piece of the puzzle. When it's done well, you don't even notice the writers are doing this, but at a subconscious level it gives the story a more cohesive feel.

It helps to think of this as a map, going from one town to another. On the map there is a main road: an almost straight, long and fast expressway that leads directly there with the minimum of fuss. It's quick and it's easy but it's not fun, and it won't be very interesting. The map might also have other routes, perhaps through cities where there's more to see, more places to stop with more choices as to where to break for lunch. There are also several lanes cutting through areas with great scenery and while these are more fun, they take you a long way out of your way.

When you're planning your journey you have to decide which is the best route, when to head off and see some more of the world, when to meet new people and when to travel fast and efficiently. You might come up with a path that takes all of this into account, weaving through the different directions that you could undertake. Your story should work a lot like this, threading together a journey that's interesting and fun, and all of the subplots eventually end up converging in the same destination.

Now imagine different characters, all heading out from the same place and all ending up in the same location. Each one takes a different journey and you are free to choose which one to watch, switching back and forth in order to tell the most interesting, educational or engaging

tale. That's largely how a story works, twisting through different layers of the same story along roads that all end up meeting at the climax.

Plots Part 3: Tangents —the Twisted Things We Do—

The plot of your novel should not follow a straight road from one event to the next. As counter–intuitive as it might seem, your story will need to wind a slightly illogical path to get from the introduction to the conclusion. Plots need to take us in unexpected directions. They need to satisfy the reader but also surprise them. A plot takes diversions in order to help establish who the characters are, to show us what they might be able to do or to help us understand aspects of the story. Sometimes a story will need to shift direction purely to stay entertaining. A plot is never a linear thing, and nor should it be.

Think of it like this: a person leaves their house to go to the beach. The story reaches its climax as their car arrives at the destination and they park up. The conclusion of the story sees our protagonist dipping his toes in the ocean. You would hopefully never see a plot that went the shortest, simplest route, at least not outside of a story about sparkling vampires. For the sake of an example let's explore two different variations of the way an author could get our main character to the finale.

1) *The protagonist wakes up and decides he will go to the beach.*
2) *He gets in his car and drives to the beach. His car is well–maintained and nothing goes wrong along the way. The journey is uneventful.*
3) *He arrives at the beach and parks his car without incident.*
4) *He sits on the beach and reads a Robert Ludlum novel while listening to Boney M.*

This might be an accurate, realistic portrayal of a very ordinary man wasting a little time at a weekend but it would be horrendous to read.

This might stretch out for thousands of words, each more dull and uninteresting than the last.

Let's look at a more common way the same plot might unfold. The protagonist wakes up and decides he will go to the beach to read his new Duncan Falconer novel.

1) *He goes out to his car and hears Boney M. coming from the speakers. He'd left the stereo on all night, and now the battery is too flat for the car to start.*
2) *Instead he catches a bus from the nearby terminal. As it pulls away, it's hijacked by armed men in masks who demand they be taken to the airport.*
3) *Realising the airport is in the opposite direction to the beach, he surreptitiously contacts the police and alerts them to what is happening.*
4) *One of the men hears this, and approaches the protagonist. He is marched to the rear of the bus and held there at gunpoint.*
5) *While the armed men's attention is on the protagonist, they don't notice that the police have set up a roadblock. A shootout results, leaving the armed men and several passengers dead.*
6) *The protagonist is able to slip out the rear door unnoticed by police, but he's even further from the beach now than when he started.*
7) *He looks for a taxi, but instead finds a shot up police car with a dead driver in it which still has its engine running. Nobody is watching, so he pulls the driver out and commandeers the vehicle.*
8) *He hears of this crime over the radio, and knows the police will soon be on his tail.*
9) *He gives them false information over the radio, that the suspect is heading to the bus terminal. This shakes them off, and with the*

aid of the sirens he's able to get to the beach without further incident.

10) *He sits on the beach, and realises that he left his new Duncan Falconer novel at home. But he felt certain that the excitement of the story would pale in comparison to his own life.*

The second version is littered with problems for the protagonist to overcome. It helps establish an understanding of who he is. Each step forward seemingly takes him further from his goal, and each solved problem sets him up for the next. Though he never quite achieves his initial goal, in the end, he is content to accept a slightly different outcome because the adventure has caused him to grow as a person and his outlook on things has changed accordingly. It might not be as realistic, but it's a lot more interesting. Of the two versions, which story would you prefer to read?

A lot of the plot development relies on going on tangents, using misdirection and even red herrings. It's important to use these mechanisms intelligently so that they are all used to build the story and establish plot logic. If you fail to do that, you will have a terrible mess that ends up looking like the final season of a certain television series involving dragons. Taking the story off on a wild tangent is what the reader expects. You're essentially driving the story and they're along for the ride. They're expecting you to show them the scenery and flesh out your characters with experiences that make them come to life. To do that, we need to challenge our characters and give them problems to overcome.

The reader wants to go off in new, unexpected directions, so long as such things make some sense. In some stories, the characters go off on a side quest, an unrelated mission that doesn't appear to add anything to the plot whatsoever. That's to be avoided. It is fine for the character to get drawn into new situations with new characters but it must ultimately

help to build our story. At the very least, a wild offshoot in the path of the narrative must help to change our character, or increase our understanding of the world in some way.

Horror novels do this frequently. Usually in setting up a victim they work hard to flesh out their back–story so that the reader cares about what happens to them. So long as there's a reasonable logic to it, then it usually works well enough for the reader to accept it. The difference is like going to a new town where you only have a few days to spend. You can wander around, hoping to see all there is for the place to offer or you can get an experienced person to show you around. In this case, you are the experienced person and the offshoots, tangents and wild lateral shifts must ultimately help to lead somewhere.

A well–used tool is the misdirect. In a literary sense, we might show something in a way that helps to disguise its importance. In our example above, the protagonist's choice of reading became a key plot element, but it was difficult to spot. It appeared an entirely incidental detail. In fact, it had more significance than we expected. We often see misdirects where a twist is coming, or we're seeing a mystery that needs to be solved. We might show a character to appear much darker than they really are in order to lead the reader's expectations in the wrong direction.

Again, this needs to be done with skill and it needs to add to the overall development of the larger story. It's not enough to have the protagonist say that this looks a certain way, only to reveal it wasn't that way at all. We must use it to take attention away from a key detail so that the reveal has a greater surprise value when it's eventually made. This is never done more bluntly that with the red herring. This term refers to the deliberate inclusion of a plot device that is not at all what it appears to be. In detective dramas, this is the deliberate inference that someone, or something, is to blame for the puzzle that needs solving.

If a red herring is handled badly it will be a villainous monster which turns out to be nothing like what we expected it to be. All it serves to do is lengthen the story. In real life there might be several red herrings along the way, several situations that seem to be the solution, but aren't. But reality is a terrible storyteller. In a story, this needs to be handled with more skill. A red herring can be added but it must be used to divert the action to where we need it to be. It can't just be used to confuse the situation; it must be used as a signpost along the way. A well–plotted red herring should best be used to confuse the reader, not to confuse the characters. It should be a way of involving the reader in the puzzle, to involve them in the overall process as the characters struggle to work out the baffling conundrum they are facing.

For instance, if a detective encounters a situation that looks similar to the one they are investigating, he might look deeper into it. We might suggest we're on the right track and then discover we aren't by revealing another crime has taken place which means it can't be perpetrated by the person we thought it was. We would do this to demonstrate the frustration our detective is facing, to join him through the difficulties and challenges of his work. We might also do it to show their competence, their bravery or intelligence or to reveal to the reader the horrors that occur in the world we're showing them.

It should never be used to drag out the plot or to needlessly confuse the reader. The reader will see right through it, and they'll see through you as well. A great story will take the reader along on many twists and turns but, as we look back, it really was just one track, all along.

Themes
—What's the Point?—

The theme is as important as the plot. It's the blood pumping through the veins of your story. Without it, all you have is a collection of characters doing a series of things. Something needs to connect it all so that it goes from a report of events to a cohesive story. If the plot is what happens, then the theme is why those things happened at all.

Most stories share some pretty major themes. More common ones would be love, family, sacrifice, honour or morality. Those things can certainly be at the heart of any story and almost any tale will touch upon those at times, but to produce something worth reading you certainly need to have a better idea of what's driving your work. Your personal choice of theme will be something that resonates with you, something inside yourself that you want, or need, to express to others. It should be something that interests you, something that drives your own passions and captures your interests. Finding that will help to keep you going when the project begins to flag, when you're having a bad day, or when the dreaded writer's block comes to pay you a visit. Look at a theme that speaks to you and tell a story about it that explains to the reader how you feel about it.

Some of the more common themes are:

Coming of age—coming of age stories take a young, not fully developed character on a difficult journey that hardens them into a more mature, more rounded person. Tales such as *Great Expectations* do this, where Charles Dickens takes his protagonist through various challenges where he discovers more about himself. By the end, he's a fully realised man. It doesn't necessarily have to be a young person. We could take anyone on a journey of self–discovery and bring them out at the other

end as a better person. *The Bucket List* shows this journey in a man at the end of his life, for example.

Crime doesn't pay—These types of stories usually pitch the law against a criminal element. This is such a common subject that it doesn't need much explanation. We've all read stories where greed motivates someone to go against what's right and that character pays the price for it in the end. This is every detective story, every crime caper and every police drama. It's so common, and so widespread that we often end up rooting for the bad guys, just for the sake of variety.

Our own worst enemy—This is where a character will have a fatal flaw, some terrible part of their personality that sets them on a path of self–destruction. It will usually tell the tale of a person who has to overcome personal demons or suffer the consequences of it. Stories like this are most often centred on the protagonist and succeed or fail on the strength of the author's ability to create a believable and relatable character. The reader needs to understand and sympathise with them and the drama comes from rooting for them against all the odds.

Technology—Anything with a depiction of technology could be considered science–fiction but there's a wider set of themes at play than just imagining the future. Science–fiction tends to take the idea of technology to its logical conclusion, pushing the envelope beyond what we currently know. Modern technology is complex and creates many human challenges today, more than enough to form the basis of a wide variety of stories.

Overcoming the odds—Stories of a person beating every challenge and triumphing in the end are quite common. We love to hear of someone

taking on the world and succeeding, no matter what. This intersects with the idea of following your dreams, another mainstay of literature. For this to work the challenge must be imposing and the character must overcome it in a way that seems realistic, often as a series of smaller, more manageable steps. For instance, the movie *Rocky* might not have been successful if the protagonist had learned to box by watching YouTube videos while eating pizza in his mother's basement. Similarly, if his dream was to clean windows then the reader might not have been so interested in his journey.

Death—This is one of the most common themes of all. Mortality is something that occupies us daily. Death isn't usually a main or central theme but is widely used as part of a narrative. Stories like Hamlet have death at the heart of the story, it drives the action, while more recently, *The Fault in our Stars* shows young characters facing the looming reality of their own ends. Many stories touch on death, since it is such a huge part of our lives but it isn't often at the very heart of the story; instead, it is often combined with other themes.

Love conquers all—At the heart of every romantic story is the idea that all you really need is love. Enough people believe in it to have made it one the bestselling forms of paperback stories. In classic literature we have great tales of how humans spiritually interconnect with one another, and in modern times we have *50 Shades of Grey* and *Twilight*. What more can I say?

Most stories have a strong central theme, and that's what the subject you're focusing the story on is. It's what drives the story forwards and what everything focuses on. It can be as specific or as complex as you choose. Think of it as the inspiration behind your writing, the idea that

made you want to create it in the first place. Behind that will be a swarming mass of other, minor themes, just as your protagonist will have a host of additional characters helping them along. They will be supporting the main theme, adding to it, or sometimes just along for the ride. What you do with them is largely up to you. What's really important is that you have an idea of what is driving the story.

It's like the difference between doing what you know you should, and doing what you want. We all have intellectual motivations for doing a host of things: your intellectual self gets you to work every morning, reasoning that you need money. You make plans, save a little and consider promotions—that's the part of you that will create your plot. The part of you that gets to work every day because you need to feed your family, because you love them—that's the part of you where the theme comes from. That's how this works: your brain creates the plot, and your heart gives you the theme. Together, they make a story.

Setting
—an Important Stage—

The place where the action happens is called the setting. It seems so simple and obvious that many authors overlook its importance. The setting is as crucial to your reader as it is to your characters and should almost be thought of as a character in its own right. The setting explains to the reader a lot about what the nature of this story is. Just like if they see a character dressed in a police uniform, which tells them a lot about what to expect from them. In the same way, the setting will give a certain impression. As the author, you can use your setting to give the reader a foundation on which to begin building your narrative. It is the stage upon which the story is set.

You can be specific, telling the reader that your story is set in a known location, such as London or New York. Certainly, if you're writing something that requires historical accuracy then you'll have to do exactly that. If you choose to use a known place then it's important that you understand what that will imply to the reader. Living in the city, and country, that you do, you'll have a deeper, wider insight into it but others, the general readers, might not. If you simply state the name of the place, what will that leave your reader imagining? If your story seeks to impart your deeper insight then you might feel compelled to share the name of your town. Your narrative might be designed to share an element of life in your chosen city; it might take the reader on a journey through the dark underbelly, for instance. Using the actual name of a known place will give your story a sense of being more grounded. If it's a realistic piece of work that intends to show *your* reality then this might be of benefit to you. Just be aware that other people might have an impression of their own and you might have to work harder to overcome their opinion.

Many times a story will be set in a fictional setting. It might closely resemble somewhere real but it won't be exactly anywhere that exists. This gives us more creative freedom and allows us to be more imaginative. It also tells the reader that this won't be entirely realistic; this story will be more fanciful and might veer away from what's generally accepted. We're reminding the reader that this is a work of fiction and we're telling a story, not trying to imagine that this is really happening. If you're creating your own city, town or village and not using one that already exists then you'll have to do more work in developing it. You'll have to describe it to the reader and tell them about how it feels. You'll have to develop it, just as you would with any other character. You'll have to show the reader what it looks like and then help them to form a deeper understanding of it.

Sometimes we don't want to name the setting at all. In some cases, we let the reader fill in the blanks themselves and let the clichés take over. Setting a story in a European city or small–town America might be all we need to say. The reader will understand enough from the implication to fill in the blanks for themselves. This is used for stories where the setting is less important and we're letting the reader know that. We're telling them that the characters or events are the place where their attention should be and the backdrop doesn't matter as much. In this case, it's important to remember that the reader's perception and prejudice will come into play. They will project their own ideas onto the blank canvas you've left for them. This might be your precise intention.

If, for example, you set your story in a crime–ridden inner city then a host of other stories, news, media, movies and television shows would come alive in their minds and they would imagine this for themselves and know what to expect. Although this is a good trick in creating the right mood quickly, it does take some creative control away from you. For this reason it works only when the setting really isn't important and you want to hand off that responsibility to the reader.

Sometimes the setting can be much smaller. A 'bottle' story is a narrative that never leaves a small setting such as a single room. This is harder to create and the action will happen remotely but can only be referenced by the characters in the limited setting through conversations. If your story has such a narrow view of the world, you'll have to work harder to bring that setting to life. Many stories have much larger scope, including whole worlds, or galaxies. In this case, you'll have to work harder to give the entire thing a sense of awe and wonder as your characters discover the setting you've created.

The place must give the characters the space to do the things they need to do. If you want to develop an action hero, your setting needs to be able to put challenges in their way. If you're writing a romance then your location needs to be able to bring your characters together in a natural way that doesn't seem too forced.

Remember that the setting is basically another character and should be treated as such. You need to put in just the same effort in developing it so that it feels real to the reader. Another important thing to remember is that everything you don't describe, the reader will imagine for themselves. You will need to set the scene enough to control the setting to the right degree. Know for yourself how important the backdrop is to the protagonist, that's how important it is to the reader. Don't let it grow to be a restriction to your story, but give it enough vibrancy to support the narrative.

World Building
—the Foundation Your Story Is Built on—

No book, no story, nothing is ever set in the real world. There is no such thing as objective reality. What one person holds as an absolute fact, another will see as a lie. The same story can be interpreted in entirely different ways, depending on the perspective of the reader, and the bias of the writer who created it.

You can write a gritty urban tale of ordinary life in your own city but it won't be a factual account; it will be your idea of what you see around you and is no more valid than the opinions of anyone else. In every fictional story, the world it's set in might seem very believable but is not an objectively real place. It's something that only exists in the mind of the writer and you will need to sell that idea to the reader through your description and the experiences of the characters you have created. So whether you're creating a fantasy, a science–fiction tale or a drama, the world your characters inhabit will have to exist in your head and it will have to be built there.

The closer the world is to the reality the reader is familiar with, the less work you'll have to do in creating it. Conversely, the further you draw the reader into something unfamiliar, the more effort you'll have to put in to make that reality one the reader can feel able to visit. All worlds your characters inhabit will need to be explained to the reader in some way.

Imagine you are writing a story about a homeless person who lives on the same street that you do. Their world is the same one that you inhabit but it looks totally different from their perspective. A dustbin, dirty and smelly, might be something you avoid, but to them, it might be a valuable lifeline, a source of food and a vital element to their survival. The reader will need to see that, to understand what this world is to the characters that inhabit it.

When we venture off into a more fantastic world, one that the reader has never seen, we must be far more creative. For that we must work a great deal harder to create a world that makes sense; a world that takes our ideas and makes them feel anchored in reality. Science–fiction takes what we know and often throws it further forwards, often into worlds we don't expect to see in our lifetimes. The technology should be suitably advanced but not so far that it seems magical to us.

We must root the design of our world in our understanding of the way things work. We must have a sense of logic to the worlds we create. Things must make sense or else the reader will reject them out of hand. It's our job to draw them into the narrative, not push them out of it with clumsy and thoughtless depictions. To illustrate this point, let's look at the two most popular science–fiction franchises of all time, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Both have excellent world–building, as you'd expect. They both show a totally cohesive vision of a fanciful futuristic realm, a world we don't live in, and they both do it in totally different ways.

Star Trek is based on people of Earth in our own future. It uses current science as a basis and tries to build on that. It explains how and why, tying each piece of technology to current theories of how things might work. This makes the stories feel grounded and believable.

Star Wars sets itself in a far–off galaxy and doesn't bother explaining anything. It just shows you a complex, fully developed science–fiction world that is totally different from ours. It uses familiar kinds of characters and shows that they understand it; therefore, we can accept it along with them. Of course, franchises often forgot their own rules. In the *Star Wars* prequels, they decided to have a character explain the use of the Force to a young recruit. It was a disastrous scene that was reviled by the fans. They tried to be something they weren't. They explained their made–up science when all that was needed was the character saying how it was and showing that he understood it perfectly

well. That would have told the audience everything they needed to know.

Fantasy stories follow the same basic rules as science–fiction. You're creating a world that doesn't, or can't, exist. Even though you're describing things the reader isn't familiar with, they should be cohesive ideas that feel like they make sense. This is the reason that most fantasy stories use our own history as a sturdy foundation. They incorporate medieval castles, swords and knights and mix those into more fantastical elements. We know those things are real so they effectively anchor us to reality, making the story feel as though it has a basis in known fact. From there we can fly off at wild, imaginative tangents, mixing in magic, dragons or other legendary monsters.

The more detail you put into the world you're creating, the more interesting and diverse your story can become. *Star Trek* did this very impressively, releasing background bibles: books that went into every aspect of the technology that writers were expected to have read and understand. The higher the level of detail you aspire to, the better the finished product is going to be.

The first step is to really get inside the mind of your protagonist. Really make the effort to live in their world, understand for yourself how things look and feel. Ask them questions and listen to their answers. Ask where they live, what they think of it, what they would change and how they feel they could bring those changes about. Ask how it felt to see this world for the first time. Have them explain it to you so you can then explain it to others.

The devil here is in the details. It's not the sweeping, giant buildings or the roar of powerful glowing engines, the distant howl of gigantic monsters as they sail majestically by some way off in the distance, or even the appendices full of elven grammar, that sell your world to the reader. What make it work are the small details, the little things that give it that sense that this is really happening. Ask yourself

mundane questions and think carefully about the answers. Those answers are the foundations your world will be built on.

TO BE ADDED

Question: if you write a fictional story set on the Titanic, does the ship have to sink? If so, why? When it comes to storytelling, is there really a distinction between a macro level event such as a historic sinking ship, and a micro level event such as the private lives of some of its passengers? You're the author—you decide! But be careful not to cheat your audience: the better known a historical event, the more the knowledge of the event will contribute to their understanding of your work.

Protagonist
—the Main Man—

The protagonist is your main character. This is the most important character in your work, the one that will make or break your story. Get this wrong and nothing else will work either. They are the link between your mind and the reader, the connection between them and the story you have to tell.

Some stories actually don't have a protagonist, but that is rare. I heard a legend of one, and only one, book that doesn't have a protagonist at all in the conventional sense. The central character dies right at the beginning and the rest of the tale revolves around what happens after their death, so technically they are an inanimate object throughout the story. That gives you an idea of how rare and unusual it is not to have a protagonist.

Some stories have a collection of main characters and an ensemble cast each sharing equal reader time. That can work well, but it's much harder on you, as an author. It is not recommended for first time writers.

If you take this path then the story has to sell itself and it has to be something rather special. If you shift the main focus away from the central character, where the reader expects it to be, then you have to have something else that's very compelling to sell them. It might work with an interesting mystery or if the story revolved around an object with some unusual significance. But for any of those things to work, the reader would have to connect very strongly with that idea. It's a much harder thing to make work.

I can remember several movies done in this way. One was about an old yellow Rolls Royce and the various owners of it through the years. It only worked because it was literally three different movies rolled into one, each having its own story dynamic. Another was *Cat's*

Eye, based on a Steven King novel. It followed the supernatural stories a cat experienced but, again, it was three separate stories rolled into one and each was to be taken on its own value.

When *Star Trek: the Next Generation* came out it was meant to be an ensemble cast of characters, each taking their own place as equals. In reality, it didn't work and the Captain of the ship took centre stage in almost every episode with the rest taking on the role of supporting him. If you do use a group of characters instead of a focal one, a nice trick to tell the reader which one you favour is to introduce them first. In *Star Trek* the entire series opened with a long, wide shot of the Captain, unconsciously telling us that this was his journey and his story.

For most of us, we're going to use a single protagonist. Most of us do this because it's a more natural experience. In our heads, most of us are the main characters in our own story and our lives happen around us with that in mind. It's the experience of life and it's relatable to the reader who largely thinks the same way.

Developing a protagonist isn't as easy as it might sound. These days, it's become socially acceptable to dumb everything down and take out anything that might be considered offensive, but that's poison to a reader. It's made modern literature soft and weak with no compelling characters to speak of.

You only have to look to your own life to see the point. The people you remember, the ones you really want to be like or gravitate towards, are the most interesting ones. We like people with something to say, with opinions of their own and fun stories to tell. Certainly there are some people out there who are offended by strong, compelling people but that's because they're weak and boring themselves. That's fine, but someone like that probably shouldn't be planning to write a book.

So your protagonist can be anything, or anyone. Age, race and gender are irrelevant, as is where they're from, and the most important thing is that they're believable. If you're telling a crime drama then your

main character probably shouldn't be a young, upper–class child with learning difficulties. They have to fit into the world that you're creating. To make them believable and interesting, the first thing you need to remember is that they are, essentially, you. Every character is a piece of you, of course, but your protagonist will draw most heavily on your experiences and beliefs. With that in mind, it's best not to stray too far from what you know, especially on your first try.

Pick up interesting character traits from people you know and let the character develop in your mind. Give them time to grow and become real to you. You should know everything about them, even things that have no part of the story and might never be mentioned. The more you know about them, the more consistent they will be, and the more believable they'll end up becoming. It's best to start with a solid understanding of the story and what role your character will take. Let the character develop into that role one piece at a time.

Be flexible and let the character become real; don't try to force traits and beliefs into them that just don't fit. Think of them as a friend—you wouldn't demand that your friend be absolutely identical to you; you appreciate that there are differences and those differences are what make the world work. Let your protagonist have ideas and opinions of their own, even if you don't necessarily agree with them. The more time you take, and the more effort you put in, the more the character will take on an identity of their own. A well–rounded and believable character will feel real to a reader. When something happens, they will know what to expect from them, that person will be as real as someone they know might be.

It's great to surprise the reader, but to have someone suddenly acting out of character is just cheap and lazy writing. We all know many incidents where just such a thing happens in fiction and it never feels like the writer has done their jobs properly. If it happens in too dramatic a fashion then it could jolt the reader straight out of the story. It's

important to know who they are, what they would do, and why they'd do it. They have secrets, they have weaknesses, and they have abilities. Draw as much as you can on personal experience, research into the person by talking to other people in the same situation so you can really understand who they are and what makes them think and act the way they do. Have a few strongly defining features in mind, so that the reader can know them, and describe them to others.

If you look at toys and collectibles there will often be statues and figures of characters from books and movies. How would your character be represented? What would be their defining moment? If someone was to make a statue, or paint a picture, of your protagonist, what would it look like? Which clothes would they usually be found wearing, which pose would best suit them, what might they be doing, what might be in their hands?

The protagonist is the main character and is often thought of as the hero, which they absolutely do not have to be. As we grow and mature, especially as writers, the more we come to appreciate that life isn't that clear–cut and neither should our stories or characters be. As an author you should be thinking in terms of the protagonist being at the centre of the action and driving the narrative rather than as a moral heart of the story. They should be just as flawed as any real person, they should have opinions that don't always ring true and they should have quirks, strengths, weaknesses and imperfections. It doesn't matter if they're quintessentially good or morally bereft; they are the heart of the story. Our job as a writer is to make them relatable by putting enough humanity into them to make them feel real. A character that has some kind of connection to us will make us interested in what happens. They don't have to be any kind of hero to achieve this!

These details make your protagonist a person in the minds of the reader, but they can never be that if they aren't a real person in your mind first.

Antagonist
—the Other Side of the Same Coin—

It's possible to tell a compelling story with absolutely no antagonist at all, or at least without one in human form. Many stories use the situation as the thing our hero must rile against, but most stories do pit one human against another, in some form. An antagonist is not necessarily a villain, or even a bad person.

The antagonist's interests and motivations must conflict with and cause problems for the protagonist, to give them something to rile against. This character might be secondary but is at least equally important. The reader is meant to form a bond with the protagonist, perhaps even picturing them with their own face and putting themselves into their world. But the antagonist is the challenge, that's the person they need to overcome. In the best stories, the difference between the two is one of perspective

Star Wars is an example of how this can, but shouldn't, work. In the original movie, we have the hero on one side, Luke Skywalker. He dresses in white, he's classically good–looking, heroic, morally driven and on the side of good. On the opposite we have Darth Vader. He dresses in black and he's undeniably evil to the core. We don't know what his motivation really is; he just does evil stuff, seemingly for the sake of it. Although there is a more nuanced narrative lurking behind the surface, this initial impression has an almost childlike innocence to it, and sophisticated it is not. It's one–dimensional, like battering the reader with a stick to get the message through to them who is who. The best stories employ a little more subtlety.

In the 70s movie, *Dirty Harry*, the villain is a mass murderer who thinks nothing of abducting children and shooting people on sight. They added a peace symbol to his belt buckle to show that he had some kind of depth. The film makers wanted you to know that, in his head, he was

the good guy. There was a good reason why he was doing what he was doing and he thought he was correct in his actions. Let's be absolutely clear on this, *Dirty Harry* was not a brilliantly insightful observation of the human condition. My point is, even an action movie can understand the need for this kind of complexity.

A good antagonist will have a more fleshed–out character. The reader can understand who they are and why they're doing what they're doing. The more developed the villain in a dramatic story, the more the reader will invest in the tale you have to tell. In a romance story, the antagonist might literally be the love interest. In a crime drama, they might be a murderer. Whatever it is, they are the opposite, the thing driving the journey our main character is taking.

Your antagonist will have a relationship with your main character, some kind of connection. They might be professionally opposed to one another, there might be a family connection, or there might be a situation that they have in common. Either way, your antagonist will be a kind of opposite to your lead and will provide a foil for them: they will motivate the action and drive the plot. In some ways, the two characters will have a lot in common and it's your job as a writer to explore that and show the reader what the important differences really are. Getting them right makes the journey real. It sets the odds and forces the reader to feel sympathy for their plight. Get that right, and the reader will want to follow along with you.

A really sophisticated piece of fiction will seek to drag the morality of the situation into the wild grey area where it belongs. For most of us, the antagonist is just as compelling as the lead. They're often the more popular character and usually seem more interesting. Taking *Star Wars* as an example, Luke Skywalker is largely forgotten but Darth Vader, walking cliché that he is, managed to get an entire movie series all about his origin. That just helps to show us the true power of a good villain. They attract real interest and make the story worth reading.

Something worth considering if you're creating a dramatic villain, someone to really, very seriously, antagonise your main character is to add an air of mystery. There's nothing more fun for a reader than slowly uncovering a mysterious character as layers are peeled back, revealing the inner parts as we go.

Give your villain a good backstory and don't be afraid to let it develop into something on its own. Spend as much time getting to know them as you do your main character. For your reader, your protagonist will have their sympathy, but your antagonist will have their interest. That is usually the character they'll be most closely watching.

Other People
—Supporting Roles—

Characters are the people that occupy your world. Everyone from the protagonist, to the antagonist, right the way down to the person who cleans his shoes is one of your characters and needs to be fleshed out enough to take their place in the story. Some of your background characters don't matter; they can be little more than something that looks like it fits, but as we move further to the foreground it becomes increasingly important that they look, seem and behave just right.

After the two main characters, there are a cast of others who might find a plce in your work:

The Foil—A foil character plays off of your protagonist. Often they'll have a role to play in the action but their main reason for being there is to provoke the actions of our lead. Their job is to show off the abilities of our protagonist. This is often the domain of the *sidekick*. This is Doctor Watson to Sherlock Holmes, Robin to Batman and Spock to Captain Kirk. In each instance they are weaker than the main character and need to be rescued, educated and pointed in the right direction. They provide a chance for the lead to be who they are, in order to demonstrate their character for us.

The Watson—Doctor Watson took such a leading role in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle that he ended up with a literary character archetype named after him. Watson was relatable to the reader. He was wide–eyed with wonder; an ordinary man out of his depths against the genius of the great detective. What this gave the author was a chance to show the thought processes of an unrelatable character to the reader. In whatever guise they take, The Watson is very much like a foil, only their function is to stand in for the reader and have things explained to them.

Whenever something is complex and difficult to understand, we have The Watson standing by to ask those questions on our behalf and have the answers explained to them. It's a bit of a cheat, if overused, but it's often the most natural way to present things to our reader. Of course, it's always better to *show* them than to *tell* them.

The Anti–hero—Sometimes we don't need our protagonist to be a hero, we need just the opposite. An anti–hero does the right thing, standing in for a hero, but has questionable motives. They're often someone who would be viewed as a villain if looked at from a different perspective, but in this role they end up doing essentially the thing that seems correct. It could also be a character who isn't morally acceptable, who we know is villainous or immoral by nature, but who still takes centre stage or still appeals to us in some way. Examples of anti–heroes from comic books are Judge Dredd and Venom. Judge Dredd would be a controlling fascist in most stories and a symbol of oppression, while Venom bites the heads off people and that's probably fine.

The Dynamic Character—a character who is dynamic is subject to change. Your main characters should be dynamic; they must end up changed by their experiences in the story. The most obvious example of this is Ebenezer Scrooge, the lead character in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. He begins as a miserly old man, a hateful, spiteful character, but the miracle of Christmas wakes him up to himself and he becomes a different, more sympathetic person by the end, learning and changing from the experiences he's lived through. To a degree, most of your characters should be dynamic. We understand instinctively that life is change and we're used to seeing our perceptions challenged.

The Flat Character is the opposite of this. This character doesn't change or evolve. These characters belong in the background, as they're important enough to move the plot along, but not enough to be fully

fleshed out, realised people. This is typical of characters like M and Miss Moneypenny in the *James Bond* novels and movies. We know that M is in charge, he's a strong, controlling influence and we know Moneypenny is feminine and attractive with just a hint of some unseen depths. But we never learn more about them, nor do we need to. They move the plot along and that's all they need to do. In that particular example, it might even hurt our plot to find out more about their lives.

If M went home each night and beat his wife after working his way through a box of cheap Belgian lager, the character would lose our respect. Similarly if we found out much more about Moneypenny, any mystique would be lost. Bond reserves her as special in his life, she's the only person off–limits and that's an understanding between them. It helps us to understand more of how isolated and alone he really is.

Flat characters exist in abundance on television, even in the role of main characters. In episodic material, especially in sitcoms, nothing changes and nobody evolves in any way. This was because episodes were written and screened in no particular order so change could potentially upset the balance of the run. This was often sarcastically alluded to in more recent comedies. *Seinfeld* famously made it their policy that none of the characters would grow or evolve in any way during the show and that nothing of importance would ever change. *The Simpsons* did this very well too with the lead character explaining how he hadn't learned a thing.

Flat characters certainly have their place but they're to be used sparingly. If your entire story is littered with meaningless people we don't care about, we won't care about the story either.

Stock characters are literally off–the–shelf clothing in literary form. We recognise a sock as a sock and the same is true of these. These are waiters, scientists, police officers and teachers. These are characters we all know, and telling us what they are tells us all we need to know. These

are people in uniform, or a type so well–understood that we know exactly what to expect from them.

This is purely reserved for characters of no importance, and we describe them sparingly for exactly that reason. The reader doesn't want or need to know anything more about them, so we use an easily recognised cliché to avoid distracting from the main action.

On top of all this, there are common archetypes. These are commonly used character traits that many, if not all, of our characters might lean towards. These are meant to be used as a place to start, so it's important that we develop our characters beyond the surface. The more we put into them, the more the reader will get out.

The most common are:

The Caregiver—This is a parental figure. This person looks after the other characters and supports them on their journey. It's rarely used for a protagonist, and is instead relegated to supporting roles, such as a doctor or teacher. This is where our protagonist might go for advice.

The Creator—This person will build, make, or be driven to change something. This person finds motivation in making something that will leave a mark on your world. We can find this character teaching or educating others, a scientist searching for a cure, or a mechanic building a custom vehicle. Think beyond the ideas of just building a thing, they could be founding a concept, or bringing together a group.

The Explorer—This is anyone looking for answers or freedom away from the crowd. This is anyone who rejects what is normal or true, and goes looking for something different or better. It doesn't matter if this character never leaves their own home, so long as they are unsatisfied where they are.

The Hero—This is an honourable, brave and steadfast person. This is to be used sparingly as they are death to drama. There is a reason that Batman always beats Superman, and that's because the reader wants him to. A flawed, rounded and interesting character, who is more than just a flat set of rules, is always more compelling. Heroes make excellent stock characters, but beyond that they're usually not interesting enough to keep the reader invested in their journey.

The Innocent—Children are often this. This is someone who doesn't understand the world they find themselves in. They are guided by a set of morals or principles rather than experience. This is for 'fish out of water' stories but it can be for any character where we can use their naivety to help draw the reader in to a new world and instil a sense of awe and wonder about it.

The Jester—A joker or a clown, often used for comic relief, someone to give the reader something to break the tension. Rarely will the Jester be our protagonist. More often they'll be in a supporting role as a bumbling buffoon who makes mistakes and seems ridiculous. If there is a character named Colin, there is a very high probability that they fill this role.

The Lover—This is, fairly obviously, a lover. This person loves, or is passionate about something or someone. Often the love interest, the besotted character who follows a more important character around, trying to get noticed. This person's primary motivation and their defining characteristic, is their attachment to something else.

The Magician—This doesn't have to be a literal magician. It's a person with the ability to see what could be and the power to make it happen. They have some gift, in that respect, or they hold some special secret. Of course, with the rise of fantasy literature, it could also literally be a magician. With writing, anything is possible.

The Orphan—This is a helpless, lost child, someone who has nobody that cares about them and no need to adhere to the rules. It doesn't have to be a child; it could be someone lost, with no way home, or someone who has been abandoned. It's someone who is looking for something and has nothing to lose.

The Rebel—Someone who goes against authority and holds nothing more sacred than personal freedom. They don't think the same way as everyone else and they don't follow the crowd. They stand outside of the masses and are often better for it. This character needs to have good reasons why they have rejected whatever facet of normality that you've pitched them against. If you're using them as a lead character, then there has to be a solid explanation as to why they don't fit into the world you've put them in. An example of this going wrong is *Divergent*, where the main character rejects everything for no good reason, leaving the reader baffled as to what her motivation actually was.

The Ruler—This could be anyone in a position of authority. It could be a teacher ruling over a classroom, or a politician telling other people what to do (while doing the complete opposite). It could be a parent, a head of a household, or any other person who holds sway over others and controls the situation. It would normally be a strong or powerful character and their motivation would usually be to retain their position, or to improve it.

The Sage—This is the wise knower of the truth. The sage could be a guide to our protagonist, or to the reader. It could be someone who reveals a plot twist, if you were really very lazy indeed. Most often, they would mentor the main characters and serve as a beacon of light for them to follow.

The Everyman—This is you; this is me; this is all of us. An everyman character is relatable; they are just like us and take on the role of the

reader when they're led into a world that might be difficult to understand. They have no odd or unusual quirks and that make them easier for us to project ourselves into. They're an old coat we can easily slip on that is comfortable to wear. An example of this would be James Bond. In the original concept, Bond was just an ordinary man in an abnormal world. The story was about the terrible things that happened from a perspective the reader could relate to easily. Although he changed massively later, he came from a modest beginning.

Of course, there's really no way to make a character that everyone can relate to. It's important to consider the needs of your target audience so you can better make them fit. For example, if you were creating a protagonist for a story like *Star Wars* then identifying your primary audience as being young men and boys would lead you to create a focal character like Luke Skywalker. You wouldn't fill it with a bunch of old monks with absolutely no charisma whatsoever, or a walking aquatic monkey–demon with a speech impediment, as nobody would have any interest in that…

Of course, these are just some of the main types, and there are plenty more. Everyone out there has a different idea of what they are and what they mean. These are not meant to be rules, a cage for you to be trapped in; it's more of a scaffold, a place from where you can grow. I was told the 'lover,' for instance, cannot be used as a protagonist, but I think that millions of successful romance novels prove that's not true.

The truth is that there are no hard and fast rules. You certainly need to be aware of these ideas but it's your choice how far you use them, and which ones you choose to reject. The best characters are none of these things, or at least not any single one of them. Your characters can blend any of these types that you chose and the more you bring to them, the more unique and diverse they will be. Tolkien takes the

opposite of an explorer in Bilbo Baggins and drags him by the hair on an adventure.

Different is interesting. If we all just copied and pasted what everyone else was doing we'd be inundated with stories about sparkling teenage bloodsuckers, teen dramas about young people inexplicably fighting authority in some dystopian future, and tales of plain, unattractive people ending up with the hottest person they know.

Perspectives
—How You See It—

There are several distinct perspectives used in writing, the most common being First, Second and Third Person. The First Person in question is the one who is doing the talking (the speaker), the Second is the one who is being talked to (the listener), and the Third is the one being talked about (a third party). Each is used differently and achieves very different effects. It's important to understand what they are and how to use them in order to get the best results, or at the very least, the desired tone.

First Person Perspective

In First Person perspective, the protagonist is the narrator. They are a fleshed out character telling their story to the reader in their own voice, experiencing the plot firsthand.

- Grammatically speaking, the protagonist refers to himself as 'I', as in, '*I* regret becoming an author,' or '*I* warned her not to read that book of poetry, but she wouldn't listen.'
- The narrator can only speak from their own experience: they can only tell you what they have seen and done, and what they think and feel.
- They can talk about the *actions* of other characters and *infer* thoughts and motives. For example, "The break–up hit him hard. It was the constant crying that first tipped me off, but throwing himself off that bridge really drove the point home."
- They cannot see into other characters' heads to read their thoughts and emotions directly. Avoid sentences like, 'He knew that writing novels was a bad idea, and constantly regretted it.'

Diaries are written in First Person perspective, as are journals, travel books and autobiographies. First Person perspective is less constrained

by time and chronology than other perspectives: depending on the story, you can relate given elements and experiences in whatever order you find most effective, as you have their entire life of your protagonist to draw from. Something happening in the present might naturally lead to an anecdote about a related incident from the past.

There are some hard limits on what you're able to do in First Person perspective. As previously stated, you cannot get into the heads of anyone other than the speaker, and you are entirely limited to telling the reader what the narrator sees and thinks. This means you cannot lead your reader to other places, or show things happening anywhere that the protagonist is not present—you learn as a protagonist does. The narrator also has to stay in character at all times, and anything he or she would not know or understand cannot be expressed.

With that said, it's perfectly appropriate for your protagonist to speculate on things beyond their knowledge, or to find information from other sources. If it's necessary for the reader to know what a friend of the protagonist is doing on the other side of town, they might send a message, or put something up on social media for your protagonist to find.

Stories written from this perspective tend to be narrower, more focused, so they're well suited to emotional journeys where the drama comes from personal conflict. In short stories, they are a simple method of quickly connecting with the reader, since humans are instinctively drawn to first hand story telling.

First person stories frequently make use of perceptual tricks to keep them interesting. Because the narrator is a character, they bring with them all the regular quirks of an ordinary person. They might not be telling the whole story, or the *entire* truth. A good rule of thumb when writing is that everybody thinks of themselves as being one of the good guys, so a story told from the perspective of a violent criminal would likely present their actions in a way that appears justifiable or even

favourable. They might gloss over them altogether. It's then up to the reader to work out whether the rosy depiction of the protagonist's virtues is consistent with the story's reality.

In *The Outsiders*, the protagonist, Ponyboy, is a confused teenager relating the tale of his life. He frequently describes characters in detail, and then they behave in exactly the opposite way when we see them first hand. This helps show his lack of maturity and difficulty relating to the world around him.

There has been a recent trend in telling stories from this perspective in young adult fiction but it's rarely done well. *Divergent*, for example, was told in first person perspective in the present tense. It was incredibly difficult to read for many reasons, and that was chief among them. As a new writer, you need to learn to walk before you're ready to try to run and it's best to stick to the conventions that have stood the test of time. They are popular and successful for a reason!

- You are the protagonist's thoughts.
- It is up to you if you wish to give a blow by blow as it happens, or to render the entire adventure in diary form, but it's better to choose one and stick with it.

Second Person Perspective

Second Person perspective is seldom used in fiction.

- You, the reader, are the protagonist, and the narrator tells you what you are doing or what you must do.
- Grammatically speaking, it's written in terms of, 'you look,' 'you go' or 'you do this thing.'
- You'll find instruction manuals and guides, such as this very book, written in this manner. Fiction is much rarer.

Many years ago, interactive gamebook stories were popular with children. You were told what you were doing as if a person was relating the action directly at you. It worked in context, but it was a difficult way to read a story, and the idea never survived much beyond a brief period where it was interesting purely for novelty value. Text based adventure games also frequently followed this format, and these likely spawned the brief interest in books of this type. An Australian series of books came out, masquerading as travel guides to fictional countries that were written in this perspective. It's not impossible to write entire works of fiction in this manner, but it would be difficult and likely only of interest because it is something different.

Overall, Second Person perspective is really not suited to fiction and would be difficult for the reader to read. It could certainly be done, but would likely come across as a trick, a cheap gimmick for telling a weak story.

- For the love of god, do not write a novel in Second Person perspective. No good will come of it.

Third Person Perspective

Third Person perspective is the most common way that long form stories are written. It involves a narrator relating a tale about someone else. We see the events from a slightly broader perspective and from a slight distance.

- Grammatically speaking, actions are described in terms of 'she wrote,' 'he edited,' and 'they read the whole book and created amazing works of fiction that changed the world forever!'
- Depending on the kind of story you want to tell, there are numerous ways of limiting what the narrator does and does not know.

The most common limitation styles of Third Party perspective are detailed below:

✤ Third Person Objective

In literature, a Third Person Objective narrator can be summed up in a single word: *dispassionate*—they just don't give a crap! They're like a camera, watching and relating what happens without any personal involvement. For stories of this type, the narrator is usually you, the author, and not some fictional character.

Stories are told from a slight distance. You're telling the reader what people did, what they said, and what happened as a result. You aren't capable of viewing the inner workings of the characters' minds, and you can't offer opinions of your own. That sense of distance gives you a great deal of control. You can show a lot more: you can give an unbiased description of how all the different characters act independently, and you can describe objects, places and events with a lot more clarity. You can show a much wider and more diverse story.

This kind of story would usually be told in chronological order, with events unfolding as they occur. The observations are neutral, so your interpretations of events and actions are limited to how they lead to the next set of occurrences.

The narrator's knowledge is often additionally restricted by being tethered to a single person or party of people, only finding things out as they do. It is also possible to tether the narrator to multiple protagonists in different locations, switching between them each chapter or section.

Although epic tales of historical proportions are normally the domain of Third Person Omniscient, J.R.R. Tolkien broke with convention when writing the Lord of the Rings series, keeping it instead in Third Person Objective. This made it more manageable by having the narrator almost one of the party, only able to see a smaller part of the bigger picture. And while our only insight into the characters was by

their own actions and words, we did get in–depth examination of the precise shade of green a grassy patch was with exception frequency, something it's unlikely the characters would have shown much interest in. Except Sam, obviously…

✤ Third Person Limited

Third Person Limited is somewhere between Third Person Objective and First Person. The grammatical language of Third Person Objective is used, but the narrator's knowledge is that of First Person. The narrator is effectively a passenger in the protagonist's head, and although they are a separate entity with a different voice, they are only capable of seeing, hearing and knowing what the protagonist is aware of.

So although we see what everyone else is doing, we only see it from the perspective of the protagonist, and descriptions will likely be flavoured by the protagonist's own thoughts and biases. It helps the reader to connect with them as a person, and makes them feel more real.

In principle, as with First Person, Third Person Limited allows you only to view the perspective, thoughts and feelings of one character throughout the story. You can only see the story as it happens to them. You cannot see things happening outside their knowledge, nor can you know what happens in the heads of other characters. Their thoughts, feelings and motivations can be inferred, but it needs to be clear from context that it is the protagonist's opinion.

With that said, it is possible to have multiple protagonists, but it shouldn't be considered a shortcut to sneaking in information about events happening elsewhere: each protagonist must have their own independent story and be given comparable weight. Each of the characters' stories must have a definitive conclusion.

About a Boy is a good example of this with characters Will and Marcus. They both have their own stories and character arcs told in

alternating sections that frequently cross over. They both end up sitting on the same sofa, their lives improved from where they began.

Although epic tales of historical proportions are normally the domain of Third Person Omniscient, G.R.R. Martin broke with convention when writing the Song of Ice and Fire series, and put it instead in Third Person Limited with an ever increasing number of protagonists that would switch each chapter. It had the advantage of keeping the individual arcs manageable and human scaled, but also personal to the individual players. As previously alluded to, there were numerous instances of him using this to cheat: to suddenly transport the reader to an important piece of story meat beyond the view of any of the established POV characters. Most of it was not written that way, so it was easy to overlook.

✤ Third Person Omniscient

This viewpoint gives godlike powers to the narrator, allowing them to know everything, all at once. The narrator can go anywhere, know anything, and relay it all back at will. The Omniscient narrator can know the thoughts and feelings of each and every character in any scene, but this doesn't mean they will talk about it. While this all gives the author ultimate power over everything, it also comes with great responsibility. There's technically no reason why the narrator can't blurt out the entire plot at any time, so care must be taken to measure and meter out the information that drives the narrative along without cheating the audience. The writer must carefully build the story by revealing just the correct amount of information as they go.

There's a further responsibility with this perspective style. As you can know and see everything that happens to and in the heads of every character, there's an additional requirement that they be portrayed appropriately. The reader is unlikely to be impressed if a principle character dies and the narrator explains that the protagonist felt a bit sad

about it. Instead, the emotions and thoughts need an elevated standard of vibrancy. The feelings must be fleshed out and coloured in, and the descriptions need to climb off the page.

TO BE ADDED

Movies and cinematic TV tend to be written in this manner. We see events occurring that the protagonists would have no knowledge of, and we're given insight into how characters are feeling through use of music. This is effective visually, but one of the issues it creates is that it often puts a barrier between the audience and the protagonist. When they're doing their best to solve their problems, and we already know what the problem is before they do, it seems rather unsporting not to help them.

While it might initially seem that this would be the easiest way to work, as there are no restrictions, it's actually the style that requires the greatest skill. The trick, here, is to know when to reveal information and when to set the limits on that revelation. You could, technically, see sentences like this:

'He knew she knew he knew that she had done it but she knew he knew she knew that he knew he would never tell.'

Hopefully you won't.

- You are god. Use your powers wisely.

As a general rule, it's considered bad form to show multiple character viewpoints in the same scene. The reader would likely find the narrative jumbled or difficult to follow if they had to deal with the thoughts of several different people simultaneously. It would be like being shouted at by several angry voices at the same time.

A rule of thumb is to stick to the character of highest importance in the scene, either through superiority or the demands of your plot, and show what is going on with them alone. Naturally, there are other schools of thought on the subject, and all rules are up for being broken if

you think you can get away with it. Some stories function as a crossing over of limited and omniscient, going between different characters chapter by chapter. Some might have a more forthright objective tone while dealing with a more rigid, formal character. The rules can be bent once they have been mastered.

One trick I have used in the past involves switching the perspectives of two characters who are strongly entwined—people with a romantic involvement, or pairs of characters with a natural meshing. I would include scenes of them talking, where the perspective gradually shifts from the perspective of one to the other, to show how they are mentally becoming one.

Another time, I had the idea to use a Third Person Limited perspective, but deliberately had the narrator move through a variety of characters as they interacted throughout the entire chapter. This was an effective way of both showing us who was in the room (re–introducing characters we may have forgotten about), why they were there, and what their individual motivations were. Ultimately, when the inciting incident occurred (curiously, very near to the end), we could understand it in its full context. It was a difficult to get right, but it ultimately paid off.

However, tricks like that are advanced and not well suited for new writers. It's important, at first, just to be aware of them and to know that every rule has an exception. If you pull it off correctly, the average reader won't even notice that the trick has been played, they'll just absorb the message you were putting forwards without being overtly aware of it. We're allowed to break the rules as we see fit, but we have to understand them first. We have to know what they are and how they work. When we challenge the formal structure of things, it should be to improve the experience for the reader, not to make things easier for ourselves.

The important thing to remember at all times is we are writing this to be read. We must make it possible for our reader to follow and

guide them to pick up the impressions we want them to get. Doing any less is unacceptable.

TO BE ADDED

For a fun challenge to get you into the right state of mind, take a movie that's shown from Third Person Omniscient perspective, and write a story outline for a novelisation, either in First Person or Third Person Limited. Who would be your protagonist? How and when would you let the reader know the information that movie viewers have picked up from situations outside the protagonist's field of knowledge?

Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope might be an easy one to start with. The protagonist should probably be Luke Skywalker, so we would need to see everything from his perspective. The assault we see at the beginning cannot be shown, so perhaps more information about that can be included in Leia's message. The political discussions aboard the Death Star? Perhaps Biggs (who Luke meets in an earlier deleted scene) can relay some of that. We don't need to see the destructive power of the Death Star because Luke finds the destruction first hand. It wouldn't be hard to draft that story, and it might make for a better read than the official novelisation.

Now try the same thing, but have Darth Vader as the protagonist.

Tense
—Stuck in the Past—

There are three basic tenses: past, present and future. In general terms, most stories are told in the past tense. This is because by the time you've read the line, the action has happened so things really can't be happening in the absolute present. Whether you're using Third or First Person perspective in your writing, usually your book will be told in the past tense. You'll see sentences like, 'I went to the shop,' in First Person and 'She went to the bathroom,' if you're working in Third. It's as simple as that and it's jarring to see anything else when you're reading.

I was once asked to check out a gentleman's work. He had written in Second Person perspective with the reader being told they were different people as it went along. He'd also attempted to set it in the future tense. I explained to him that this was virtually impossible and would require a great deal of skill to pull off. As it was his first attempt at writing, I did advise him to try something simpler to start with. Ignoring this, he handed me his work. It was a pile of utterly unintelligible nonsense, just as you'd expect.

Some novels try to break with convention by telling the story in the present tense. It is usually jarring to read. I'm not saying it's impossible to make it work, and I appreciate the attempts to create something new, but tenses are one place where convention is very strong. We think in terms of things having happened, even things happening right now. When we talk, we generally use the past tense to describe almost everything, which is why narratives work best this way.

A story told like a diary might work well in present tense. The narrator could tell the reader what they're doing as events unfold around them, perhaps surprising them and taking the reader along as events unfold. Even then, the narration would include past events, taking the

story off to previous points where the action would switch to the past tense.

Present continuous tense can give a piece of writing an anecdotal feel. It might well be suited to speech if the character is talking about something they've personally experienced as if it were happening now. The character might say, 'There's this guy and he's walking down the road when this other man walks up to him.' People sometimes talk just this way but the narrator will relay this story as if it's happened back to the reader.

Unless you're skilled and have a very good idea about how to do it, it's best to stick with past tense. It may be that the present tense will give you some benefit in the way you need to tell your story, in which case plan it carefully and certainly attempt it. But for most of us, and for almost all stories, stick with the past tense because it works! The real key is to know and understand the tenses and how they work. We certainly need to be aware of them ourselves, even if we're not using them.

The MacGuffin
—Something and Nothing—

The MacGuffin is a thing that's really nothing. It's often scorned for being a plot device, an object inside the story that only exists to move the action forwards. However, it doesn't deserve the poor reputation it has. The MacGuffin was reportedly popularised in a film by Alfred Hitchcock. In a lecture he stated the following:

'It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?" And the other answers, "Oh, that's a MacGuffin." The first one asks, "What's a MacGuffin?"

"Well," the other man says. "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands."

The first man says, "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands," and the other one answers, "Well then, that's no MacGuffin!" So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.'

A MacGuffin, then, is something that's of significant interest to the main characters and their pursuit of it is a driving element of the plot. The scorn and derision that the MacGuffin has earned is largely as a victim of its own success. It tends to be overused and is often used too cheaply.

It's a common trope in both written and visual storytelling that an object will appear that seems significant and will rouse the protagonist to action. As the plot progresses, it will reduce in importance, before eventually melting into the background. This object is effectively a Holy Grail: something that the characters go out to seek for reasons that aren't really important to anyone but them. It simply represents something, and that's all we need to know. The lost slipper in *Cinderella*, Grandma's house in *Little Red Riding Hood* and the Infinity Stones in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* all serve this purpose.

For stories that rely entirely on such MacGuffins to move the narrative along, the overall quality tends to be inferior. This is the domain of action thrillers where the heroes will be chasing a mysterious box, secret plans or hidden artefacts. None of them matter, and the characters don't really connect with these things. They're just a link in a chain to get things from one end of the story to the other. Detective and spy thrillers are particularly guilty of this. The protagonist will likely find a clue, some tiny object that everyone else will have missed. It sends them on a journey to get to the owner. Once there, a new clue will send them off in a new direction, usually discovered by accident as our hero stays one step ahead of a shadowy villain who's after the same object for reasons nobody is entirely sure they care about. This is why MacGuffins are often disliked and considered a cheap narrative trick.

A MacGuffin doesn't have to be a physical object, such as a box or a necklace. It could be a party, an event, a form of energy, even a concept. So long as it has limited importance beyond motivating the action in the plot then it qualifies as a MacGuffin. When you get right down to it, everything that drives your plot is basically a MacGuffin. Nothing inside the pages of your book has any real importance or gravitas outside of it. The entire thing plays out in the confines of an artificial world.

It's important to understand the primary motivation of your characters and to understand what's driving them, but everything beyond that, the things that cause them to move their motivations into actions, are MacGuffins of some sort or another. For instance, a woman might not know her real parents and will struggle with questions of what her real identity is. That might be the underlying reality that drives the plot of your story. But what will set her on a journey? At some point she will have to find a clue, perhaps a picture, an address or a box of letters. That object, or event, will trigger the action that will drive the plot. Whatever form it takes, it's ultimately a MacGuffin of a sort.

When people refer to a MacGuffin in a negative, derisory way then they're doing so because the mechanism has been used cheaply, without proper thought, or without sufficient development of the character. In our example it would be a lazy use of the mechanism if our woman happened to stumble upon a picture of herself which just happened to have the name of a street in the background. People would not be satisfied by MacGuffins of this nature. If she sneaked into her adoptive parent's room and searched it while they were out, finding the very same picture in a box of family mementos hidden under the bed, that would be different. The object would be the same but the way it's come by is different.

It's still just as much a MacGuffin in that it will take our character on a journey to discover the truth. The difference is that in the first example the writing is cheap and thoughtless, it just happens because it needs to. In the second, the discovery is driven by the character. We know she wants to find the truth and her desire to do so logically leads her to the discovery. That's using the character's motivation in a way that makes sense and will be accepted by your reader. It's a tiny difference, but it makes an important impression on your readers.

Essentially everything that motivates the characters to action could be considered a form of MacGuffin. Your job as an author is to use the mechanism with sufficient development to make it appear natural. If it's done cheaply, your plot will suffer for it. If it's done correctly, your reader will appreciate the extra effort.

Dialogue
—How To Explain That You're Terrified of It—

Anything where two or more people speak during a scene is dialogue. Without it, we're unlikely to have very much of a story. To some people this is utterly terrifying: to others it's not difficult at all. If you are among the first group then you have a bit of a problem since most stories are extremely heavy on dialogue. With notable exceptions, even an average modern action movie will be mostly characters talking to one another. Dialogue is inescapable—it's a huge part of the way stories work. As a rule we should always show, and not tell, the audience what's happening and the most basic way to do that is to have one character explaining it all to another.

In some stories we can encounter a huge monologue. This is the terrible cliché in many tales where the villain finally reveals all of their plans to the hero, usually while they're tied up and waiting to die by some ridiculously over–complicated means, explaining everything so the audience can catch up. This can make sense in a First Person or Third Person Objective or Limited novel, where that first encounter with the villain is the first that anybody knows about any evil plan. This often gets lost in adaptation when brought into cinema though, as movies and TV tend to be told as Third Person Omniscient. Everything we need to know about the evil plot can be revealed to us visually as the story progresses.

Most stories will use dialogue more sparingly, and with greater skill. It will usually be a two–way interaction that either moves the plot forwards or else reveals some detail that fleshes out our understanding of the character. It could be where a person in authority explains the mission, it could be where two people are discussing their feelings about an upcoming battle or it could be a woman explaining to a heartbroken man why it's not him, it's her.

So horrifying is the idea of writing speech that a struggling writer once asked me if I thought he could write an entire book without it, so he wouldn't have to bother. I asked if the story had any characters in it, and since it did, it would probably need them to interact at some point. If people speak in real life, they'll have to speak in your story. Luckily, it's nowhere near as hard as it sounds.

All speech between two characters goes into inverted commas. What happens inside those commas is completely unfettered by normal rules and regulations. Those punctuation marks form the boundaries of grammatical requirements and the tenets of societal norms. The words you write inside those commas are the words your characters say. Accordingly, they aren't absolutely required to follow the rules. People do not speak the way the language requires us to write so your sentence structure can be off and the words can be less accurate than they might need to be.

In extreme cases you might choose to misspell words in order to infer a very heavy accent and you might use words that aren't entirely correct. Normally, you will stick fairly closely to the rules but you must remember you don't absolutely have to. In many books, swearing is avoided, even though it might be commonplace in the situation you're describing. Such things can make the story seem less believable and so a balance has to be struck.

As a general rule having the normal structure of dialogue stray too far makes the work hard to read. If it's done exceptionally heavy–handedly it can literally stop the story dead, killing the drama and forcing the reader out of the narrative entirely. For that reason it's usually best to compromise, to find a way to suggest the right tone without accentuating all of the faults that stray into normal speech.

Dialogue should have a point. It's not enough to just stop your story and have a brief conversation just for the sake of it. The dialogue is a part of the action and has to be used to move things along. The

conversation should have a point that resonates with the characters and drives the development of the plot. The conversation should reveal something about the story or people you're writing about. It must fit into the narrative. As a rule, if it doesn't add anything to the tale you're telling, then don't add it. If you're in doubt, or even if you're creating a conversation, try saying it out loud. Speak it to yourself and work out how your character would answer. What would they really say, what words would they actually choose?

Apart from the initial meetings, we don't usually tend to bother including greetings. Although people will routinely go through a polite ritual when they meet their friends of saying, 'hello' and shaking hands, we don't need to include that every time. We should include a greeting when two characters meet for the first time as that will likely add to our understanding of them, and might well move the plot along. Beyond that, unless there's some significance in it, we can skip the routine meetings and move directly along to the important action. The same is true with small–talk. We don't need to add details of minor conversations and can quickly summarise them if they're worth a mention.

A key area where people fall down in dialogue is in not making it clear who is talking. This is especially true when there are two characters of the same gender interacting. Once we've established the names and identity of the people talking, we might quickly revert to 'he said' or 'she said,' or leave it out altogether if it's otherwise clear who is speaking. Without occasionally reminding the audience who is who, they might very quickly lose track. Take a moment during the action of speaking to mention the character, give them an action to carry out so that an additional sentence can be added, like planting a signpost at the side of the road. You can have a character deliver a line and then tell the audience they sit back and take a moment to gather their thoughts. This

gives the reader a moment to step back from the repetition of bland dialogue and gives their imagination something to work with.

Once in a while, add the names of the character to remind the reader of who is speaking. Add an additional line of description to help them follow the action and make sure that it's easy to keep up with what's happening. With dialogue, we want the audience not to be challenged with language and able to put no effort into following what we're writing. We want their full attention and focus on what is being said, we want to immerse them in the story and to visualise the events for themselves. Confusion will only break the spell.

When two characters speak there are several ways to present their spoken words and it's a good idea to mix them up, using different approaches each time to stop the sentences becoming boring and predictable. The word 'said' is largely invisible to the reader: it's so familiar that it has essentially become a symbol that we absorb unconsciously. We barely notice it any longer and accept that when we see it someone is speaking. We only need to say who it is for the audience to connect directly the idea with the words the character is speaking.

It's a good idea to rotate the structure so that it's more interesting but there are ways to do it that are counterproductive. A character could grunt, snarl, shout or cry the words out and those certainly have their place. Use them, but use them sparingly, for the most part stick largely to the word 'said' but move it around so that it doesn't become fixed and stagnant.

Look at the three examples below.

"You shouldn't be a writer," ***said Seth.***
"I shouldn't be a writer?" ***said Jack.***
"No, you shouldn't be a writer," ***said Seth****.*
"Why shouldn't I be a writer?" ***said Jack.***

"Because you don't know the difference between an author and a writer," ***said Seth.***
"I'm also not very good at dialogue," ***said Jack.***

In the first example above, the conversation is dull and we lose interest in it quickly. The piece added on to the spoken element is called the 'speech tag' and it's a good idea to vary it often. This is what it looks like when we don't. We should vary the way we structure the sentences so that this boring and repetitive conversation is more fun and interesting to read. The tags should be changed around so that the same thing isn't seen twice.

"You shouldn't be a writer," ***said Seth.***
Jack raised an eyebrow curiously. *"I shouldn't be a writer?"*
"No, you shouldn't be a writer," ***he repeated more firmly.***
"Why shouldn't I be a writer?" ***Jack asked, a frown settling onto his weathered, time–worn, and mostly balding face.***
Seth pointed to a sample of his terrible work, prodding it several times with his index finger. *"Because you don't know the difference between an author and a writer!"*
"I'm also not very good at dialogue," ***Jack agreed sadly, nodding in agreement.***

But it's also possible to go too far. If we try to vary it too much then we can easily end up looking unskilled. It is plain that we're trying too hard and we haven't managed to find the balance that the audience will need. While the following example is technically perfectly correct, it does point to a lack of experience.

"You shouldn't be a writer," ***Seth screamed.***
"I shouldn't be a writer?" ***Jack mumbled.***
"No, you shouldn't be a writer," ***Seth agreed.***
"Why shouldn't I be a writer?" ***Jack growled menacingly.***

"Because you don't know the difference between an author and a writer," ***Seth pleaded with great passion.***
"I'm also not very good at dialogue," ***Jack admitted sadly.***

The spoken conversation is the same in all three instances. The first is dull while the second is both more descriptive and interesting. The last tries to vary the speech tags too much. In the second example, one of the characters 'asks' instead of simply 'said' something and that fits into the flow correctly without seeming forced, as it does in the third where he growls it menacingly instead. The second is closer to what we'd expect to see in print.

If we vary the speech tags so that each and every one is different, the reader will have to absorb a more difficult message and the focus will be drawn away from the words the character is speaking. At times, that might work perfectly well. A character could scream 'No!' and then what is being said is far less important than the way it was spoken. Like all things in life, there must be balance and the variations must be applied with a little skill. You must know what tools you have and know when to use them.

Another rule with dialogue is that each character's speech needs its own paragraph. We can add actions in another sentence once the spoken words are complete but they should originate with the character who said them. Once we switch to the other character, we must start a new paragraph. This helps the audience to follow a conversation, knowing that the paragraph breaks are a good indicator that someone else is now speaking. Once we add an occasional reminder of who that is, the reader should have no trouble understanding what's happening.

Although older writing styles did the opposite, modern punctuation pertaining to the actual spoken words stays inside the inverted commas. If the spoken sentence stops with a period, an exclamation or a question mark that will all happen inside the quotation

marks. The speech tag, however, is not always impacted by the punctuation and does not need to begin with a capital letter because the sentence hasn't really ended.

Just to make it even more fun, if the spoken sentence has ended, we don't end it with a full stop if we're adding a speech tag; we end it with a comma. We only end it with a full stop if that's the actual end of the complete sentence.

Here are some examples:
"I made a big mistake when I chose this as a career!" Jack said in exasperation.
"What the hell else would you have done?" quipped Seth.
"I would have got a proper job," he retorted with a sigh.

In all three of these examples, the person doing the speaking has actually finished their sentence but the entire sentence hasn't finished, so we don't conclude it at the punctuation inside the inverted commas. Although a sentence would normally stop with the question mark or the exclamation point we give those a pass as they add content to the sentence that makes it worthwhile. The full stop is only used when the whole sentence is finished.

Here are some more examples:
"I could have done something with my life," Jack said.
"I too should have thought things through a bit better," Seth grumbled.
He said, "I regret not paying attention in school."
"You really are terrible at this." Seth laughed, and handed him back his first chapter.

In these examples we see how the full stop means the sentence has ended, even though the question or exclamation mark would also take on that role. Inside the inverted commas, they do not end the entire sentence; they take on the role of the comma and only let us know that

the dialogue sentence has ended. If we see a full stop, it does mean the entire sentence is complete, even though it's inside the inverted commas.

The rules are really not as complicated as they sound and the best way to learn them is to read other literary works and pay attention to how the rules are applied. The rules for dialogue can vary slightly depending on the country of origin but this is the simplest and most common form. So, the basic rules for dialogue are to

- keep it meaningful,
- keep it interesting,
- keep it to the point.

Remember that speaking is an action and the dialogue must conform to the rules of any other action that is carried out by your characters. If there's no point in it, don't add it. Use it to move your story along and make sure it adds something of interest to your work.

TO BE ADDED

Where possible, allow your characters to speak for themselves. Once a dialogue begins, it's better for the narrator to take a step back, and let the dialogue communicate as much as it can by itself. Too much narration added pulls the reader out of the dialogue, and necessitates its own existence.

Vocabulary
—How Much Is Too Much? Too Much!—

Your vocabulary is the range of words that you have at your disposal. In terms of writing, we use the word to mean the level and tone of the words you're using. There is much discussion about what kind of language to use in your book. Two distinct schools of thought on the subject have emerged that diametrically oppose one another. As usual with extreme schools of thought, it's likely that neither is correct and that the truth is really somewhere in between.

The first idea is that the language should be basic. The intention is that any audience, even poorly educated people, should be able to access your work. If you can't explain something in simple terms, argued Albert Einstein, then you don't really understand it well enough yourself. The counter argument is that the poorly educated readership will likely remain poorly educated if we never aspire to teach them anything. If the school system failed them, is it really right that the authorship of their creative material fails them too?

If we follow the first pattern, everything we write would be flattened down so the language is as basic as possible. While it would certainly be possible to create a novel of this type, it would likely be cold and uninvolving. Language is a vibrant and dynamic thing and it has multiple layers we can use to express different things. Dumbing it right down to the lowest common denominator is dangerous.

The school system in a lot of Western countries, as well as movies and other media, are guilty of deliberately undermining the complexity of our world. Their attempts to simplify things so far have left no intelligence in there. Movies have dialogue that is forced and painfully unemotional, plots fall apart if we question the slightest detail. There is little respect given to the audience and the situation is only getting worse.

While I can see the value of making important philosophical work as accessible as possible, the whole idea ignores a key component. George Orwell was a proponent of using basic, simple language in his work. He wrote *1984* as a warning of how we might be controlled in the future, and he was sadly on point with many of his predictions. Certainly his novel is an important work and it was a wise choice to make the language accessible, so the people who would benefit most from it could understand the language. What he underestimated, unfortunately, was that the people who wouldn't be able to understand it were now so uneducated and so uninterested that they had no means to get their heads around the concepts, let alone the language.

If we go in the other direction and use the most complex language we could, our work equally falls apart. Literary fiction that attempts to obfuscate, complicate, befuddle and becloud is usually too complex; it muddles and confounds. This type of literature has a strong surface message: 'This is not for you. Go away.' It's usually elitist, aimed at a demographic of one, *the writer*, or at least the writer that the author thinks they are. Using complex words purely for the sake of it really just shines a light on the author's ignorance. People who aspire to complexity usually don't have a proper understanding of what it means to create a work of fiction. They are little more than children showing off by performing a mundane act. The correct way to approach the subject is to adopt neither of these extreme views.

The first thing to take into account is your audience. What do they know? What use of language will they understand? If you're writing young–adult drama, you have to be aware that their language skills are likely to be limited and you have to write accordingly. If you're pitching a highly complex drama based on the interplay of opposing philosophical beliefs, then it would give a scope for a much wider use of more complex language. Knowing what your audience is expecting, and meeting that expectation, is certainly your main concern.

We absolutely should not be selling the audience short. We shouldn't behave like we think they're idiots and make our work so dumb that we're insulting them, nor should we be pushing them so hard that they'll lose interest in our stories. Stick to the level of vocabulary that you think they'll be comfortable with and add a little literary flourish by exceeding their expectations, by just a small margin, a little as you go. My general rule of thumb is to exceed their projected ability by around ten percent; anything less than that is a little condescending.

The main concern with language and vocabulary is that the work you're creating absolutely must be satisfying for you. It's your work and it has to be something you're ultimately proud of. Push yourself a little bit with the scope of your language, but make sure you're in full command of it. Don't use words you don't fully understand and can't confidently use in conversation. If you do, you may use them incorrectly. The main reader of your book is you, and it's important not to forget that. Create something for the audience and make sure you respectfully pitch it at them, but never let yourself create something you know isn't right. Push both yourself and the audience but learn when not to push too hard. Vocabulary, like almost every aspect of creating a novel is about finding the proper balance. It isn't easy to do and it's a skill that takes a lot of practice. There are no shortcuts at this level.

And one more note on vocabulary: your finished work should neither insult your audience with dumbed–down language nor be littered with a self–aggrandising display of arrogance. If you've done your job correctly then the words you've chosen will be used because they are absolutely the correct ones, not because you're trying to show off, and not because you think that's all people will understand. An author must be able to go far, far further. Your personal vocabulary should be excellent and you should always have full command of far more than you need. Consider if you're writing a young–adult novel where an authority figure speaks with unusual eloquence to deliberately confuse

our main character. Are you capable of adopting that mindset? Are you able to visualise the mental process of that person and competently write their dialogue? If not, then you've got a little more reading to do.

Show Don't Tell
—but my Imagination Has no Eyes or Ears—

When it comes to writing, one convention that holds essentially true is that you should *show* and not *tell*. Of course, sometimes it's necessary to *tell*, but as sweeping generalisations go, this one makes a lot of sense. *Telling* is when the author, the narrator of the story, explains what's going on, or what has led up to a situation as a series of facts. You will often see descriptions like:

'The author lived in a small apartment. At weekends, he would often stare at his weathered face in a mirror, wishing he could turn back time.'

In this example the narrator exposes everything we need to know. It's explained to us as if someone were describing an anecdote or story. We are now aware of the thing; it's information we can use, but it didn't happen to us and it's unlikely that we will particularly care about it. When an author *shows* you what's happening, you are drawn into the action. This helps to build a perception of depth, as if you were experiencing it for yourself. The same information could be shown to us like this:

'The author awoke in his small, cluttered apartment, his phone awkwardly perched next to his bed on a pile of well–thumbed novels, dirty washing and mostly empty beer cans. He groaned to himself resignedly: it was the weekend. He had no work to do, no job to hide behind, and two whole days in which to be productive with his writing.

'He sat up, rubbing his hand over his short, cropped brown hair, and caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. Had he always looked that withered? As the thought flashed through his mind, he quickly averted his eyes and sighed to himself. Out of sight, out of mind—for now at least.'

In this example the narrator hasn't reported the information to the reader, but instead has let the information be discovered as the scene progresses. The information is the same, but in the second example the scene is alive, the character is moving the action forward and the reader is able to imagine the things happening around them.

A very unrealistic real–life example that helps to illustrate this better is from the television show, *Star Trek*. Many times in *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space 9* series there would be an epic space battle, but the viewer would be shown only symbols of various sides engaging on a monitor display. A dramatic life or death struggle was going on just the other side of the bulkhead, but the viewers were left to watch a screen with tiny avatars moving backwards and forwards, relying on the actors to provide the necessary gravitas – often with less success than the scene required.

In fairness, these decisions were usually made due to the constraints of the budget. It still leaves the reader feeling cheated at this hollow and empty experience. There's no personal investment, no sense of drama or stakes and no connection to the events as if they were actually happening. With writing, it's far more important and you don't have the excuse of budgetary limitations to hide behind. Your job as an author is to avoid cheating your readers. You have to draw them in and make them feel like they're a part of the action, perhaps imagining themselves as your brilliant and well–written protagonist, or observing as an emotionally–invested spectator.

Imagine your own personal experience of life. Luckily, and hopefully, you're not a brain floating in a jar (but I apologise if you are and you found such a comment offensive). A human being is a complex organism with a mind, a body and a consciousness. That body is full of chemicals and senses; electrical signals that flow back and forth to a mind the extent of which is beyond our comprehension. The human experience is meant to involve us living in the world, doing things for

ourselves, touching, tasting, seeing, smelling and hearing the universe around us.

Which brings us to an interesting question and, more importantly, to some kind of point. Which is more real and more vibrant in your own mind: the last really excellent meal you had, or a meal that somebody described to you? Of course, it seems obvious that the physical experience is the one the leaves the more vivid impression. Usually this is the case but, perhaps counter–intuitively, it really isn't as clear cut as we might be led to believe. The presumption is that first–hand experience will always leave the stronger impression, but that isn't always true. You may not be paying that much attention to what you're eating. You may not have the cognitive building blocks necessary to properly frame and conceptualise the fullness of the experience. The lighting may be dimmed, so you miss much of the visual appeal of the food or you may just be focusing on conversation and ambience.

On the other hand, a good description of the food, together with a play–by–play of the visceral experience of enjoying it—the textures, the sensations, the nuanced hints of flavour—can connect very strongly. These can leave a much stronger impression than if you had actually eaten the food yourself. But in the end, if someone told you about something they had eaten and took the time to really describe the experience, then you'd probably like to try it for yourself. If you were given a factual description of the food's content then all this would be reduced down to a few logical connections that might be stored for future use. That's how human beings work.

If we relate that to our writing, we have to engage the reader by explaining how things feel, taking them on a journey into the experience of our characters. We want them to vividly imagine what it's like to be there, feeling the world as if it was real to them. Telling them means they know what's happening but they have no emotional investment in it. It has left no impression on them. Showing the reader adds a

dimension to the story. It makes it real. It connects at an emotional level with the reader and makes the characters into believable people. The difference between the two ways of presenting the same information is quite obvious and very noticeable.

While the *show don't tell* principle works for the most part, shortcuts are sometimes unavoidable. The author must sometimes tell the reader what's happening in order to set the basic parameters of the scene, and there will be times where a certain amount of exposition is preferable. Your reader is dedicating their time to reading your story, and it's important you treat that time with respect.

Fairy–tales and fantasies often require a great deal of world–building in order to make sense of the imaginary setting in which they take place. While it would certainly be unacceptably lazy to roll off page upon page of exposition, it's not always practical to have a character experience events as they unfold, unravelling the world around them as the story progresses. The *Alice in Wonderland* approach of a sudden fish out of water who doesn't understand the world she finds herself in only works when the details of the world are not important. Her lack of understanding is a central facet of the story. In a more complex world, this would just take too long to experience.

Watership Down by Richard Adams gets around this by first introducing the lead players: partially anthropomorphic rabbits who are just going about their daily business, doing brunch and whatever else it is that partially anthropomorphic rabbits do. Just as the story really gets moving, he adds an exposition drop of the stranger variety. It's an in–world exposition in the form of the historian telling the other rabbits a pseudo–mythological legend detailing how the rabbit came to be. It gives us a small taste of the belief system and psychology of rabbits, and it is one that mostly corresponds to the world they inhabit: *every other creature will kill you, but first they must catch you*. It is also scattered with cheekily written footnotes giving fascinating but optional

information about their culture and history, and occasionally these are woven into the narrative. It's cheating without leaving the reader feeling cheated.

J. R. R. Tolkien's approach in *Fellowship of the Ring* was to have one of the characters writing a piece of historical documentation (and in fact the very chapter you were reading), dedicated to describing what it meant to be one of his people. The writing was humorous, in character and not overly long. It gave the reader just enough information to see the world through the eyes of the protagonists. After that, we can learn about the world and its history as they do, experiencing them along with the characters. On the other hand, it was also accompanied by the appendices: hundreds of pages of exposition detailing the varying histories of the races, hand–drawn maps, and linguistic guides for understanding the in–universe languages. These were supplemental reading for those thirsty for more, and handy reference material for those wanting to write spinoff stories. If you skipped them altogether, though, it wouldn't make much difference to your enjoyment of the story.

The graphic novel *Watchmen* by Alan Moore took a similar approach by putting the necessary exposition in diary form in the twisted voice of one of its lead characters, and providing faux primary source materials as optional world–building references outside of the main narrative. These were appealingly presented in various forms, fun to read, and didn't detract from the story being told as they were presented between chapters as something you found lying on your desk; again, cheating without making the reader feel cheated.

The important thing to master is balance: knowing when and how to use the different ways of presenting your story. As a general guide, if something is happening, take the reader into it and engage them with the story. If you're taking the reader into the scene, use the art of telling them simply to set the stage and then lead them into the action. You

don’t need to get it perfectly right but this is always something you need to be aware of.

Your Style
—From a Whisper to a Scream—

All too often in modern times, something old, established and utterly logical is replaced with something new, wobbling around on a flimsy foundation and being wildly illogical while doing so. Your author's voice is one of those things.

I had a rejection email once for a short story which complained that the narrative didn't have a voice. My immediate reaction was that of course it didn't, it was a short story, not an organism with a larynx. What on Earth was this person talking about? I asked my collaborator his thoughts on the matter, and he described it as the way the narrator's voice sounds in his head when he reads passages off the page.

Now it made sense. What this industry person had done was confuse the word 'voice' with 'style' and this had now become the industry norm of expressing this idea. Why use a term people actually understand when a new one can make less sense? Voice describes your expressive style. Your writing will be bland and uninteresting without it. With it, your work will be unique to you. It can, and should, change as you and your work evolve and it can change from project to project. All it needs is a dash of uniqueness: a writing signature that carries the weight of your identity. Without that, your creation is boring, flat and bland, and it won't work. Your writing won't come alive in the mind of a reader if it's not capable of marking your impression on them. It's like listening to the same story told by two different people: one might be logical, honest and factual while the other is more fanciful and entertaining. You'll have a preference for one over the other, just as all people do.

My collaborator, a close friend, helped me to establish my voice. He noted that often my work was characterless: it didn't have *me* in it. I was the one thing missing from my own writing. He pointed to my blog

writing where I had commented about a trip abroad. I had been living in a foreign country in a small apartment that was infested with red ants. After a particularly illuminating encounter I commented online that I had always presumed, very wrongly, that these little red monsters were known as 'fire ants' due to their vivid colour. It was only when one had got inside my underwear and had bitten me in the place a man least likes to be bitten that I discovered that this was not the case.

He held this up as an example of my character. I liked layered jokes and yet I including them neither in my narration, nor in my plotting. When I wrote my factual accounts, this was not true at all; they were much more an expression of who I was. I learned my lessons and brought my humour, my sarcasm and my personality to my work. Suddenly, it was much better received and, as a bonus, I enjoyed writing it far more.

So your voice is your style, and nothing more complex than that. Establishing your style is far harder than identifying what it means. It's a process for which there are no shortcuts. Knowing your style means knowing yourself. There is no secret formula; you have to put in the effort and the time. Read widely and read beyond your preferred genre. Try new things, read a good cross–section of fiction and non–fiction, and push yourself in every way you can to learn more. You'll start to notice preferences and those will start to show you the kind of style you're likely to develop for yourself.

Once you've got a clearer idea of what it is you want to produce, you need to practice. There really is no substitute for this. You need to write. Write short stories, write essays, write anything you can think of until you eventually begin to have a style of your own, a unique direction that your work begins to follow.

I read once about an archer. He explained how learning to be excellent is just plain boring. He pulled back the bow and fired an arrow, again and again, time after time. He did it relentlessly until it became

habit, until it was his nature. He explained that he suddenly realised he was good at it. The arrows would fall where he wanted. He had made the act unconscious and didn't even need to think about it any longer. It might take a decade, and many people think that's the length of time it takes to master a craft like writing, but it will be a decade well spent. You'll find your style shining through and when that happens, your work will be all the better for it.

I was working as an English teacher. It was an on–going struggle to find short stories to use for tests and exams. I gave up and just wrote my own. Once my exam was submitted, the coordinator asked if I had written the story. She said it felt like one of mine: the same sense of humour, the slightly dark tone and twist in the ending I like to employ. It became a tradition at school that I would create a story for the exam, something that mirrored what we'd been studying that semester.

And that's when you know you're doing it right. When people can recognise your work, without knowing it's yours, without you sticking to the same genre and with new, unfamiliar characters, you know you've found your style. It's about bringing a piece of yourself to your craft. It's as easy as that, and it's one of the hardest things you'll ever do.

Unreliable Narration
—Rewarding Trust With Betrayal—

A less common technique in literature is termed the 'unreliable narrator'. It's less used because it's much harder to employ correctly in writing and is much better used in visual media. By definition, the person telling the story is the narrator and so as we read a book, we expect the voice in our head to be correct. None of us would be thrilled to reach the end of a story and find the writer telling us he got it all wrong and really something else had happened. That's just cheating and it makes for an unhappy reader and leaves you with very little chance of selling your second book.

An example of this is where Alice wakes up to find out that her adventures in Wonderland were all a dream. It's like using the 'get out of jail free card' in Monopoly, it's not technically cheating but it isn't doing it the right, fair way, either. When we find this in a book, it's wholly unacceptable. It can only work properly, therefore, if the book is told in the first person or third person limited perspective. First person perspective causes issues in that the readers know that someone is telling them a story, and they're not expecting it to be told totally reliably. Third person limited gives the illusion that the narrator is unbiased, but there's every reason for this not to be the case. Either way, getting an unreliable perspective right without just being plain annoying is very hard.

The term was originally coined in 1961 by Wayne C. Booth but the concept goes back further than that. It was used frequently in crime fiction by authors like Agatha Christie, to the annoyance of her readers. She would frequently omit certain facts, misleading the reader without going as far as actually telling an outright lie. This meant that by the time we reach the conclusion, we aren't in possession of all the facts and so the characters are behaving in ways we didn't expect. It isn't fair, and it's lazy writing of the worst possible kind. A skilfully woven plot can

give you all the information you need and still have the end come as something of a surprise.

Unreliable narrators can be used to reveal a startling detail that will make us look at everything differently. Although they shouldn't be used to disguise plot elements, they can be effectively utilised to alter our perception. In the novel, *The End of Alice* by A. M. Homes, the narrator deliberately withholds the full story of the crime that saw him landed in prison—the rape and murder of a young girl—until the end of the novel. This changes the whole situation of the story, rather than having any influence on the plot. A children's novel, *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler*, which I read while extremely young, had a very clever twist that surprised the whole class. It tells the story of an energetic and annoying young student. Throughout the story the character acts exactly as we'd expect a young boy to behave and the final reveal is that he's actually a girl. It's an incredibly simple reveal but it changes the entire way we think of the story.

Some stories tell various chapters from the perspectives of different characters, each either not knowing, and not revealing, certain details. I once read a surprisingly good *Star Wars* novel that achieved this in a clever way. It took a random scene from the movie that had a number of background characters and then each chapter expanded on one character, showing how they came to be there, or what happened next, the whole story intertwining with details added as we see from each person's unique viewpoint.

Sometimes, the mechanism is used quite obviously or completely without subtlety. In a detective or crime drama, the villain of the piece probably won't reveal the truth, or will openly lie. Of course, this is a character acting out their role and their lies often pave the way for the plot to develop, but it's arguably the most common use of the tool, even if it's arguable whether it is even the correct use of an unreliable narrator at all.

There have been attempts to categorise the forms of unreliable narrator, not particularly successfully, but for those of us who believe that everything should have a label, here are a few:

The Pícaro

This is a narrator who exaggerates and brags of their own achievements. They are usually a smaller character than they appear and they try to seem more important. This is the little man driving a big car, the poor person dripping in fake gold and the fisherman whose fish was always a little bigger than the last time he told you the story. We all know one!

A well written piece will be littered with clues that the narrator's assertions require a lick of salt, such as characters and situations not behaving quite as he had led you to believe they should.

The Madman

A mad narrator is anyone experiencing mental illness of some sort. For whatever reason, and in whatever ways it manifests itself, the person is not mentally competent. It can be anything from serious mental impairments, such as schizophrenia, or relatively minor problems that make it difficult for the character to understand his own mental and emotional state. This is the province of stories like *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* where it is revealed that the narrator isn't who he thought he was.

The Clown

This is the province of narration where the character relaying his tale doesn't take it seriously. They deliberately mess about with the rules of convention, truths and expectations. It could be done for comedic effect or because the narrator enjoys toying with us.

The Naïf

The Naïf is a narrator whose perception isn't fully formed. This can be through limitations of their point of view or their immaturity or mental capabilities. The narrator sees the whole thing and explains it to us, so this is one that isn't in control of all the facts. It might be a younger character seeing the world from a lower perspective or a naive person who just doesn't understand what's happening. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a chapter told from the perspective of a young boy described a sexual act he had witnessed as wrestling.

The Liar

We all know what a liar is, and the implications of it are fairly obvious. This is a narrator with something to hide; they spin a story to us with deliberate omissions in order to present themselves in a more favourable light. Usually this narrator will have something to hide, even if they're hiding it from themselves. This is seen in stories like *The Life of Pi,* which is hailed as a fine piece of modern fiction with a clever twist, but really it's just a very simple mechanism which is really quite obvious from the outset.

So the unreliable narrator deceives the audience in some way, either intentionally or by accident. The author, however, makes no accident by doing this; it must be intentional. It can be done to obscure certain details in order to reveal something which might skew our perception. It shouldn't be used to build a plot, only to strengthen our understanding of a character.

Managing Expectations
—Positioning the Pieces—

TO BE ADDED

This part is mostly already written as an essay, and can be more or less used as such. Maybe start with:

Pop quiz! What's the difference between a story and an anecdote?

Comparisons
—It's Like This—

Good quality writing is peppered with non–literal language including metaphors, allegories, similes, analogies and idioms. Before we can understand how to fit them into our writing, we need to understand what these things actually are. It's not as hard as it sounds.

Metaphor

The most useful tool to the writer is the metaphor. A metaphor is using something to represent something else. It creates a connection between two things that aren't usually related. It's like forming a very subtle comparison that's almost hidden but can be found if you're sufficiently aware of how things work to look for it. In the simplest terms, a metaphor is saying something is something else without making any comment about the quality of that comparison. A metaphor adds depth, a layer of frosting to sweeten your language.

Simile

A simile functions in a very similar way. The difference is that it's far less subtle, and rather than saying that one thing IS another thing, we're merely saying that it is LIKE it. In fact that's literally all it is: saying that this thing we're talking about is like something else that would normally be unrelated. It's not the same as pointing to a small, blunt–nosed dog and saying it looks like a cat. That's a simple comparison of two things that are very much like one another. A simile is looking at that dog and saying that the dog is like an old friend that always brings your whiskey and laughs at your jokes. A simile is like a fire that burns away any doubt about the point you're trying to make.

Allegory

Allegory is a long–standing literary tradition that's still quite commonly used, although the rules of its use have changed over the last few centuries. Traditionally, an allegory is a way to represent immaterial concepts as manifest things. It would often give them overly theatrical weight, and that makes sense when you understand that this is a literary mechanic from a time when reading was rare and theatre was popular. One of the best known examples would be from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, where the ghost of Bob Marley's brother Jacob appears to Scrooge wearing long, heavy chains that represent the weight of his sins in life. The concept of his human failings is now represented as tangible objects.

Nowadays, allegory has changed, shifting its meaning to the point where it's essentially little more than a metaphor applied to a narrative, a set of circumstances, a series of events, etc. It's used to describe when a writer creates a dramatic situation that is meant to represent something else, some historical or political event. An example of how this is used well would be in the story of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where the death and resurrection of Aslan, the lion, is steeped in religious subtext and is meant to represent the biblical story of Christ. There's very little difference between a modern allegory and a metaphor, except that an allegory applies to the entire story, not just a specific thing inside the tale.

In its original form, an allegory might be an ancient typewriter that constantly jams, with the writer struggling to use it representing the difficulties of writing a book; a Chinese computer running Windows Vista would have the same effect. But now such usage has changed so that an entire book would have a connection to something else, and this change is probably for the better.

Analogy

While a modern allegory has much in common with metaphor, analogy has much in common with the simile. You use it to compare a set of similar circumstances to a set of different, but easier to understand, circumstances for the purpose of introducing a difficult–to–grasp new concept in an easier–to–digest manner. This might be used in such a way as describing the use of Microsoft Word to write a book (and the associated frustrations) as being *like wrestling with a greasy pig*. Analogies are not really useful beyond that, and have less literary value to us than other non–literal language.

Idiom

An idiom is any common expression that doesn't mean what was literally said. The key point is that it's common, enough so that there are dictionaries dedicated to them. They're very easy to understand; in fact, they're *a piece of cake*.

But how do we employ these things in writing? The answer is that we should use them skilfully and effectively, and here's how to do that:

Similes are the easiest to use. You can use them as a narrator, explaining to the reader how one thing is like another, or you can have your characters say it for you. That is pretty much the extent of their usefulness in terms of writing. The human brain likes to make parallels; it's how we think. If you were to hear a strange noise and were forced to describe it later, it's unlikely you'd do a very good, scientifically accurate job of it. Instead you'd compare it to several other things you'd heard and end up with some cluttered explanation that gets somewhere near it. It's how we're built, and knowing that means we can paint a more effective image in the minds of our reader.

Her smile can be as bright as sunlight on a summer's day, or *his rage can be as brutally unforgiving as an oncoming train*. Using

language like that can create a more vivid impression in the mind of our readers, and can help change the emotional reaction they will experience. This is particularly effective when you're describing something outside of their usual experience. If you're working in horror and describing a monster they've never seen, then similes help to make it real and tie the fantasy back to the world they know best. Obviously, the same is true in science–fiction, another place where we often need to create a bridge from where we are to where we're taking our readers.

Metaphors are much more commonly used in writing, and all good literature should employ them. I mentioned before that I taught novel analysis using *Siddhartha*, a Nobel Prize winning piece of literature that followed the path of a man towards enlightenment, metaphorically representing the ascent of Buddha. At the same time, we were studying *The Duff* (Designated Ugly Fat Friend,) a rather crude teenage fairy–tale about how an overweight and self–confessed bitch got the hottest boyfriend in school. *Siddhartha* was bereft of depth; it seemed to have no point to make. It rambled and lurched about and completely relied on the subject matter to add gravitas to its plodding, meandering progress. The metaphor throughout was a clumsily constructed papier–mâché statue that crumbled to mush in the presence of the humid mists of literary elegance. The students hated it. I hated it more. *The Duff* was written with the subtle elegance of a ballet–dancing gorilla, but a very clever editing job meant it wasn't at all painful to read. There were actually many interesting things to find buried away inside.

Each character's car metaphorically represented them. The car had the qualities and traits of the character who owned it, rather like the original use of allegory. The protagonist's mother, especially, was interesting. She was represented as a sleek and attractive sports car, albeit a rather tacky and mainstream one, but she was filled with rubbish and was rotten on the inside.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the four children are never physically described and are never fleshed out in any great detail. In an early scene they each mention an animal: each one represents the character. It's all the detail you need to know; the metaphor works so well that it hints at us exactly who the characters are without any need to go further. Small metaphors like that let the reader know that you know how to do your job. If you want to prove it, then your whole plot should metaphorically represent something too (that would be a modern allegory). A story should be about something and you can use metaphors to talk about that thing without mentioning it directly. *The People Under the Stairs* is meant to represent the Regan era, a terrible political time when greed was encouraged and rewarded, for instance.

A more famous example in movies was *Dawn of the Dead*. This zombie movie was set in a shopping mall with jingling music and cheaply made luxury goods shining out from behind every window. Reportedly, it was inspired by a time when the creator of it was walking through a similar shopping centre and became horrified at the lifeless, empty eyes stares of people as they shopped. The movie represented the dehumanising nature of mass consumerism, replacing shoppers with braindead monsters. Elements of your plot should also metaphorically represent one another. A good plot has layers of similar elements working together. Similarly, the titular tiger in *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* is clearly representative of the Gestapo, an ever present overbearing menace who can come to your home at any time, take everything you have, and you'll smile about it like a good citizen. According to the author, it was just a tiger because that makes absolutely perfect sense, but it's unwise to ever assume an artist knows more about their work than you do.

Allegory, used in the modern way, should be a core element of any well–written piece of material. Your work should make a point. Although most people have forgotten, writing is an art, and art should

reflect some aspect of human nature and give people something to think about. The best works of fiction resonate with us because they make a deeper point, give us something to talk about and, perhaps, change our mind about things. Your story should touch on themes that drive you, or events happening in the real world that you feel are unacceptable. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens used this skilfully to show the rise of a poor young man to a position of social respect, showing how society's ideas of value were wrong. Much of his work reflected this, as did the works of George Orwell and many others.

Parallels connect one thing to another. Good fiction should use this tool, as we reveal to the reader how things are alike. There is an effective scene at the end of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. The protagonist started out as the man in white, convinced of the righteousness of his mission (even though the only reason for this is that some crazy old man told him what to do). He has finally won the day, beating the black–armoured villain to the ground and he stands over his enemy, victorious. There is then a moment of reflection and some unusually sharp writing. The hero notices the damage to his mechanical hand and the missing hand of his enemy, a man who is mostly machine. He is now dressed in black and has only succeeded by giving in to his rage, rather than the peaceful means he has sworn to use. He realises that he and his enemy are really not that different after all (a detail which was very directly foreshadowed in the previous movie). The reader now sees how the villain isn't a villain at all, just a person whose life has followed a less sympathetic path than the protagonist's. Drawing parallels between the two shows us some depth to the story, and we should use figurative tools in the same way.

Symbols
—the Shape of Things—

Symbolism is taking an idea that already exists and using it to tell the reader something about what's happening in the story. Symbols are everywhere. They're things, physical objects or even just a drawn shape that represents an idea. The Nazi swastika is an example of a modern symbol. Although it was based on the Manji symbol reversed and rotated, it is now filled with negative connotations due to its association with war atrocities. As soon as we see one, we know what the message is meant to be. Use of symbolism in literature or other media is typically more subtle, and will often go unnoticed at a conscious level. Symbols are used incredibly frequently and once you become aware of them, your mind instinctively knows how to interpret it.

Colours

Colours are frequently used symbolically in literature because they are so accessible. We all know colours. We're all very aware of how they look and the effect they have on the way we see things. In old Western movies, the heroes wear white and the villains wear black. We know at a deep unconscious level that white represents innocence and moral fortitude. That's why women get married in a white dress, and so many protagonists in so many stories wear that colour. Black is darkness; it's mysterious and threatens evil due to our unconscious fear of the unknown. As previously mentioned, this particular use of colour was evident in *Star Wars* with Luke, the innocent hero, dressed mostly in white, and the evil, mysterious villain, Darth Vader, dressed in black. It's a way to establish quickly who is who. Han Solo, a morally ambiguous character wears a literal mixture of the two. It's only later that we start to see a little more complex moral interplay going on in the story.

Red is about passion: it's painted on the outside of many very fast cars and motorcycles. The Flash from the comics wears a red costume due to his power and speed.
Blue is calm and thoughtful, it is the colour of intelligence and consideration;
Grey is careful, safe and logical;
Green is natural and connected to others;
Yellow is happy and motivational.

These colours can be used to give certain impressions in your story if you dress your characters in them, have them painted on their walls and have their cars chosen in those shades. An interesting example is from the TV show, *Breaking Bad*. The protagonist's boring family car was painted a custom shade, a grim, drab colour that represented his life. It was dull and was designed to give the impression of a man being swallowed up by the emptiness of his existence. This was done at considerable expense, since several cars were used for filming. It shows just how important this detail was. Getting these details right matters. They resonate with the reader, and even if they don't see it consciously, at some level it does make an impression.

Animals
Animals are also used to give a symbolic impression of a situation. We're all aware of the obvious ones, such as a dove to represent peace. We've seen that often enough to know exactly what an author is telling us. If a character has pet doves, it would speak of his intentions. Similarly an owl is a bookish, intelligent symbol. They are used when something is meant to look smart or important.

Oxen or Bulls represent hard work, or steadfast resolution. They are fixed on their task, stubborn and difficult, but steady and reliable. In both

the Chinese and the Western interpretation of horoscopes these animals are interpreted the same way, and with good reason.

Dogs or Wolves are often used in literature to represent learning, or an obstacle to learning. We see this in Harry Potter where the three–headed dog needs to be passed before the protagonist can gain access to his goal, and discover the truth of it. We see it in *A Song of Ice and Fire* as the sigil of the Stark family. One of the protagonists doesn't know the truth of his identity, and one of the many story threads is his journey to discover it. His brother becomes a seer; his sister an assassin. Many of the family are on quests of discovery, so it's no accident they had this animal represent their family.

Butterflies are often used to represent control, especially in movies. The Monarch butterfly is often seen when a character is being deceived or controlled, especially a female character.

The Heavens

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we explore a world that exists inside the imagination of the children during a wartime separation from their parents. The country, Narnia, is beset with a never–ending winter, a cold darkness that represents the emptiness, helplessness and fear the children are feeling. In fact, this story is filled with similar religious symbolism. The lion, Aslan represents Jesus and the entire story metaphorically echoes the biblical story of his death and rebirth. It has mentions of gods turning the water to wine, stone tablets, sacrifice and betrayal, all the key elements of that tale. The sun is often used to represent both God and Satan interchangeably. Because the sun is the source of all power, all life on our planet, it is often used to show such power of creation, but the idea that it also represents evil is also common. Indeed, one of the names of the 'devil' is 'Morningstar' which

literally means the rising sun. The sun can also represent masculinity while the moon represents femininity.

The Human Condition

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has a great deal of symbolism which is very easy to overlook. The characters themselves represent things that the author was trying to tell us about. Marvin, the paranoid android represents the workers of the world. He's clinically depressed and labours constantly, doing menial tasks just to keep him busy. He grumbles about his lot but carries on without a choice in the matter. Zaphod represents leaders and governments: he is egotistical, greedy and untrustworthy. He is insane, narcissistic and arrogant. The protagonist Arthur Dent represents the everyman. He's normal in an abnormal world so he anchors our perception of this much different view of the world. In many ways, Arthur represents the author himself, drawing a lot of parallels to him.

Mirrors

Mirrors are commonly used to represent another world. Since we see a slightly distorted version of ourselves in them, we can readily understand the mirror as a gateway to a different place. We see this used in *Alice through the Looking Glass*, and many other stories just like it. Indeed, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the wardrobe, the gateway to the fantasy, has a full–length mirror attached to its door, telling the reader what it represents. This is quite a common trick used in visual media. When a character is demonstrating duality, they will often have a scene involving mirrors to show a different side to them.

Other Inanimate Objects

Symbols can also be physical and inanimate objects. The most obvious might be the simple use of a ring. A ring is a circle, representing completeness and coming together. The story of *King Arthur* has a 'round table' for this reason and *Lord of the Rings* use this symbol to show us that the physical ring isn't a ring at all but the coming together of the forces of evil. If we see a character throw his leg over a powerful motorcycle, we know he's a rebel, he's dangerous and exciting. If we see a woman in glasses, we know she's smart. If we see a suit, we know our character is important, perhaps wealthy. All of these things tell us about the characters, situations and plots, in ways the reader doesn't quite know is happening.

There are many common symbols and you can create your own. If an object gives you a certain impression, it will have a similar effect on everyone else. Think about what these things mean to you and you can probably use them to express the idea to others.

Foreshadowing
—an Early Echo—

Foreshadowing is a literary technique where we hint at what's coming next. We can do this in a number of ways and with any degree of subtlety we choose. It's used as a way to build tension, to warn the reader, and to create a connection with them. We're leading the story and laying out the paving stones for them to walk. It's our job sometimes to mark the way with a little sign.

Foreshadowing can take a number of forms. The simplest is to have two characters mention what might be coming. In a crude and simple form, a wise older character might warn a younger protagonist of a danger they might face up ahead. That's about as subtle as nailing a warning sign to the outside of your book but it is commonly used, especially in horror fiction. Sometimes we want the reader on the edge of their seat, we want them shouting at that main character in their minds that they shouldn't be doing that stupid thing. They know what's coming for them, what's lurking in the shadows. In those cases, subtlety is best used sparingly, if at all!

More often we want the reader working things out for themselves. We might use an example of the situation that's coming in a smaller form. If we want a big climatic battle, we might have a smaller battle with a similar outcome. Using the situation to repeat itself is a more common use of foreshadowing and a method that doesn't beat the reader around the head with the details. If we use this method carefully then we're dropping hints that they can follow as the narrative unravels, the way a crime writer leads the reader into the mystery. If it's done skilfully, it puts the reader into the mind of the detective. In the case of a story involving a character like Sherlock Holmes, it allows us to follow along with him. Such a character is there for us to marvel at, not

necessarily imagine ourselves as. Hints, clues and foreshadowing help us to work with the story and begin to unravel the details for ourselves.

Sometimes foreshadowing is used as a way to create a bit of complexity and raise the overall standard of our writing. If used properly, it shows the reader that we understand our craft properly. We foreshadow an upcoming scene with a subtle sign of what's coming so that the reader knows we're doing our job. It's often used in the same way as a gunslinger might spin his revolver. It's a sign of professionalism that we understand how to properly construct a story. In many cases, it really is little more than a little dramatic flourish where we take the opportunity to just show off a little.

Scenes should generally not surprise us with the sudden introduction of new information at a critical point. On the contrary, surprises work well when they are the result of combining or playing out known details in an unexpected way. We should have a certain expectation about what's to come and the way characters act. An event that doesn't fit would jar the reader out of their immersion in the narrative. For that reason, when we create a bold stroke, we should foreshadow it so the action isn't entirely unexpected. We want the reader immersed in the story and so we allow that to happen by introducing the big ideas previously, just as we would properly introduce a main character.

Often a writer will want to misdirect the reader. That's a perfectly valid literary tool but it's not to be confused with foreshadowing. Foreshadowing isn't a way to shout 'over there' while something is happening in the other direction. It's an echo of the future happening in the present. It is our way of including the reader in our narrative and it's a technique I would expect to see in any quality piece of writing. Consequently, I was unable to find a single instance of it in the novelization of the original *Star Wars* movie.

A good example of foreshadowing done well is in, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. In the story, George killing Candy's dog foreshadows the event of him later killing Lennie, as the dog is a literary parallel to that character. The circumstances of the death of the dog were the same as Lennie's, both being unceremoniously shot in the back of the head.

Twists
—Trust Nobody—

There is no more satisfying way to close a book than by being rewarded with something you hadn't seen coming, but was entirely predictable in hindsight. This is a sign of respect that an author has for his work, as well as respect for the reader. It means the writer his done their job and has considered how to write a good ending that fits the story. The author thanks the reader for their investment of time and money in what they have written.

A good way to do this is to add a twist. A twist, in terms of literature, is an unexpected happening or shift in the story. It is usually in the form of a surprise reveal. While a good twist is a wonderful thing to find in a well–written book, a bad one can sour the story and turn your reader against you. For that reason, a great deal of care and effort must be put into creating this element of your story. Because it is your story, there is no way that anyone else can help you plot your twist. The twist is dependent on your characters, their relationships to one another and to the reader, the settings and the situations. There is no silver bullet or magic formula that makes creating an interesting twist work; that is what makes them work.

The way to make a twist that actually surprises, engages and satisfies the reader is to have it in mind from the outset. A good twist will be built into the plot, designed into the DNA of the characters from the very beginning. It will form part of the very spine of your story and will be tied into every detail of the plot. There is no shortcut here. If you try to add a cheap, lazy twist on the end of a story, the reader will smell it on you. They'll feel the players in your story acting out of character and you'll lose their interest.

A lot of crime stories rely on simple reveals that the murderer is who you least expected it to be. They'll then reveal that the reasons for

this are known to the brilliant detective but they choose not to share it with the reader. This lazy trope has become a cliché, sent up in countless parodies of the genre. To make it work, the narrator will have shared all of the information with the reader and they'll be aware of every detail; they just won't have interpreted it correctly, due to skilful plotting. A good reveal will make the reader realise that, *of course*, that was the answer all along. You'll leave them asking why they didn't see it for themselves.

The simplest twist is to subvert your expectation of the character. For this to work, the reader must feel that they completely understand and appreciate who the character is. You will then reveal that there's an element of their life that the reader weren't fully aware of, even though the clues were there all along. This can be as simple as revealing a male character is actually a female, for instance. It might be that their moral compass was wrong all along, or that they were unaware of their own history. This kind of twist must still fit the character and must still be logical but it will surprise the reader by showing that their assumptions about the person were wrong.

Another version of this is to show that a character is not who or what you think they are. This is a more common type of reveal and is not as hard to weave into your story. This is less often a reveal about the protagonist but more usually focused on the antagonist or other supporting character. This might reveal that a friend or ally is actually working against the hero or the opposite where a presumed enemy is actually nothing of the sort. This is a commonly used mechanism in spy thrillers or crime dramas because it's a simple way to subvert expectations without a huge investment from the author. It's also a very common thing to see in pulp fiction, episodic TV dramas and movies not designed to challenge the reader.

The next type of surprise is to show that the person's relationship to the world they live in is different to what is expected! This is slightly

more difficult to write, and takes more careful planning, but it will impress the reader more. This is where the protagonist finds out, together with the reader, that everything they knew is wrong. In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* the final reveal is that Earth is actually not a real planet at all but was artificially constructed. Furthermore, the entire situation was done for reasons which tie into the whole wider story of the book. It takes the situation the characters have been dealing with and adds the final surprise, subverting their entire understanding of the universe around them. When this is done skilfully it brings the plot together, actually providing the climax to the story and leaving the reader feeling like they've undertaken a worthwhile journey. It has changed their perception of the world you've created and perhaps challenged their opinion of their own world.

In movies, this was done well in *The Sixth Sense* where one of the main characters discovers that his situation is totally different to what he believed was true. This brings his entire world down around him, changing everything the audience knows about this story, in spite of direct clues being littered throughout.

Often a twist can be drawn from a misdirect. This is common in crime stories where something is strongly suggested in the plot which later turns out to not be true, or at least is wildly different from what we expected. A misdirect is when we show the reader something happening but it didn't happen, at least not in the way we've lead them to believe. A common mechanism to use is to show a character dying, but to later reveal that they're not dead at all; it was all a trick. This is often used in murder mysteries where the author will keep trying to confuse the reader until eventually revealing the truth of it all. Many times, the killer might have been someone we thought we'd seen removed from the equation. In essence it works like a magic trick, where the magician will get your attention focused in one direction while a switch happens in the other. You will draw your reader to look at something happening while

something else is really happening that you show with less detail, hoping they'll not pick up on the significance of it.

Another twist will be happening only between the narrative and the reader themselves. It will suggest that they have understood the world incorrectly. This works by showing the reader how something they never saw is what's actually driving the plot. In a short story about atrophy by Isaac Asimov there's a slow build through different periods of time as characters discuss the energy of the universe running out. Each step shows the evolution of technology and the advancements of the humans as they discuss the problem. The eventual reveal is that humans completely surpass the biological and become something far greater, solving the problem of the universe running out of energy by restarting it, creating the world all over again and being responsible for the Big Bang itself.

Expedition to Earth by Arthur C Clarke is a short story about a ship heading to Earth. Aliens make contact, revealing that we are ancient colonists and these are our ancestors coming to share their more advanced technology with us. They reveal they have the solution to our problems and that it's something we would never have expected. This was written after the 'Out of Africa' theory suggested all human life had come from that part of the world and had diversified from a common ancestry. The story took that concept and showed it to us in an unexpected way.

Another common twist is the idea that characters aren't what they thought. They might be imaginary, two might really only be one, or they might have mental illness and have been seeing the world through a distorted lens. We might see the world in the wrong order; the narrative might trick us by showing events in a different order to when they happened, hiding key details until we finally have an understanding of what really happened. The author might reveal that this isn't really taking place where we thought. It could be that this city or world is

really a simulation, a dream or some other altered reality. Some stories sell themselves on the idea that it was all a trick, a game or a test and that nothing was real at all. *Dead Man's Shoes* has the protagonist and his mentally challenged brother show up in town in search of revenge for some yet unknown wrongdoing. It's later revealed that said wrongdoing resulted in the brother committing suicide, and the brother we saw was a representation of the protagonist's overwhelming sense of guilt for the way he'd treated him in the past. It was a big surprise, but it made perfect sense in context and served to give us a much better understanding of the protagonist who had mostly just been portrayed as angry and vengeful.

These are some of the common mechanisms but there are many more. There is only one person who can create a successful twist ending to your story, and that's you. Each twist will have to be as unique and imaginative as the tale you're telling. Just be careful that the plot logic supports your reveal and that you avoid the careless and overdone clichés.

Finished!
—The End?—

Congratulations on finishing your book. Sadly, this is the point where you now realise that a book is never actually finished. You can read it back a hundred times and you'll find something new that's wrong every single time you do.

At some point, your book will have to be abandoned. It will be like sending your child out into the world, never knowing with any degree of certainty that your job preparing it was done correctly. You can only know you did your best and hope it has everything it needs to make it. But while you can never be totally and completely sure it's ready, you can certainly give it your absolutely best shot. The time to abandon the book, to close it one last time and call it finished is when you know you can't do any better. The end of your first draft is a very, very long way from that point. My own personal preference about dealing with a completed first draft is a process that works very well for me.

The first step in the process I have when I'm writing is that I have a frequent collaborator whom I use to good effect. Chapter by chapter, I will send my work to my friend and he will read it, assess it and get back to me as soon as he can. This means that, unlike most writers, I have quality running feedback as I go. I cannot overstate how valuable that is. Once we reach the last chapter, he'll give me his impressions and I'll hammer it into shape accordingly.

Then, I go away! I leave it alone for two weeks. I enter a kind of twilight zone where there's nothing much to actually do. I'm not working on plots or character development, nuances of metaphorical representation, allegory, idiomatic speech patterns or building drama. I'm just me, usually drinking too much caffeine during the day and too much whiskey at night. I have always found that having some distance

from my work makes it a lot clearer when I go back to it. I'm looking at it with fresh eyes. Before I mail the chapters to my colleague, I write them, and then edit them once, cleaning up the many errors that creep into the work. What he gets is far from perfect, but it's readable and it shows where we're going.

After a couple of weeks, I can go back and I will always find a lot of things I'm unhappy with. There will be plot holes where I changed my mind about what a character should do. There will be people acting out of character since I had a better understanding of them after working on them during the process of creating a book. A lot of things will be out of place and that second draft should identify those things and give you a chance to put them right.

Finishing a book is not the end, and unlike some others, I won't claim it's the beginning of anything, either. It's a process from beginning to end and completing the first draft is a very important part of it. In some ways, it's the hardest part, from the point of view of staying motivated, keeping yourself going and pushing yourself to keep your mind in that world. But in many other ways it's the easiest. The fun part is now behind you. You have editing, correcting, and then the whole other matter of trying to sell it ahead of you.

Well done for getting this far, but you don't have a book yet. You have a draft and the thing separating what you have from what you want it to be, is a lot more hard work.

Drafts
—When Will This Ever End?—

By the time you consider your book to be ready for mass consumption there's a good chance you'll come to hate it. There is no alternative to simply going over it, time and time again, rereading and correcting it until it is right. It probably still won't be right, but hopefully it will be less wrong.

The first draft is not a book. It's really just a scaffold: a set of notes that may or may not outline the story you want to tell. We need to be very careful about being too precious about our work. It's a good time to get feedback from any source we can. If we can get feedback from someone who reads a lot and knows what they're talking about, even better.

I have seen this too many times: I've been handed samples of work that just aren't ready and I've received angry responses to constructive criticism. What do you suppose is my reaction to that? I don't bother to help them again, so a useful source of feedback is lost forever. Nobody can claim that a first draft is a final draft. It would be unspeakably arrogant to think that we can create a best seller on our first attempt. It does happen but usually only because it's hit upon a current trend. When that rare event occurs, it's because the book isn't a risk, it isn't different or it isn't really interesting enough to get published at all. It still takes a good editing job to create something that fits nicely into the mainstream trends. Is that what literature needs—another vampire book, another dystopian teen saviour?

Feedback is very important. You need to establish what works and what doesn't. A character you love may be hated by everyone else, or a situation you felt seemed real might be jarringly unacceptable to others. One of the main things to remember is that you're too close to it to be objective. Not many of us can read our own material with a fair and

critical eye. For instance, the previous comments about the likelihood of getting your first work published… Those comments might be entirely true, they might be utterly correct but they give a sense of the writer being bitter and cynical. They are poorly conceived and leave the reader with the wrong impression. We all make mistakes like that. We all give extra weight to our opinions, our own perspectives and our own beliefs. We often presume, quite incorrectly, that the entire readership will sympathise with us; often, they won't.

Another common problem is the plot. We know it, we created it and we know exactly how it works. We understand our big reveal, we get the twist and we chuckle at our cleverness. But very often, the clues we left aren't bold enough for the reader to follow, or are too obvious. We have to have led them to the ending just right but judging how to do that is extremely difficult. We need to assess how well we've done: how easy is the plot to follow and make sense of? Does our ending work? Do we have a conclusion that leaves the reader satisfied? That's a very difficult thing to get right. Some books hammer the point home, treating the readers like children and trying to spoon–feed them all the answers. Others try to show you how clever they are by leaving you with an ending that makes no sense whatsoever.

The best example of this is from *The Matrix* trilogy. The first movie was excellent. The plot threads draw together into the final reveal that Neo was ascending to a position which was always pre–ordained. The final act of the protagonist becoming what he was born to be left the viewer happy that they'd been treated with respect. The second movie dropped its pants and urinated all over that. It had a scene with the antagonists literally telling the protagonist that he wouldn't understand what was going on because he was not smart enough. It was like pointing to the audience and saying, 'We're so much smarter than you that we've written a movie that you can't follow. Look how clever we

are!' It was no great surprise how terribly the second movie fared, compared to the first.

American Gods by Neil Gaiman had a deeply unsatisfactory ending of a different sort. The book was compelling and interesting all the way through, with a protagonist whose journey was fun to follow along with. The ending just wasn't up to the task of tying up everything that had built up to it. It was like saving for a month to buy a gigantic firework that just fizzled out with a weak little pop.

Does your ending feel right? Does the story leave the reader with something to think about, as well as feeling like they're sufficiently involved in the events and the characters for them to know what's going to happen next? Does it give them closure? If you've developed your characters correctly, and the plot makes proper sense then you won't need to conclude with a line like, 'and they all lived happily ever after.'

Many romance stories end on the first kiss. The reader is left to create the rest of the events for themselves and should have no trouble doing so. There will be a multitude of other problems. Plot holes are common and need to be carefully sewn up. I once accidentally put a character in two places at the same time, just because I needed him there and didn't notice what I'd done; we all make stupid mistakes! If you weren't the sort of person who made terrible life choices you wouldn't have chosen to become an author in the first place.

My usual process is to finish my books chapter by chapter. I then sweep through and give it a second read. That catches the worst of the grammar, spelling and content mistakes as I go. I then mail the work to a fellow writer I work closely with and he feeds back on it. I take his advice and try to incorporate his ideas into my work as I go.

When I finish, I go away for at least a week, ideally two. The next draft puts everything right where it should be. Only then do I consider it ready for the editor. I will admit, I'm very lucky to be able to work closely with someone competent, who can help make what I write work

as well as it does. But I wouldn't have a friend like that if I hadn't put in the work to get this far. Benefits like that have to be earned.

My second draft process is pretty short and has been whittled down with careful practice and a lot of hard work. Yours might be longer or shorter still, depending on the standard of your writing. As you begin, it's best to take your time. Go over everything carefully, make use of spelling and grammar checkers and take all the feedback you can get. Pay particular attention to the key elements. The most important things to focus on when you go back over your work are these…

Beginning

Does your introduction do a good job? Is the reader captivated enough to keep reading? Have you shown them enough of their work for them to step inside of your narrative and have you posed questions that the readers want to have the answers to? In short, have you done enough not to keep them reading, but to make them *want to* keep reading?

Climax

The climax of a story is the moment of highest tension. It's the grand finale, the moment everything leads to. It's a big fight in an action story. It's the big kiss in a romance. It has to be more significant, more important than any other part of the story, with odds that are higher than ever before.

Conclusion

The conclusion has to work, even though by the time they've got there, you already have their money. It has to leave the reader smiling. It has to make them feel like every page, every sentence and every word was worth the time they gave it. If your book sells, it will sell by word–of–mouth. People recommend good books to others and they won't do that if they feel cheated or let down by what they've read.

Protagonist

Is the protagonist sympathetic? It doesn't so much matter that we entirely like them, it's much more important that we understand them. There are plenty of anti–heroes and tarnished characters who are far more popular than more morally correct characters. A good protagonist will carry the story. They have to be interesting enough for us to want to keep up with them. They can't be too boring, or we'll lose interest and they can't be too awful, or we'll just start to hate them.

Antagonist

Is the opposite of the protagonist a suitable foil? Is this person a challenge, do they offer enough of a counter to the main character to show off who they really are and what they can aspire to? Is your antagonist an engaging character in their own right? Do they feel real, interesting and intriguing? Are they balanced correctly so that they're a person who presents questions to the reader and also poses a real and believable threat to the central character?

Setting

Is the setting big enough? Does the world your characters live in give them all the scope they need? Is it a good fit to the tone of the story and does it set the right tone? You can't easily draw a starscape on a white background, no more than you can set a fantasy story in a boring, empty field or an epic battle on an airport tarmac. Did you create a world that fits the scope of your tale with enough depth to draw the reader right into the lives your characters are living?

More importantly, do all these things work well together? Chances are that you can't tell for yourself.

The Hook
—Catching Your Fish—

Comment: Make sure this naturally flows from previous section.

The hook is an almost forgotten art in writing. It hearkens from a shadowy time when literature was appreciated for originality. It was a glorious time before vampire novels filled the shelves, and young–adult dystopian novel adaptations filled the cinemas.

Its naming is based on a fishing analogy. To catch a fish you need to bait it: you need to attract it by offering it something it thinks that it wants. You then slowly allow it to get closer and closer, flashing your promises at it, making that seductive suggestion that the fish needs what you're offering. Then, when it's too late for the fish, it bites. The hook, a sharp little barb, jabs into the fish and it's caught. The battle is largely won. There might be some thrashing, some beating around to escape, but the hook has done its job. You've got your prey on the end of the line and you're not letting it go.

The literary hook works in much the same way. Your bait is the cover, the title, the blurb on the back cover, the listing, categorising and genre selection. All those things flash the promise to the audience, offering a tantalising glimpse of what they might find. They're the shiny little promise that gets the reader to think about your book, to consider it enough to pick it up and take a serious look. Your hook is an idea, a concept. They were considering your book, perhaps casually, maybe just taking a sideways glance, but now they see the idea behind it. That's your hook and if it does its job, it takes them further, drawing them in.

Your hook is the unique selling point. It's the thing that sets your book apart from all others. It might be a fresh approach to a genre, it might be a different and exciting way to tell a story, or it might be an intriguing and unpredictable crossing of ideas. Whatever it is, the hook's

got to be smart enough to sell the concept of your story so that the browser becomes a reader. Concepts can be simple or complex but what they have to do is connect with your audience and make them ask questions. They want to know how that would work, how it would read and what new things it could reveal to them. Your hook will fill their mind with these questions and your book will promise the answers.

Some good examples of hooks are:

- *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is about an ordinary man waking up one morning to find the Earth is to be demolished, to make way for a hyperspace expressway. Straight away, the plot of the book poses questions. What will happen if the Earth is destroyed? It's an unusual plot and it catches our interest immediately.
- *13 Reasons Why* tells the story of a student who commits suicide. The story is told through recordings which explain their motivation. This is an interesting and unique narrative structure.
- The movie *Donnie Darko* revolves around a mentally–ill young man who is told the world will end at a specific time by Frank, a six–foot–tall demonic rabbit. Paired with a serious, dark tone, this idea was compelling enough to warrant giving the movie a look.

Hooks can really be anything. It comes down to that unique idea that makes your work slightly different, better or special. It's the thing that separates you from the rest. *Alien* was a sci–fi movie, matched to the tone and style of a haunted house, slasher horror movie, but otherwise didn't do anything particularly different. It rehashed ideas with an eye to a high level of quality, but the coming together of the genres was an intriguing enough idea to interest people in the story. If you don't have fresh hook that you can explain to your potential readers, then you really might need to put some more work into your concept. Ideas that repeat

what other people have already done rarely do well, and even more rarely get published.

Beta
—Going From Second–Rate—

One of the most important processes you can put your book through is the beta test. Editors are hard to find, similarly a good proofreader is both difficult to procure and expensive. Beta–readers are available at the bargain price of somewhere between absolutely nothing and a half–decent cup of coffee.

A beta–reader is someone you know who will read your work and give you honest feedback on it. This can actually be much harder than it sounds. Many of your friends will be reluctant to read your *rubbish*, which is how your early attempts are likely going to be presumed to be. It's also an emotionally jarring experience to put your work into the hands of others and actively seek negative opinions. While they might seem unfair, it will help you to develop that thick skin that will become increasingly essential to your survival.

Writing requires a thick skin: an inability to be offended by the opinions of others. A writer with a thin skin, who's offended by comments, will simply not make it. Their soul will be crushed, and their hopes and dreams will be chewed up and spat back out. You essentially will have to become a walking blob of emotional scar tissue. To develop this, remember that opinions are subjective and that most of them aren't particularly valid in any case.

I once had a negative review added to a motorcycle travel book I had written. The reviewer commented how disappointed she was that the book wasn't about bicycles but about motorcycles instead. Another gave it a scathing review because it contained a swear word and he claimed I should burn in hell for my foul language. Clearly, taking that seriously would do to my mental health what my mental health has done to my writing. The correct way to deal with criticism is to listen, evaluate, remember it's an opinion and no more valid than anyone else's, and then

decide if it's warranted or not. If it's emotional in nature, especially in the vein of being offended by your work, it's generally of less value. If people are offended, they're often advocating censorship of something they don't enjoy. People who do that are on the shakiest of logical ground and their opinion is generally not to be taken too seriously. For this reason, we choose our beta–readers with some care, tempered against fighting to get people actually willing to read our early work.

Ideally we are looking at people from our target audience. We want people who match the kind of people we expect to read our book. From the pool of our friends, that shouldn't be too hard a stretch. You might write mainly for yourself and people like you, so your friends are likely to be a fairly good match. However, you shouldn't stop there. You should try to get your work into the hands of as many people as possible, people from diverse backgrounds and across a wide range of demographics. Not only do you want people who will appreciate your writing to comment on it, you want the opinions of people you expect to hate it.

There is no such thing as a bad or invalid opinion. Communicate to your beta–readers that you want an honest, blunt and unbiased opinion. If your work really is rubbish, you need to hear that. You will never grow beyond your weaknesses without hearing about your shortcomings and learning to overcome them. Search through your friends, sign up to forums and find as many people as possible willing to beta–read your book for you. You may even want to construct a form for them, a series of questions that might help them express their feelings about your work.

Focus on your weaknesses and the rough edges of your work and see if the beta–readers flag the same problems that you suspect are there. In some cases we're our own worst critic, in others, we're blind to our faults. You need to balance these things out against one another.

The kinds of questions that you should be asking are:

- **Introduction**—Did the beginning of the book make you want to find out more? Are there questions on the first page that make you want to seek out answers? Does the opening paragraph set the scene adequately and does it do the right job of drawing you in. If there are weaknesses in your work, this is the place they're most likely to manifest. Getting the opening part of the book right is no easy thing and it's one of the most important aspects.

- **Protagonist**—Get your beta–readers to give honest feedback about the nature of your main character. Do they like, sympathise or identify with them? If they don't, they won't engage with the story. You're likely to feel a deep and powerful connection with your protagonist since they are, essentially, a piece of you. Don't let that cloud your judgement. Make sure you're open to the opinions of others.

- **Plot**—Does the story make sense? If it does, then is there enough interest to keep things moving along adequately? Is it interesting to read? Plot needs to move along fast enough to engage the reader but not so fast that they can't keep up. It's another thing that's hard to get right and beta–reading will help you to work out if you've got the right balance.

- **Would you read another one?**—Would the reader be interested to know more? If you've done a good job of developing the characters then they will feel almost as real to your reader as people they know. They will want to know more about them, to have more adventures alongside them. Would they welcome another book from you?

- **What did you love and hate?**—Don't be afraid to discuss what works and what doesn't. There will be things in every story that some people will hate and you need to know where that is in yours. If you've struck the right tone, they'll hate the antagonist or whatever grim situation the hero is pitched against. If they hate anything else, you might have work to do. Don't take it personally. Take their suggestions on board. If you're lucky, you can get multiple beta–readers and you'll be able to filter their feedback. One might hate your main character, the rest might not. Perhaps most will dislike the setting. In that case, treat the opinions as suggestions and decide how best to proceed. If people universally dislike an element of the story, you should probably address it.

- **The ending**—Of all the elements of your story, this is where you need to listen the most to the readers. Does this work? It probably doesn't. Many authors have a tendency to rush endings, because we understand the story so well ourselves. Getting this part right is critical and we need to be most open here to what our beta–readers are telling us.

The beta–reading process is a critical step in getting the story right. It's the difference between creating a story you like and writing a story others will love. Take all the opinions on board and carefully weigh them against what you're trying to achieve. If multiple people agree that something isn't right, there's a good chance that it actually isn't.

This is not about censoring yourself or imposing limitations, it's about getting it right so the story is everything it can be. It's also a crucial process in growing an as author and mastering your craft.

Editing
—This *Will* Never End!—

After working through the drafts, the next step is editing and proofreading. This is a pretty horrible time because it's the first time your work will be in the hands of people whose job it is to change things.

There's a fine line between proofreading and editing but your work will probably need both. Editing is ripping the work to pieces, moving things about, changing elements of plot and characters and basically turning your work into something worth selling. Proofreading is much less traumatic. It's correcting the grammar, punctuation and spelling. Both of these services will generally have to be paid for, and good work is not cheap.

Apart from the cost, there's the difficulty of finding someone competent and trustworthy. If you're very lucky, you'll be able to secure the services of an editor you can trust. There will be elements of your work that you just can't bear to see changed and you've got to know that your editor will respect that. While we should be open to positive criticism, it must remain your own work, and your own vision.

You can secure the services of a proofreader online; most are garbage. I used one, a person working in the same city as me. I gave him a sample of my work. It came back with all new mistakes, evident from the very first page. I was not impressed and challenged him about this. He replied, to my surprise, that he wasn't aware he wanted me to actually correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. You would hope that this is an extreme example of how awful this part of the process can be. After that, I tried finding an affordable online service. One had an advert with five grammatical errors in it that even I could spot, and I am not an expert by any means; in fact, I consider grammar my weakest point. Eventually I found my editor and we managed to go forwards,

collaborating further until we ended up, in some cases, literally building works together on a fifty–fifty basis.

Handing over your work to an editor is a daunting prospect and one that shouldn't be taken lightly. However, it is a necessary part of the process. It's quite unlikely that we'll be capable of turning out a fully–realised novel by ourselves. We all have blind spots; we all make mistakes. Editing is about changing elements of the story, maybe moving characters around, changing emphasis and reordering chapters and scenes. Proofreading is just correcting mistakes. For this reason, proofreading services are generally affordable, and editing services are usually not. This is why drafting, and redrafting with feedback from our friends is so very important. Most of us, as first time writers, just can't afford to have the work edited before we submit it to a publisher, or self–publish.

Readers rarely take this into account. It's incredibly jarring to have your work compared to something that's gone through a big, mainstream publishing house. Many people will comment that they managed to find an error so the book was suddenly beneath their contempt, but will happily read utter garbage with everything spelled correctly; we're looking at you, *50 Shades of Grey*!

If you can't afford an editor, that means you have to do the job yourself. That means everything must be in its proper place. Nothing should jar the reader out of the narrative. An example of that was in the dreadful, awful, horrible *Star Wars* novelization. I was stuck in a sealed security building and wasn't able to leave. The last book I had available was the novel of the original *Star Wars*. I wasn't expecting great things but it failed to deliver even on those low, low expectations. There was a scene where, in the movie, the protagonist is confronted by a creature wrapped in bandages that yells and holds up a stick. It cuts to the next scene of him being dragged along unconscious, the reader left with the presumption that he was attacked. The novel fills in the blanks, telling us

the young hero of the story sees his attacker and faints, flopping to the ground and passing out from the sheer terror at the sight of a man with a stick. I swore and threw the book in the dustbin and spent the rest of the afternoon reading the backs of biscuit wrappers.

This is a great example of jarring the reader out of the narrative. I wonder how a half–decent editor didn't pick up on that. How was that not flagged as just an awful piece of writing that made no sense? It did nothing to establish our protagonist as a brave young man at all. Later in the story he confronts the entire government of the galaxy, so there was no consistency in his character whatsoever. It would be bad enough if we made that mistake, it's horrible that an editor of such a well–known, and high–selling piece of work failed to pick that up.

Another thing to be aware of, that readers rarely take into account, is that rules are not set in stone. Every country has different grammatical rules. Some vary only very slightly. Use of grammatical mechanisms changes over time as well, and what might be considered incorrect only a few years ago is now considered acceptable. G. R. R. Martin quite famously used some bizarrely antiquated–sounding made–up grammatical constructions throughout his series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which was adapted into the TV series *Game of Thrones*. He also chose some eccentric spellings of common words and invented new phrases, just to rub it in our faces. A real mummer's farce, ser!

The American market is the worst offender of this, assuming anything that doesn't correspond to their version of English is incorrect. There is actually no definitively correct version of English. So if you're hiring a proofreader, or doing the work yourself, make sure you both agree on what version of the language you're using. It's best, if you're going to hire someone, to find a native speaker. It's not the greatest idea to hire an Australian to correct something into UK English, unless they are exceedingly well–qualified. In that case, however, you won't be able to afford their service. It's true that if you get picked up by a publisher

then your work may be professionally edited and corrected, but only a small minority of authors find themselves so lucky. Even assuming you are that lucky, you really should expect to take the responsibility of editing yourself. Your job is to make sure the book is ready to read and nobody else should really be doing that for you.

Done
—the First Step Towards Disappointment—

So you've finished your novel polished it to a shine. Your blood, sweat and tears are now wrapped up in the carefully–chosen words of your creation and your innermost thoughts and fears are there for the world to see. Every comma is in the right place, and every adjective is perfectly descriptive. Now you have to decide what you're going to do with it. You have several options and, as usual for writers, none of them are very good.

- **Traditionally publish**—There are publishing houses ranging from the largest in the world right down to the tiny ones operated by just a couple of guys in their spare room. Most of both kinds probably aren't worth bothering with.
- **Self–publish**—You can, in the digital era, publish your own books yourself on the internet. You can even get paperbacks made, if your customers so desire.
- **Post it for free—**Many people don't realistically expect to make money from their work so they post it on sites where it can be downloaded free of charge. It's shocking how many people think that, just because they were able to string together enough words to fill a paperback, they deserve to make a living off it for the rest of their lives. The only thing more shocking is the grim reality of it all. For this reason, posting your work online isn't a terrible option. Getting your work read should be your first priority. You will grow from every comment, every negative review and every reader. Even someone trying to wreck your confidence is helping you in some way, but none of that happens if nobody is reading your work.

- **Do nothing—**The overwhelmingly vast majority of writers take this option. They know they can't afford a professional edit: they either don't have the financial resources or they don't fully believe in themselves. For whatever reason, they end up with their work sitting on a computer somewhere, doing absolutely nothing whatsoever. This is probably the least productive way to write, but it's where most of our first efforts belong. Just as your first line sells your first paragraph and that, in turn, sells your first chapter, people won't buy your second book if they hated your first. Sometimes it really is better to leave your first effort to one side.

Submission
—Putting It Out There—

Submitting to agents and publishers couldn't hurt, so why not try?

Publishers

Every publisher has a submission process. Some are completed online, some use forms and some require you to send an email. They usually require a cover letter, a sample of your work, which would normally be the first three chapters, and a complete synopsis.

The cover letter has no set formula. A rule of thumb is that it should contain three main paragraphs: the first should introduce your proposal. It should set the scene of what the story is about, describe the challenges your protagonist faces and pose questions the reader might want to find answers for. The second paragraph tells them all about you. It should explain who you are, what you've written before, what your qualifications are and why you're passionate about your craft. The last paragraph should explain the technicalities of your work. They want you to explain to them how it fits into the market, what potential there is for sequels and what you see as the future for your writing.

There are no hard and fast rules, but this does seem to be the general consensus. A few publishers actually demand this formula, some demand others. Most may ask you to submit a brilliant letter with no guidance whatsoever. Interestingly, there are sites that offer support and advice on this and usually that's by showing successful application letters. Most don't follow the above formula at all, and analysis shows there's no structural format to them that shows any kind of convention. So, effectively, you're on your own there.

It's worrying that they ask more about market analysis and where your book fits into the mainstream than what it's about. I have never

been asked about the underlying message and how it moves forward the literary spectrum. Nobody cares about that stuff anymore!

What is often said on forums, sites and columns is that it's best to personally tailor your application. They suggest you find out about the interests of the people you're submitting it to and find a way to flatter their ego. Yes, they actually advise that you flatter the ego of a professional whose job it is to form valid opinions about the quality of a piece of art from a sample of the work.

The second thing you're asked to give is a sample. Again, they usually ask for the first three chapters, or a word count that should be roughly the same. Some only ask for one, some ask for a great deal more. I've encountered one that required the entire novel but it is much rarer. I would be very, very careful about submitting more than three chapters. Certainly you should check the fine print of the submission first to make sure you're handing over absolutely no permissions or rights to your work.

The last thing you'll be asked for is a synopsis. Almost without fail they will want a single page document that shows all the main points of the plot, including the ending. Some don't ask for the conclusion, especially if your story has a twist in the tale, but most do. The synopsis details all the twists and turns of your plot in as simplistic a way as possible; after all you have only one page to write it on. It should be given in third person perspective in the present tense. It should read in sentences that sound like, *'The main character goes to his family home and discovers it in ruins!'* As painful as it is to reduce the entire work to a single page—work that's taken you a huge chunk of your life, your effort, your time, your blood, sweat and tears to create—that's what they want you to do.

In essence, if they actually went out of their way to make this difficult, degrading and downright illogical, they couldn't make a better job of it. There is an argument that maybe that's intentional. Maybe they

want to weed out the ones who aren't serious so that only the best remain? If so, it's incredibly misguided. It's just another clear sign that the author is being judged on something other than the quality of their work, or even their marketability. What better assessment of a person's seriousness as a writer than the ability to complete a well put–together novel? You could also argue that there's no better way to judge the quality and content of a person's work than by assessing the content and quality of that work. However, in these modern times, publishers like to have their egos flattered by a diligent study of their Twitter accounts to see what they like and then focusing your attention entirely on them.

The publishing industry has convinced itself that they are what's important, not the authors who create the products they sell, and not selling those products because they appear to be singularly incapable of doing that either. It's the same as the rest of the media, where everything is being dumbed down and everything looks from only a single perspective. Looking out from anything else is considered offensive. This is why we live in a world where, in certain countries, history is considered flexible, young people can't work out what toilet to use and science isn't actually very scientific.

Agents

If you submit an unsolicited manuscript to a publisher, it will probably get less attention than a female stripper at a gay wedding. To be taken even remotely seriously, you need an agent. An agent will get behind your work, they will want to promote you, they will believe in you, they will take 10% of everything you earn (or more) and they will do their very best to get your work in print. The way that normally works is that the people in the agencies and the people in the publishing houses have personal connections which would be impossible for you to foster yourself. So to get your work published, you have to form a parasitical relationship with someone who will probably do a lot less than you've

already done yourself. To get an agent you have to go through almost exactly the same process that we go through to submit to a publisher, only with more flattery.

In short, there's no magic bullet. Publishers aren't looking for quality work. They're not looking for interesting, thought–provoking and entertaining new material. They're looking for things that are exactly like what they made money on before, and they're looking to have the message they believe in packaged for easy delivery into open minds.

It's telling that they're not looking for 'the next big thing,' and they say as much on their submission pages; they're looking for 'the next *Twilight*, *50 Shades of Grey* or *Hunger Games*.'

Fitting in
—Copy/Paste/Repeat—

The entire mainstream media is a mess. The movie industry is faltering horrendously and it can't see the problem that's causing the issue. Endless copies, remakes and reboots are clogging the cinema screen with safe, big–budget, small–minded garbage. Few movies are made that are an expression of art, few are remembered after the DVD release dies down and within ten years, most are forgotten. Literature is going much the same way, for much the same reasons. It's important to know what those reasons are before we can understand the current state of published media.

Let's not pretend that literature has ever been entirely altruistic. None of us are that naive, I would hope, or else your written work would be virtually unreadable. Printed media costs money and that means that someone has always been in it to make a profit. But the problem has never been as bad as it is today. There is an agenda in the media; a certain message is being broadcast loud and clear and anyone with any insider understanding can see it for what it is. I won't belabour the point; it's something you need to find out for yourself to really understand. Agents and publishers employ very specific people to search for the material they're looking for. They're not looking for quality, they're not looking for something that will endure and they're not looking for fresh, new ideas.

As a teacher, I can assure you that the dumbing down of society is in full swing. Works of literature such as those of Charles Dickens or *Frankenstein* are beyond the capacity of the modern reader. A book like that, written by an 18–year–old girl, can barely be understood by someone that age today. It's not that the language has evolved until it's incomprehensible; it's that education has systemically failed the young. and we've undermined the entire process of maturing into a functioning

adult. As the great science–fiction author Isaac Asimov frequently pointed out: there is an agenda towards anti–intellectualism, an agenda that promotes the idea that someone's ignorant lack of information is just as useful as a person's informed and reasoned opinion. We're now more concerned with how uneducated people feel about their lack of ability than addressing the problem of raising their competence through effort and learning.

Frankenstein was written in a dark time when education was a privilege for the rich, much as it is today, and so only certain people had the luxury of sufficient wealth to write such works of fiction. Ignoring the idea that 18–year–old Mary Shelley might not have written this book at all, it stands today as the first true science–fiction novel. It's a work of fiction that explores the what–if of modern science and takes the idea to an extreme end. That strikes at the very core of the medium.

Today, nothing pushes boundaries and nothing is created that leaves a lasting impression. What's true of literature is true in every other media platform. Modern publishers are moving towards the ugliest business model of all time—one that further undermines all good sense and reason. Publishers now use search algorithms that look for passing trends on the internet. They look for what's selling, what ideas people are sharing. They then contract writers to create something connected to those trends. Whatever is the latest piece of trivia that will be recycled into a product for sale.

Literature itself is falling prey to this. With vampire fiction selling well, a certain publisher decided they wanted a piece of the action. They contracted out the creation of a novel series with just such a theme. They had a title; they had the ideas and a description and they found a writer to put it all together. The writers of this kind of thing are poorly paid and have no rights to the material they create. Often, they will be replaced throughout the series, and if so, they're frequently discredited to the point where they will probably never be published again.

This is the state of modern fiction. This isn't a conspiracy theory, this is fact. This is how publishers seek out profits: by ignoring quality and creativity. This is why so few authors are able to sell their work and why the work that is getting published is so instantly forgettable. Creative work goes into a 'slush pile.' We're asked to submit our new creations to agents and publishers and it will go to readers who will assess the quality of it and decide what to publish. However, this is failing spectacularly.

I know of a writer who, experimentally, wrote several pieces under different aliases. This writer posed as a man and as a woman, and they wrote under various ethnic backgrounds. The same work was sent out to the same publishers around the world, predominantly those in America. Rejections came back more quickly in some names than others. Interestingly they were returned from different publishers on the same days, with the same wording exactly, even though the publishers were in different parts of the country. Under some aliases they were invited to submit further parts, or to different readers, under others, they heard nothing whatsoever. It became clear, since they were submitting the same work, that readers are, at best, more interested in publishing work from selected backgrounds, and not the ones that you might believe.

Literature should be judged on the quality of the work, not on the heritage of the person who created it. The publishing industry admits that around 98% of the books it publishes fail to make a profit. The tiny minority that do find some measure of success carry the rest. So, by their own acknowledgement, the system is so broken that publishing houses have lost touch with what people want to read. They want to publish what they think will sell, but people simply don't want to read it. The reader is rejecting modern literature wholesale and it worries me what that means for the future.

We get to look back today at the works of Charles Dickens, Isaac Asimov and other great authors whose work encapsulated important messages. Their creations made us think; they pointed us to the plights of the poor, or social injustice visited upon the masses by the selfishness of rich. What will people think of us when they look back at *50 Shades of Grey*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *Twilight*?

Sadly, the media industry is slow to change. Movies, for instance, aren't doing well. DC (Detective Comics) ferociously pushes their political agenda in their big budget movies and they continually flop. People don't want to watch the cartoon exploits of wholly unrealistic characters amid plots that crumble into pieces if you dare to examine them. *Star Wars* managed to go from a near classical status to garbage in the space of a few movies. The original space adventures were ground–breaking but their production studio drove harder and harder to push their political viewpoint, all the time reducing the value of the plot, and the sense of the characters. All that was left was a big, messy special–effects–driven blob of commercial waste. The audience turned its back and the studios scratched their heads, not understanding why people were rejecting what they were selling. Worse, they loudly blamed the audience for not embracing their message.

Literature is, very sadly, going the same way. The media industry has devalued the importance of the writer until they are viewed, and paid, as nothing more than an optional extra. No more are the writers at the heart of the story, and so there are fewer worthwhile stories that are being told. Few authors want to write the kind of books that the publishers want to sell. Even fewer are willing to take part in a system with the odds stacked so heavily against them. When the industry should be welcoming and investing in new, fresh ideas, they are actively hostile towards them.

One large publisher asked that your submission be completed with an answer to the question, 'Why do you think you're qualified to

write this book?' This was on a standard submission form where you were putting your own novel up for approval, and you were asked to justify why you were qualified to develop your own ideas. If that sounds nurturing to future authors to you, then we're on very different pages.

As it stands, the publishing industry tends to have a very firm idea about what it wants to sell. Readers seem to have an equally firm idea about what they want to read, and they don't seem to quite mesh with one another. If you're lucky enough to be part of the currently appropriate demographic then you might just manage to get yourself published. Of course, that means that you probably won't be lucky enough to have anyone actually read your book because nobody wants to buy what they want to sell. You still have the option of writing vampire fiction, teenage angst and clumsy metaphors for the latest political fiasco.

Small Publishers
—Small Ones Are Less Juicy—

There is a twilight zone between the big, well known publishers and doing everything yourself that is filled with sharks. Incompetent sharks, mostly, with broken teeth and a taste for lead–filled paint, but they remain sharks, nonetheless. Some of these sharks are more like dolphins, and they're really quite friendly. This is potentially the most dangerous place for writers to be and it can be a minefield where the mines are filled with sharks and lead paint. I've dealt with a large number of these, often getting accepted for publishing with varying degrees of complete lacks of success.

One was a vanity press publisher dressed up as the real thing. They proudly advertised that they didn't charge authors to publish their books, and that much was certainly true. I was accepted and had my book prepared for publication. Alarm bells started to ring when the editing process was non–existent and I was told the book was just 'perfect as it was.' They asked about cover art and I sent them a sketch of what I thought it should be like, and they literally printed the sketch, again telling me it was '*just perfect.*' Clearly, they'd been to the Ed Wood School of Publishing Excellence.

They singularly failed to promote the book, expecting me to do literally everything and it quickly became blindingly obvious that they were a book printer, not a publisher. They supplied products for me to sell for them, relying on the author's enthusiasm to get the job done.

I did get three very contradictory messages about the quality of their business model. On the one hand, I got a very positive review in an English national newspaper. My father also spoke with someone who had recently borrowed my book, while in New York, from a hotel library so some marketing must have been going on somewhere. On the other hand, I got details of a class–action lawsuit that the American authors

had taken against the publisher for its horrible business practices. It no longer exists!

I was then accepted by a small UK publisher. Communications dried up very early on and my research showed that it was just two mates operating a website out of a spare room in their house and they just hadn't been able to keep up with it all. Consequently that went nowhere.

Two of my books were accepted by a midsized English publisher. It was an automated site where you upload varied information, bend over and hope for the best. I submitted several things and they accepted all of them, each one earning me a standardised email of congratulations. It's moments like this that make a struggling author almost dare to hope… almost. Fortunately for me, I have friends in very low places and an investigation revealed that it was all a scam. The situation was that they agree to publish your work, subject to the usual editing, packaging and post–production. However, you're billed for all that and can select an option you can afford. With the publisher actually being spoken of with reasonably high regard, I considered it. But no, a publisher pays the author, not the other way around!

One other publisher offered me a contract. Another quick investigation later revealed outstanding debts of tens of thousands of pounds, missing business partners who might very well either have made a midnight dash to a tropical country, or now have a supporting role in a motorway bridge. Again, business irregularities became fairly obvious and so, it seemed very likely it was just another scam where desperate authors are stripped of their dwindling resources.

There was one other small publisher I had dealings with. It was a sole trader operation with a single, seasoned publishing professional publishing niche non–fiction travel books. He accepted mine and began the process with not a dollar changing hands and a legitimate contract that all seemed perfectly fine.

The process is slow; patience is a prerequisite. Communications are rare but friendly. There are no wobbles, no reason to worry and everything moves steadily, but slowly, along. Will he promote my material and drive my work to be the next big, industry changing thing? No, he'll put it on his site, the community will buy small but regular numbers of the book and we'll all plod on with it. It's a start, and that's the best you can probably hope for as a new author.

Authors are a desperate people. One commented that if someone tells you they want to be a writer, kill them straight away, while they're still happy. Later on, misery will descend on them like bricks falling off the back of a truck. When people pour that kind of time, experience and dedication into their work, there will always be someone out there trying to cash in on them. Small publishers are often doing just that, profiteering in a clumsy, outmoded industry that creates shattered dreams and poorly conceived books of non–rhyming poetry. If you are lucky enough to find a decent one, then it will still be a slow, awkward process. But it's a start; this is likely your best chance of getting your work out there and getting your name noticed.

I hear a lot of new writers telling me they're going to get a deal with a big publisher, even before they've completed the first page. That kind of naivety is lethal in this industry. It's dangerous to your sanity to think like that. The best you can hope for is to focus first on the quality of your story, make sure it's the best you can do. Then, get people reading it, listen to their feedback and make sure your next one is better. Perhaps that will make you the author you want to be, maybe it won't. It still remains the best chance you've got.

Self–Publishing
—Selling Your Book—

Self publishing is easier, and harder, than it ever has been. For many of us it's our best and only option.

Many years ago when the internet was young, like a freshly installed toilet, it was virgin territory for a person with a little bit of morals and half a brain. With half a brain to speak of, I set myself up an eBay account and sold my old toys. Making a huge amount of money doing it, I quickly set up an eBay shop and did very nicely buying up toys, games and models from forgotten corners of old shops, market stalls and warehouses. I made a very comfortable income that also afforded me the opportunity to play with old toys. I was living the dream!

I cleaned and checked everything, listed my wares with honest details of every mark, every fault mentioned. I photographed it from different angles and I made the customer aware of every blemish. I put some effort into my listings, even getting comments on them. I met people close to where I was living and ended up making good friends with several of them. I behaved professionally and my things sold well, my customers investing in my reputation, knowing they were dealing with an honest, decent seller who would do their best for them.

Those were the good old days but it all went very wrong. The internet is a toilet and nobody was bothering to clean it up. Before long, everyone tried to cash in on it. Every man, woman and child saw people like me doing well selling online and tried to get in on the act. They listed their junk, cleared out their lofts and basements and flooded the market with their goods. Their goods weren't listed to the same standards that we early pioneers maintained; they now hid faults, or were blind to them. They didn't care about customer service. They just wanted to make a few bucks from an already bloated market. Buyers

changed too—they expected the wares to be garbage and demand faltered. They knew they had to be wary now. If there was an old toy they wanted, they knew that hundreds of people would be selling one and they had only to wait for a better deal. Prices got pushed down, along with the standards, and everything changed. It became a place where quality was hard to find.

Sadly this is exactly what happened in the self–publishing industry. The buyers have, quite rightly, lost all interest in the works of new authors. The majority of material out there on Amazon is utter garbage and is mostly unreadable. It's become too easy. Anyone can drop their unfiltered, low–expectation work into the market. It's like pouring salt into a glass of drinking water. It's now spoiled.

The market is so saturated that getting quality work noticed is virtually impossible. If you charge too little, hoping to make your work more accessible, you are likely to be judged as not worth reading. If you charge too much, people will just buy something cheaper. There's no shortage of options, after all.

Amazon is the largest of the self–publishing options and any idiot can upload their manuscript and call it a book; many idiots do. It's a little too easy and, therefore, there's not much of a filtering mechanism. Amazon has done a great job of making books accessible to a wider market than ever before but this has come at a price. With nothing standing between the author and their reader the quality has declined horrendously. In fact, there's nothing to maintain a level of quality so this was really to be expected.

I'm sure we all know the lurid tale of George Lucas and his creation, *Star Wars*. The first three movies (and some consider them the last three) were classics. Lucas had a rare ability for bringing together young, smart, talented people who created a singular vision. Then, some years later he released the prequels. This time, he was hugely successful, and popular, and he had no reason to answer to anyone. He had ideas he

wanted to use and nobody dared to oppose him. What we ended up with was a mess. We need someone to stop us, to tell us 'No.' We need to hear that things just don't work. We need to have checks and balances against our own arrogance and short–sightedness. Without that, Lucas ended up with a strangely lopsided movie that felt unfinished, awkward and poorly conceived. It was like watching the most expensive student film ever produced.

This is the problem with self–publishing for the audience. The work available is usually not edited, not proofread, not beta–tested. It won't have been checked and rechecked to make sure there are no plot holes, to make sure it reads properly or that it even makes sense. In short, there's very little out there that's worth the reader's time.

From the author's perspective, the problems are far worse. Your book might be worthwhile but how will anyone know that? You might be the needle in the haystack but your readers have to find you and that's no easy task for anyone. Suddenly you're not just competing against an unprecedented number of new writers; you're competing against the sheer volume of the other material.

To make a success of being a self–published writer, therefore, you need to be a highly accomplished self–promoter. You need to be the best, not just at writing, but at all the things the industry is meant to do to help the readers find you. Remember walking through the railway station and seeing the posters for the latest crime novels? Do you recall the magazine articles about upcoming works of horror? Is there an amazing piece of artwork on the front of a science–fiction or fantasy novel that always stuck in your mind? Well, as a self–publisher, there is nobody else to do any of those things so you've got to do it all for yourself. Your budget didn't even stretch to a decent editing job, let alone hiring an artist to create a cover design. The mountain you have to climb is so vast that you can't even see the top of it. With the odds so heavily stacked against you, the chances of you finding readership are incredibly slim.

Thinking outside of the box might earn you a little recognition. You might be able to find some unique hook on a Facebook page, perhaps a fresh twist on Twitter, some new social media way to market your work but still, you're a single voice in a very large crowd. It's not impossible but it's a full–time job. One of the biggest gripes I hear is that self–publishing means becoming a self–promoter and essentially leaving behind all dreams of writing books.

While all of this sounds incredibly negative, and the industry is, your options are so limited that this might actually be your better choice. The thing to remember is that your story is what's important. A motorcycle isn't a motorcycle if nobody is riding it. A book isn't a book if nobody is reading it.

Self–Promotion
—Selling Your Soul—

Self–promotion is ideally suited for people who don't have any friends. If you do have some, you probably won't by the end of it. Self–promotion is all about getting both your name out there and your book. You're selling your work and creating yourself as a brand. It's incredibly difficult and your brain will suffer.

Start with your name. It might not be ideal and you'll probably have to change it a bit to make it fit with what you, and your readers, would expect. As a famous example, J. K. Rowley added the middle initial of her name on the advice of her publisher. They thought it sounded better and, for some reason, implied she was a male author because they were more marketable at the time. Packaging and promoting yourself is a lot more complicated than it seems at first.

You're entitled to a pen name, a name not quite your own and it's important you get it right. Get it wrong, you're stuck with a name you don't like and that just doesn't work. Even worse, if you start to get established and your name doesn't fit, you'll have to change it and undo everything you've built.

Your name can't be too routine. If you were to choose 'John Smith' you'd vanish in a sea of other people sharing the same name. While that might suit you and you work, it would be incredibly difficult to find on search engines. You want people to know your name; you want them to remember it and you want them to find you easily.

A good writing name sounds like it is describing a writer, sticks in your head and is as easy for your audience to find as possible. A good idea would be to search for the name you choose, see how it looks written down and make sure nobody else is using it the way you intend to. Stick fairly closely to your real name so it has some personal connection to you and make sure that you like it.

Once you've got the right name, you can start to get it out there. Sign up to *every* social media site you can think of. Sign up to writing and reading forums and connect with other writers and your audience. Each one of those things is a step closer to your own personal hell. You need a Facebook page in your shiny new personal name. Once you've got your Facebook page up, you can then set up a business page as an author. Your audience can connect with both.

Both need content. Don't just copy and paste things from other places. You need to have original, interesting and smart content. Look to your strengths and do what you can do best.

Although I have to confess I really don't see the point of it, there's also Twitter. To me, Twitter seems like a gigantic advertising board. It's like Facebook with all the good bits taken out. You can post half a text and add pictures. You can choose to follow people and normally they'll follow you back. What you can't do is reach out to people who read and tell them what you're doing. Twitter is great once you're more established but in the early days, it's not much use to you. However, set it up and make sure you use it as often as possible.

Make sure you contribute often with new and original material. What you shouldn't do is constantly try to sell your work. It alienates your audience and you will quickly lose their interest. It's a great way to lose friends too, and even your relatives will probably start to resent you.

Amazon will allow you to offer free downloads for a limited time. Even though it sounds wildly counterintuitive, giving your work away is often the best way to sell it. Running promotions will mean people might download your work, give it a read and, perhaps, recommend it to others. I once launched a nonfiction book that I didn't think anyone would really have any interest in. I was actually bullied into it by some friends who thought a blog I wrote belonged as a book. With the raw

material on my computer, it was difficult to argue against the logic of doing it.

It was niche material so I posted about it on related forums and offered it for free. It had hundreds of downloads, which went up to thousands. Somehow it caught on and regularly turned in a few hundred dollars a month. The traction it earned as a self–published book got it noticed by a publisher and saw it twice reach the Amazon best–seller spot in its category.

Conclusion—Are You Still With Me?—

Writing a novel is not a straightforward process. It takes a huge investment in time and energy to build the skills necessary to put together a compelling, interesting, entertaining and challenging piece of fictional work.

Nobody thinks they can walk into a shop and buy a guitar, take it home and create an album of ground–breaking genre–defining rock tracks. Sadly, a great many people think that all they need to create a novel is a laptop and an idea, and that simply isn't the case. At the heart of a good novel is a great idea. The journey to get to that idea has to be fun and engaging. Your story has to take the reader on an adventure. You have to speak to them in a way that they both understand and connect with, but also in a way that fires their wildest imagination.

You have to be a psychologist with an in–depth knowledge of how human beings think and feel. You have to be a prolific reader, a person who knows what's been done before and how to do it themselves. You have to know the world around you and have developed solid, dependable opinions. You need to grasp the issues of the day and be able to see both sides of all the arguments.

On top of all of that, you need to have taken the time to develop your craft through writing profusely and by challenging and pushing yourself to create better and better work. Along the way you'll have learned to accept criticism, even though it might have always felt like a personal attack. You will have been battered, beaten, and depressed and you will have considered giving up more times than you can remember.

In every sense your first novel will be an uphill struggle but once it's done, the second will be easier and every one after that will be completed with less effort. You'll learn lessons along the way that will

bleed into other areas of your life. You will find yourself a better read, more balanced and intelligent person for the experience.

You'll go through stages. Your first work will be pretty poor and you'll want to keep it to yourself. Later you'll consider getting opinions from your friends. When that's suitably positive you'll get it out there in some way, posting your work on sites and forums. Eventually, if you stick with it, you'll be producing work of a publishable quality. At that point a whole new set of challenges rears up to face you.

Writing a novel, or creating a new world for your reader, is one of the most satisfying things you can do. When I first dreamed of telling stories, I imagined directing movies or writing comic–books. As I realised that wasn't going to happen, I started to explore other options. As a comic–book writer, you're only a small part of a large team. You're rarely more than writing a chapter in the life of an existing character. You're tied into a wider story arc, held back by the accepted canon of the world that's already been created for them. Your work is then interpreted by an artist, whose work is further changed by inking and colouring. You're nothing more than a link in a chain and the same problem is endlessly compounded in movies. You have remarkably little control since you're only a tiny part of a huge production, even if you're lucky enough to find yourself at the helm.

Writing a novel is a totally different prospect. There are two people involved, for the most part, you and the reader. You, as the author, have the ability to add as much depth and colour to your story as you're able. You can bring this world to life and create characters that leap off the page and become a part of the reader's mind. Certainly, we have to contend with beta–testers, editors and proofreaders but they're usually there to support us, to polish our work and to get the little bugs out that we might have missed.

As an author you are creating a universe and inviting people to come and take a journey with you through the world you've painted for

them with your words. When you get right down to it, this is all utterly insane.

If a normal person went to his doctor and said that there were people living in his head who felt totally real to him and he imagined them going through experiences that changed their lives, what would his doctor think? If he said he vividly hallucinated entire worlds where the rules of social convention weren't absolute and that this place can only exist in an entire universe that only he could see, what would the diagnosis be? And what if the reader went to the same doctor, complaining that they were on an imaginary journey where they would stare for hours at a dead tree that challenged them to imagine new things while fictional characters danced through their brains, trying to impart new ideas?

An alien species would likely be bewildered by human behaviour, but to us it makes sense. Stories have always been the part of ourselves that is shared with the future. History might tell us the dates and times, but fiction puts flesh on those bones and carries the truth about what it was really like to be alive in our time. The stories you write might outlive you, they might change the way people think, or they might be the spark that lights a fire.

So as a writer it's your responsibility and privilege to create something amazing. Don't buy into trends and faulty thinking. Don't try to add your voice to an ignorant crowd, screaming blindly in the dark. Always aspire to rise to something better. If you're going to be an author, be the best author you can be. Be the very best author you can imagine.

The end of this book is only the beginning of your journey.

Glossary

A writer must know many things, in addition to how to write. In order to show off at parties, if you ever get invited to any, you will need to be able to drop some of these words into conversations. Luckily some of these are so obscure or overcomplicated that nobody else will know what you're talking about either.

It's also worth knowing them if you actually plan to take writing seriously, although it should be noted that doing so is an almost cast–iron guarantee that there will be no party invitations in your immediate future.

Abbreviation

Abbreviation is when a word is shortened or contracted in some way. Sometimes it's a single word such as '*Centigrade*' which is often represented as '*C*'. Other times, it's an entire phrase such as '*Reply Soon Via Post*,' often written as '*RSVP*,' or '*BYOB*' meaning '*Boiled Yams on Bread?*'[2]

Action

Action is typically the things in the story that actually happen, as opposed to things that are merely discussed or explained. In terms of movies, it often refers to adrenaline–inspired happenings and acts of violence.

As a genre, it's the category where nobody sits around discussing the meaning of life, and anyone trying to do so would probably get an adrenaline–inspired punch in the face for it.

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[2] The author makes no guarantee as to the veracity of these claims.

Alcoholism

Alcoholism is the driving force behind a great deal of literature. See also *self–loathing*.

Allegory

Allegory is one of many writing techniques where we say one thing, but mean something completely else: in this case we're telling one story, when we're really telling a different unrelated story. Or are we? It's used mostly to show how clever we are, and is rarely seen in movies where the protagonist wears spandex and jumps off of buildings.

Popular examples include:

'*Animal Farm*:' a bunch of *anthropomorphic* farm animals organising a perfect society. The real story is a highhanded criticism of Stalin's Communist regime.

'*Inferno*:' a journey through hell guided by a Roman poet. The real story is one of a giant fireball heading for earth, and the limited timeframe the powers that be have to save everyone!

Alliteration

Commonly found in poems, prose, and advertising literature. This is a section of text where each word begins with the same letter. '*Bullshit baffles brains*' is a popular one among marketing agents, and comic characters often have alliterative names like '*Willy Wonk*' and '*Brigadier Brad Bratwurster*.'

It's best to avoid using alliteration when writing poetry, because that would require you to be writing poetry. Don't write poetry. Your family will pretend you died in a hilarious sex toy factory accident, because it's less embarrassing than admitting the truth.

Allusion
Allusion is where a writer hints at something without stating it directly. They might describe some other well known story without overtly stating that that's what they're talking about, such as saying that the worst book of all time had multiple layers of things that weren't clearly black and white. Likewise one could make reference to that movie where the entirety of the plot is that a dog eats some guy's notebook, so a complete stranger just walks up to him in the street and gives him a new one.

Analogy
An analogy is a literary technique where, for the purpose of clarification, a principle, concept or situation is compared to an utterly unrelated one that happens to share certain qualities. This is where we suggest that using Microsoft Word is like stripping naked and wrestling with an overexcited greasy pig, or that reading any modern novel that involves sparkling vampires is a lot like drinking lightly diluted bleach.

Anamorphism
Anamorphism is where we skew the relative dimensions of something, such as a cinema screen for more efficient storage. It appears in this glossary purely to avoid confusion with *anthropomorphism*, which is about something completely different. You're welcome.

Anecdote
When we add a delightful little story of our own to help illustrate a point, then we've used an anecdote. This is where I might tell the story of teaching young–adult fiction in class, giving up, throwing the book in the dustbin and writing a selection of short stories instead.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is where we apply human traits or attributes to animals, inanimate objects, or other nonhuman things. More commonly, we write what is effectively a human character, but decide that they're actually a cartoon rabbit, and we have to show them constantly eating carrots because otherwise, nobody will believe they really are a rabbit. We do it in our everyday lives too when we assume our cat has an emotional connection to us, talk to our motorcycles, or mourn the death of an estate agent.

Not to be confused with *Anamorphism*, which has absolutely nothing to do with this, though it might make for an interesting story if it had.

Antihero

An antihero is someone who takes on the role of a *hero*, despite having negative or questionable reasons for doing so, or personal qualities that really don't fit the job. They are often a criminal in the role of a saviour, or a violent thug trying to keep the peace. Examples include Judge Dredd, Venom, and Hillary Clinton.

Apocryphal

This refers to a story of dubious or doubtful origin, or one that we know is false or meaningless. Much of the Bible is described as 'Apocrypha,' and has been the cause of many arguments. In modern times, just about anything seen in the mainstream media could be described the same way, with Fox news and CNN battling it out for the top spot.

Archetype

An archetype is an idea, a symbol, or character type in a story. It's a story element that appears again and again in narratives from cultures all

around the world, and symbolises something universal in the human experience. Archetypes are commonly appearing character templates, symbolic representations of things, and the fundamental truth that we're all going to die and that life is essentially meaningless.

Author
A mentally–ill person with a deeply delusional belief that they will one day make a successful living from telling others of their species about the imaginary people who live in their head.

Autobiography
A story about someone's life, written by the person that they are. The expectation is that it's the story of someone that actually has an interesting story to tell, but all too often this expectation is found to be overly optimistic.

Biography
A story about someone's life, written by a different person that they aren't. This can be a story about an important historical figure told by a seasoned researcher. More often, it's the reality behind an *autobiography*: a poorly qualified ghostwriter jumbling together a pile of garbage from the inane rantings of a self–important client paying them just enough to keep suicidal thoughts at bay. Even more ironically, it's often the little bit in a novel about the writer, but written by the writer about the writer. It all just shows what a silly place the world is and why we probably shouldn't go there.

Biopic
A story about someone's life, brought to life on the big screen. One sub-genre—the musical biopic—has in recent years gained the well–earned

reputation for brazen overuse of artistic license when representing any and all aspects of the person's existence. These also frequently resort to *Porn Logic*.

Fun fact! Nobody actually knows whether it is pronounced '*baɪoʊpɪk*' ('*buy oh pick*') or '*baɪɒpɪk*.' (rhymes with '*myopic*' .) I'm definitely leaning towards the latter, because the first just sounds weird, like somebody is deliberately saying it wrong to garner a cheap laugh.

Buzzword

A meaningless phrase or word that briefly acquires importance at a specific time, only to be lost later when people realise they were being stupid again. For examples, see almost everything considered politically correct, and every second word spoken at every business seminar anywhere in the world. Also see *Word Salad*.

Character

A person, or otherwise active participant in your story. They're usually a human, in stories written by humans, and often behave largely normally so the reader can relate to them. They can also be animals, vehicles, or household objects. A popular children's programme in Japan, for example, is presented by a preschooler, a cactus and an *anthropomorphic* chair.

In the realm of fantasy and science fiction the scope is almost endless. As a rule of thumb, if it can react to anything then it's a character and should be treated as such. The difficulty in determining what actually constitutes a character is further compounded by a great deal of modern young–adult fiction, where it's almost impossible to discern living, humanoid characters from planks of wood, and vice versa.

Character Development

For a story to work properly, many of the characters, and especially the protagonist, are required to change as a result of the journey they go through. Development can take the form of a shift in our understanding of who the person is as more details are revealed, or more often, the character learns new things and experiences situations that change their perception. Without development we have bland characters and stories that nobody cares about. Disney productions are notorious for lack of character development, as it would be too confusing for their target audience if the hero was not already perfect in every way, and if the villain was anything but pure evil as a fact of birth.

In '*Nineteen Eighty–Four*,' the protagonist starts out as an optimistic rebel. The crushing weight of a totalitarian regime beats that optimism right out of him, leaving him a hollow cusk. There is no requirement that the characters become better people for their experiences.

Cliché

Any phrase, behaviour or situation that's been used so often that its meaning and value has lost all impact to the reader. This is the domain of the understanding that every franchise taken over by Disney will be ruined, and the concept that printed media has lost all originality. This is where good ideas go to die. They are to be avoided like the plague.

Climax

This is the moment of highest tension. This is the great explosion that everything has led up to, the moment of release that all the stress, the hard work, the pumping and pounding has all been for. This is the event where it all makes sense for just one glorious moment… and then… and then it's pretty much over.

I'll call you tomorrow for sure.

Coherence

Coherence is the way that things connect properly together. If something has coherence, then its parts are properly–connected, logical and move in the same direction together. Without coherence, we end up with a blob of literary garbage that makes no sense. The jokes here basically write themselves.

Connotation

Connotations are the common associations that a word has, in addition to its literal meaning (the *denotation*—not to be confused with *detonation*). Often the world tries to confuse us: many words can have the same denotation, but completely different connotations. This is where you might say that a tall building is a 'mighty erection,' and while this is absolutely correct, everyone looks at you a bit funny and when you next check your mail you find you now have an appointment scheduled with HR.

Mismatching the connotations of words can be a fun way to say one thing while implying something completely different. Mind you, it also gives you political correct expressions like '*visually challenged*,' and '*gravitationally unfortunate*.'

Conundrum

A conundrum is a puzzle, something where the answer isn't clear. It's a difficult riddle that challenges us, like wondering how certain books got published in the first place, or how some films got made, or why people spent money to suffer through them.

Comedy

This is the genre that makes us laugh. It's where we ironically misrepresent reality in dramatically abstract ways that challenge us

enough to relieve the tension through laughter. This used to be common before everyone was offended by everything for reasons that they were hilariously unable to articulate without overuse of *Buzzwords* and *Word Salads*.

Not to be confused with '*The Comedy of Errors*,' which is really not very funny at all. I read it cover to cover, and was hard pressed to find a single joke anywhere.

Denotation

Denotation is the literal, or *dictionary*, meaning of a word or expression. It completely ignores the emotional resonance and focusses entirely on the abstract definition. This can be the source of horrendously lame humour, and even horrendouser fact checking. If you've ever complained that a stack of pancakes is only about eight inches high, considerably less than the mile you were promised, you really need to rethink your life. Not to be confused with *detonation*, for obvious reasons.

Denouement

The denouement is the end of a story, the part where all the different plotlines are finally tied up and all remaining questions answered. Although its origins are French, it doesn't necessarily mean the story ended with the protagonists surrendering.

Detonation

Detonation is where a thing that once existed goes boom. It is a staple of the action genre, and a lot of fun recreationally with easily acquired materials and modified *Star Trek* model kits. It is included in this glossary so as not to be confused with *denotation*, which means something completely different.

Deus ex machina

Deus ex machina is Latin for 'god from the machine.' It's when some previously unknown character, force, or event suddenly resolves a seemingly hopeless situation or overcomes overwhelming odds with ease. This is usually disappointing to the audience, who may have been hoping for a conventional resolution to the story that would involve combining previously introduced story elements in an unusual or unexpected way. Such disappointment can be effectively treated with comic book movies which don't remove symptoms so much as dull your senses to the underlying cause.

TV series '*Batman*' (1966) intentionally derived humour from *deus ex machina*, to the point that it became a weekly staple. The dynamic duo would regularly find themselves in a cliffhanger certain death scenario with no resolution in sight. It would always be immediately resolved by a never previously introduced gadget (such as Shark Repellent) or alluded to knowledge—the more ludicrous the better—that is exactly what they need, and will never make another appearance again. Basically, don't do that.

Diacope

Diacope is when a very competent writer repeats a word or phrase with one or more words in between. This is a very advanced technique used only by very skilled creative minds. Some common, and persistent, examples of diacope is Hamlet's *'*To be*, or not* to be!*'* and the great opening words, 'A horse is a horse, of course, of course, And no one can talk to a horse, of course, Unless, of course, the horse, of course, Is the famous Mr. Ed!' from a television show about a talking horse—obviously.

Dialogue

Dialogue is conversation. This is when two or more characters discuss things with each other. Even in an action or adventure story, dialogue makes up the vast majority of what actually happens. Dialogue helps us move the plot along and develop a connection between the characters and the audience. Get it right, your story will flow. Later incarnations of *Star Wars* got it very, very wrong and had to sell itself on special effects and visuals. It's very hard to get those to work in a written format, not that we haven't tried.

Diction

Diction is the choice of words or phrasing used in a spoken or written piece of text. It's important to develop your own style of diction and find your own way to phrase things so that your writing has a distinct flavour of its own. Diction can be said to be both good and bad: good in terms of a well–spoken and intelligent person who clearly makes their point, and bad in terms of almost everyone from Australia.

Doppelgänger

A doppelgänger is a twin or double of some character, who usually takes on the role of an evil, or darker version of them. Commonly they will appear the same, but have some quality that sets them apart, perhaps being intelligent when the character we're comparing them to is not.

This was explored successfully in the in every other way unsuccessful *Star Trek* movie, *Nemesis*. Data's doppelgänger was basic and unintelligent, while Picard's was outright evil for absolutely no discernible reason. This never made less sense than in the *Star Trek* 'mirror universe' episodes, where there was an entire universe occupied by evil versions of the crew who all had goatee beards, including the women. Remember kids, if you ever find yourself to be an evil doppelgänger in somebody else's story, and a group of armed men can't

decide which of you to shoot, always tell them they should kill both of you as it's the only way to be safe. They fall for it every time!

A little known fact about modern media players is that the 'mirror universe' episodes of *Star Trek* was the sole reason for the introduction of the 'skip' button.

See also *Nemesis*, unless I've forgotten to add it.

Drama

Drama usually refers to any serious genre story, such as crime drama or detective drama. In film and television it is a literal genre all by itself and is considered the opposite of comedy, itself considered amusing and fun.

Drama also refers to finding tension in conflict. Drama is a key element in building problems for our protagonist to overcome and to drive the plot forwards. It's the kind of thing you would expect to witness if you were to challenge the beliefs of a poorly–educated person.

Dystopia

Utopia is a perfect paradise where everything is ideal and all the social problems have been solved. Dystopia is the opposite of that, a place where, people are routinely poorly educated, wholesale lies are the norm, resources are running low due to exploitation of the environment for profit, corporate greed runs the world, wars are fought for profit, global banks hold the economy hostage, the rich control puppet governments, the media is totally controlled or we stand on the brink of environmental destruction.

I wonder what it would be like to live in a world like that.

Epigram
An epigram is a short statement that shows insightful thought. It's usually communicated in a witty, paradoxical, or funny way. This is seldom used in American sitcoms.

Epiphany
An epiphany is a moment where it suddenly all makes sense. It's where realisation hits you and you might be motivated to shout out 'Aha!' As a literary device, an epiphany is when a character is suddenly struck with a life–changing, enlightening revelation which changes their perspective forever.

Epitaph
An epitaph is a short statement about a person who has died. It's something to remember them for, often carved into their tombstone or read out at a memorial. Authors often write one for themselves before they die from suicidal depression or alcohol poisoning.

Epithet
An Epithet is a nickname. It replaces the name of a person and adds some description about them so that the audience can get an impression of them straight away. An example of this is in the movie *'Top Gun'* where the protagonist is called 'Maverick'. This tells us a lot about the character's temperament and attitude. This is a great way to very quickly show the audience a lot about who a background character is. Unless it's '*The Wire*,' in which everyone has at least one nickname, and none of them tell us anything other than that urban gang members are really bad at coming up with nicknames. The character named 'Cheese' for example was in no way, shape or form, anything like fermented curds.

Eponym

An eponym is a person or thing after which something else is named. A person's name will often come to be associated with the name of another character, person, thing or discovery. It could be an animal named after its owner or the way that 'Hawking Radiation' is named after Steven Hawking, who discovered it.

The word 'eponym' itself might be named after the discoverer of the term, Roy Eponym who sold cabbages on the corner of Baker Street in London and created the very first, but not entirely successful, use of the mechanism by naming one of his products 'Roy'.

Essay

An essay is a form of structured writing that uses either formal or informal language. They usually discuss a topic or seek to inform and educate. They are rarely written for the purpose of entertainment and are often used in schools to crush creativity and help foster a hatred of being alive.

Euphemism

A euphemism is a polite, soft phrase that we substitute for a harder and more blunt way of saying something that might be a little too much for the audience. We might think 'Modern media is a total disaster, entirely set up to pitch a horrendously negative political agenda controlled by people with the morality of a hungry alligator,' but we actually say, 'There's room for improvement'.

Excursus

An excursus is a moment where a piece of writing diverges from the plot or meaning as a form of digression, heading off temporarily in a different way. I was travelling once in Asia and a saw a T–shirt with the

words printed on the front, 'The sky was never a thing.' I often wondered what they were trying to create, what message that was trying to deliver.

Exposition

Exposition is the part of the plot right at the very beginning where we introduce the story by 'exposing' the audience to the characters, themes and settings. It's also anywhere where we talk to the audience, telling them what is happening instead of showing them. Sometimes it's unavoidable but if it's done too much, the novel takes on the form of an essay and a lot of the value of our writing will be lost. This is why, in all the great political systems of our time, the leaders must always convey their messages through the medium of interpretive dance if we're to fully understand what they're trying to say.

Fairy–Tale

A fairy–tale, or *fairy story*, is a fanciful tale that isn't meant to be taken too seriously. Its primary audience is young people and it is likely to feature fantasy characters and unbelievable settings. Despite being a story aimed at children, they are often a morality tale and will likely have a core message of some kind.

Because of the unbelievable nature of these stories, and their deeply–rooted cultural heritage, the term is often erroneously used to mean any story that's known not to be accurate. For instance, 'Boris Johnson got England to vote to leave Europe by telling them a complete *fairy–tale*. I can't believe people were stupid enough to believe his transparent lies. We should make him Prime Minister.'

Fable

Fables are fantasy stories, often using animals or objects as key players in the narrative. They are aimed at a slightly more mature audience than fairy stories and have a moral lesson of some kind to teach. They aren't meant to be taken as literal fact and are accepted as a way to pass on lessons by directly communicating with one another. In modern times this has largely been replaced by Prozac–addicted teens talking about their feelings on YouTube.

Fantasy

Fantasy is a genre where almost anything is possible and the only limitation is the outer boundaries of the author's imagination, however most are set in a poorly–researched medieval settings with castles, witches and the odd dragon thrown in for good measure.

To qualify for this genre the story must have elements that cannot exist in our world, leaving the reader to assume that it's happening in a reality that's different to ours where the normal rules of our universe don't really apply, such as Trump Tower.

Farce

A farce is a comedy in which the writer hates the characters so much that he conspired with their universe to make things as difficult for them as possible. This usually involves criminally poor timing and terrible communication which leads to horrendous levels of misunderstanding that none of the characters are in any way aware of.

Global politics, and capitalism in general, work this way.

Fiction

When something isn't based on fact, it's considered fiction. Any made up story is fictional including novels, movies and Communist history books.

Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a word or phrase that uses figurative language instead of the direct and absolute meaning. These tend to be implied suggestions and we understand them due to a shared cultural reference. An example of this is when someone describes his date as having a 'good personality' when he really means she's unattractive, or when a woman says that everything is 'fine.'

Flashback

The flashback is a plot device that shifts the audience's attention from the present time to a period some time before so that an event of some importance can be more thoroughly detailed. It's much more common in lazily written movies than in well written literature.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing hints to the audience about something that's coming soon or is likely to happen. It is usually a smaller instance of a thing, designed to prepare the audience to accept a more dramatic version when it occurs. It was very similar to the way that everyone in America thought it couldn't get any worse when George W. Bush was elected president.

Genre

A genre is a classification for literature and other story forms. It's used so that the audience has a better idea of what to expect from your work,

or to help them choose what they want to read. To an author it's really much more of an inconvenience, since the point of all this is to create something new and we're then told that it has to fit inside an existing scaffold.

Hero

The term 'hero' is often incorrectly used to mean the main character of a story. A hero is someone who shows heroic or morally desirable virtues, and while the main character of a story might exhibit these, they don't have to and probably shouldn't in most cases.

Horror

Horror is a popular genre for movies and novels. It takes disgusting, appalling or frightening themes, such as Boris Johnson running anything more demanding than a tap, and presenting them to the audience. Horror is often a victim of its own success: its popularity means it's an easier genre to work in and this means new, limited or unskilled artists often aim their work here.

Hyperbaton

Hyperbaton is a figure of speech in which the typical order of words is changed and words are moved around. Yoda, the most famous example of this, is.

Hyperbole

This is where the author, or character speaking deliberately exaggerates to an extreme. It can be used humorously or to make a point. For instance, saying the First World War was 'the war to end all wars' was an example of this, just as when a new parent might look at their child, on the first day of its life, and say, 'This will be the greatest day of my

life,' forgetting that, in around 18 years, that innocent–looking monster is going to leave home.

Idiom
An idiom is a phrase that gives a figurative meaning; a phrase that isn't exactly what the words literally mean. For instance, we might say that it's 'raining cats and dogs' but, unless Harry Potter got very drunk last night, we just mean it's a bit wet out.

Innuendo
An innuendo is when something is said that has a polite and reasonable meaning on the surface but has a less innocent underlying message that is often rude, crude or insulting. An example of an innuendo is when someone might say that a friend, 'has been seeing a lot of a girl lately,' saying on the surface that they've been spending time with one another but hinting more at nudity. These are commonly used as jokes, and the script of every *James Bond* movie was basically a string of these held together between random MacGuffins.

Interjaculate
Depending on your dictionary, it either means to ejaculate parenthetically, or to interrupt a conversation with an ejaculation. This is classic example of show don't tell, but in this instance, telling would probably have been more polite.

Intertextuality
Intertextuality is the fact that all literary texts are all intimately interconnected. Every text is affected by all the texts that came before it, since those texts influenced the author's thinking and aesthetic choices to some degree. This is why it's so critically important that you go about

the business of becoming an author by reading quality work and not any number of shades of anything monochromatic.

Invective
This is the literary device in which a person attacks or insults someone, or something, through the use of abusive language and tone. I was shocked to find that the name for this doesn't come from any kind of Gaelic root.

Irony
Irony is a subtlety where two contradictory meanings of the same thing could be inferred. It's considered the grey area between expectation and reality, in no particular order. The best example of this is when Alanis Morissette ironically released an unironic song about irony.

Jargon
Jargon is the specific type of language used by a particular group or profession. Most obviously it's when scientists use terms that non–scientists wouldn't understand but it can also be used at the other end of the spectrum when uneducated people with extreme political views post comments on internet forums.

Juxtaposition
Juxtaposition is when two very dissimilar things are placed against one another in order to demonstrate their differences. This is often used to show a character's traits by pitching them against an opposite.
It was done skilfully by Charles Dickens in the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*:

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was

the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way …'

and completely the opposite way in every Marvel movie.

Literary Device

Shockingly, this doesn't refer to an Amazon Kindle. A literary device is any mechanism an author can use in the act of telling their story. There's a host of them out there to use and a great deal of very good books on the subject. There are also some terrible ones written by cynical alcoholics, but you get what you pay for, I guess.

Litotes

Litotes is an understatement in which a positive connotation is made by expressing the very opposite in a negative sounding way. The most obvious example of this is when you're asked how you are and, intending to say that you're fine you might reply, 'not bad.' This can be used to say that something is exactly what you say it is but it's usually meant slightly sarcastically and when we would say 'not bad' we really mean that it's not quite good either. An example of the more common usage is if someone was to ask if you've seen the latest DC movie and you replied, 'Yes, it wasn't the worst movie I've ever seen.'

Malapropism

Examples of malapropism are when the wrong words are used, intentionally or not in order to have a kind of comedic effect. This is fine if used by an author to show a character's inept blundering but when it come out of the mouth of the US president, it's less acceptable.

Maxim

A maxim is a brief phrase or statement that holds a little piece of sage wisdom or upholds a general rule. The problem with all this is that for every one that suggests something is one way, there's another that suggests exactly the opposite, and they're usually both just as true as each other. For example, 'Actions speak louder than words.' This is certainly true and, even in writing, we prefer to show the audience rather than just tell them. The opposite of this is, 'The pen is mightier than the sword.' Both are true, given the correct situation for them to flourish. It just goes to show there are always two sides to a story, with the exception of almost every recent movie.

Metanoia

A metanoia is when someone, usually a character doing the speaking goes back and deliberately modifies their statement. This isn't to say it's wrong, it might just require softening or making slightly more pointed in some way. It could be done by the narrator in a first person narrative but would be more natural spoken by a character. An example would be if a character was to say, 'Kanye West is the greatest musical genius of all time! No, wait, that's a bit too strong, but he is a musician. Perhaps that's a little much too… Well, he's alive. I'm pretty sure he's alive.'

Metaphor

A metaphor is a commonly used device where we draw a comparison between two unrelated things. If we use words such as 'like' or 'as' then it becomes a simile. A metaphor is used to show an element of a character, situation or thing to the audience that they might not otherwise have noticed. For instance, snowflakes are a good metaphor for people. Each is unique, but pretty much the same as well, and it's difficult to drive if too many of them are piled up on the road in front of you.

They're also frequently used to alter the way something resonates with the audience. If the writer is a serial killer (or wishes the audience to believe he is), he may describe disturbing things in his fiction like dismembered corpses using language normally positively associated with natural beauty, haute cuisine or art appreciation. Similarly, you might refer to your children as a demonic horde, or a motorbike as your girlfriend. Or your girlfriend as your bike.

Mixing metaphors is to be avoided but you can burn that bridge when the cows come home.

Metonymy

This is a figure of a speech in which we replace a word with a related word that stands in for the more accurate description. This is when we refer to our car as our 'wheels' or our loving life–partner as 'the old ball and chain.'

Monologue

A monologue is when a single character gives a speech. Anyone who has ever been on a training course organised by their workplace knows that these are to be used sparingly.

Motif

A motif is an image, symbol or idea that appears frequently in a story. These can be character types, ideas, themes, words or anything else. A frequent motif in modern movies is lazy writing, for instance.

Narrative

Simply put, a narrative is a story. In more complex terms it's the form and structure of a story.

Nemesis

I didn't forget!

A nemesis is an enemy, an enemy that appears too big or too powerful to overcome. It can be a fictional character, like Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, or a situation, such as being stranded on a desert island to Robinson Crusoe. To an author it could be getting published, alcoholism, a caffeine addiction, mental health issues or the grammar checker in Microsoft Word.

Neologism

This is a word or phrase that is new and not yet frequently used by most writers.

Ode

An ode is a classical poem, but since it is a poem, I don't care about it.

Onomatopoeia

This is when a word attempts to imitate the sound of the things it describes. Obvious examples are 'woof' and 'fart' which have similarities to the sound of the thing they name, and which is where the words appear to be rooted from. Some languages also have onomatopoeias that sound nothing like the thing they describe, and also have them for textures, smells, and abstract difficult to articulate concepts such as the sense of unease when walking into a room full of people and thinking you might have possibly just spotted an ex–girlfriend or boyfriend. English, for the most part, is not one of those languages.

Oxymoron

An oxymoron is a figure of speech which brings together two opposite elements and combines them to show how they don't make sense. This is used to show a paradox to the audience, to find humour in the ridiculousness of the situation. Examples of this are 'military intelligence,' 'unbiased opinion' and when Bing Crosby said, *'We're busy doing nothing.'*

'Passive aggressive' is not an example of this.

Parable

A parable is a story that's used to deliver a moral or spiritual lesson and isn't meant to be taken literally.

Paradox

A paradox is a statement that contradicts itself such that it can neither be true nor false. 'This statement is a lie,' is a simple example since, if I'm lying then this is the truth but it can't be the truth since I stated it was a lie. Other paradoxes include the election of every US president in recent history and the fact that anyone still goes to the cinema anymore.

Paraphrase

To paraphrase something is to repeat a message while rewording it to either simplify, expand or to avoid repetition. So it's basically saying the same thing in a different way.

Parody

A parody is a type of comedy that tries to imitate something and find humour in the fact that it's copying something by way of comment or critique of some aspect of the original work. This is something you see a lot in kindergarten playgrounds.

Pastiche

A pastiche is a fictional work that attempts to imitate something else, often in a slightly exaggerated way. The thing it's trying to copy can be another author, a different genre or another piece of creative writing. This is usually done respectfully, to pay homage to the work of a great writer, or it can be done because the author is completely incapable of coming up with ideas of their own.

Peripeteia

This is a sudden shift in a story with a negative reversal of fortune for a character. Sometimes known as the 'turning point' this is where a protagonist's luck goes from good to bad, the tale taking a tragic turn. If you look back over your life, this would likely be the point where you decided to become an author.

Persona

This can refer to the characters in any creative piece of fiction. More often it talks about the projected character of the narrator of the story, when it's told in first person. If you're writing fiction in the first person then the character speaking isn't real, so you adopt their persona when you're relating the story to the audience, rather like putting on someone else's shoes, their hat or flaying a person and wearing their skin over yours.

Personification

Personification is a literary device where you describe something inanimate in human terms. This works as a kind of metaphor and we use it every day when we refer to our cars and motorcycles affectionately, name our pet dogs and try to reason with anyone in middle–management.

Plagiarism

This is the act of taking other people's words and ideas and claiming them as your own. This is the bane of writers because there's an incredibly fine line between stealing someone's ideas and being inspired by them. In real terms, *Star Wars* plagiarises *Lord of the Rings*, *The Outsiders* plagiarises *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Harry Potter* plagiarises almost everything else. The only way to effectively ensure that you don't plagiarise your ideas from other people is to have electro–convulsive shock therapy until it erases all of your memories, however that's the story of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Also, having your memory erased wouldn't stop anyone else plagiarising your work, unless Carl Gustav Jung was right about the 'Universal consciousness' thing.

Platitude

A platitude is an obvious, simple and easily understood statement that has little meaning or emotional weight. You see a lot of this on social media whenever anything of any consequence happens anywhere in the world, and everyone makes grand public statements about how important or terrible it is, despite having nothing of value to say on the topic. They are also the reason motivational posters exist.

Plot

The plot of a narrative is the chain of events that move the story along. The plot is the actions that the characters carry out as the tale progresses. It is possible to lose the plot but, as an aspiring author, you probably already did that.

Poetry
Poetry is a type of writing created by men who can't get girlfriends and need to express their failure, and women who think people might want to know how they feel about stuff. Poets are often seen wearing berets and dark clothes, and nobody cares what they have to say.

Porn Logic
A common method of plot construction for musicals, martial arts movies and Christmas Specials, where the '*action*' scenes are the real attraction, and the plot exists purely in their service. Because we are inherently creatures of context, we need to be given a reason to care, or we quickly lose interest. Typically, scant effort is put into making these plots coherent, and few would ever pretend otherwise, or care.

Prologue
A prologue is a short section that works to introduce a story before the introduction. It's used to set a scene or give some important background information. In some movies, where plot development is conspicuously absent, there might be information written on the screen so that the writers don't have to actually do their job properly.

Prose
Prose is writing that doesn't include verse. It's anything other than a poem. Prose is good; we like prose.

Protagonist
The protagonist is the main character, the hero, the central character and the focus of our story. We see the events mostly from their perspective, even if it's a cartoon duck or a talking teapot. Essentially all stories will

have a protagonist and they will usually be human, even if the story is made into a movie starring Adam Sandler.

Proverb
A proverb is a short phrase or saying that is universally accepted as containing an element of wisdom. It usually will have emerged from a culture, rather than be identified with a single author. An example of this is the American proverb 'A monkey in silk is a monkey nonetheless.' When did America go from understanding this to where they are now?

Pun
The lowest form of wit, just below *The Big Bang Theory* is the pun. It's a terrible joke based on the interplay of homophones that have the same or similar or not entirely dissimilar pronunciation, but different meanings. This is the root of the much derided 'Dad joke' and the awful desperation attached to it serves to illustrate how dreadful parenthood can actually be.

Quote
A quote is when we copy something someone else has said or written and put it in our own work, referencing them fairly and making it clear that we're using their words as an example and making no attempt to claim them as our own.

Rebus
A rebus is where a picture, letters, numbers or symbol takes the place of a word. This is the realm where 'IOU' (I owe you), text talk and poorly made T–shirts from China are from.

Red Herring
A red herring is a misleading clue that disguises the truth of what's going on. Modern examples of this are wars in the Middle East, social justice, political–correctness, elections, Fox news, sex scandals, popular culture and the Kardashians.

Resolution
The resolution is the final end of the story. It's the part where the cowboys ride off into the sunset, it's the bit where the hero finally gets the girl, it's the moment where the princess realises she had the magic in her all along. It's where the story closes, all final questions are resolved and we're satisfied that the story is over and the characters will now live on in our imaginations.

Rhetoric
Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, it's a way to present your views and to make the argument compelling to your audience. It used to be done by forming a logical argument but now it's usually done by screaming about your feelings and accusing everyone who doesn't share your views of being prejudiced against you in some way. The difference is the behaviour you'd expect from mature, grown adults and children fighting over who gets to be the first to eat some brightly–coloured paint.

Rhetorical question
A rhetorical question is a question by grammatical standards only; it's intended to make a point, with no expectation of an answer. Imagine a similar question asked in two different ways. A perfectly normal question might be, 'Would you vote for that politician?' A rhetorical question on the same subject might be worded, 'Why would anyone vote for a bumbling, semi–literate old fool who has the moral fortitude of a

snake suffering from foetal alcohol poisoning?' Sadly, this is pointed at no current world leader in particular.

Romance

In strictly academic terms, romance does not apply to love stories. Romance, as a genre in creative literature literally means any story where the focus is on a journey that involves strong moral or spiritual values. In modern times, this has shifted to be understood as any story where love is the key driving factor of the plot. This genre has widened to include stories where violence and sexual abuse is a core theme, so long as the male lead is attractive, or else it would just be creepy.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is a form of irony that mocks and ridicules. It's used to show contempt for things that probably deserve it. Read any of the entries here for examples of it. It's where the tone is deliberately hostile or clearly drawing amusement and it often means the opposite of what is said. An example of this would be if I were to state that 'Disney has done a great job developing existing franchises, and even updating their own work.'

Satire

Formally, satire means the use of humour, irony, exaggeration and ridicule to mock the stupidity of someone, or something, else. However, the term is popularly used to describe when political, social or current events are ridiculed in some way.

Self–fulfilling prophecy

A self–fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that somehow manages to make itself come true. This is where a character might turn into the very

thing he hates, or realise that the thing he is most afraid of has happened because of his fear of it.

An example of this would be if I was afraid of wasting my life and so decided to become an author…

Self–loathing

Often one of the main driving behind many of the worst life decisions made, such as alcoholism, abusive relationships that you stay in because it's an improvement over the alternative, and becoming a novelist.

Setting

The setting is the place where your story is happening. The setting also includes the time, elements of society and doesn't even necessarily have to be a geographical location. For instance, a story can be set in a dream, or other conceptual reality.

Simile

A simile is a literary device where we compare one thing directly with another using the words 'like' or 'as' to directly draw the reader's attention to the similarity between two otherwise dissimilar things. An example might be where a teacher said to his class, while being charged with studying a recently released young–adult novel, 'Reading this is like repeatedly smashing my head into a wall, only without the pleasurable sensation of unconsciousness to look forward to.'

Soliloquy

A soliloquy is a kind of extended monologue where a single character delivers a speech. The speech is delivered without there being another character to hear it so it's made purely for the benefit of the reader or audience.

Style

Style is the way an author writes, the way they express themselves in their work. Style is what sets one author apart from the rest. Some authors have a happy, light and happy tone while some are darker with more sarcasm and obvious self–loathing.

Subtext

Lurking just below the surface of the obvious meanings of a sentence or narrative is the subtext, a more nuanced secondary meaning. It is the realm of the hidden or inferred intention or underlying message. This is often what makes a classical story resonate, and the first thing to be dumped when they make a sequel.

A good example of how this works is in this example:

Sherlock Holmes: Yes, punch me. In the face. Didn't you hear me?

Dr. John Watson: I always hear "Punch me in the face" when you're speaking, but it's usually ***subtext***.

('A Scandal in Belgravia.' Sherlock*, 2012)*

Syllepsis

Syllepsis is when a sentence applies the same word simultaneously to two grammatical objects, but one of them is technically incorrect. It's a rhetorical trick also known as 'cheating'. A common example is, 'Either they or I am wrong.' Obviously, it should be written as 'Either *they are* wrong or *I am* wrong,' but what determines if it's a syllepsis or not is whether or not you think you got away with it.

Not to be confused with *Zeugma*, which it is always confused with.

Symbol
A symbol is an image or object that stands in to represent something else. Examples of this are how flags symbolise countries, how Superman has the letter 'S' as his crest, and how when we think of Germany the idea of engineering excellence, strict adherence to the rules and overcomplicated cars come to mind.

Synonym
A synonym is a word that has a very close meaning to another word and can often be swapped around for it. It's considered bad form to repeat the same word in a sentence so we search for synonyms to keep our writing fresh and interesting. For some reason, there is only one word for "thesaurus".

Tautology
Tautology is explaining something by saying the same thing again only using different words. It's like repeating the same thing to clarify the meaning, only by changing it slightly in case it was misunderstood. It's a way of ensuring understanding through modified repetition.

Theme
The theme is the central core, idea and topic behind your writing. It's the meaning behind everything you've created. For example, the theme behind much of Isaac Asimov's work is that humanity and technology closely become indivisible, while the theme of Marvel movies is to make as much money as possible.

Thriller

The genre 'thriller' includes any story where the main driving force is that the story is thrilling, creating emotional waves of excitement and anxiety as the audience experiences it.

Tone

The tone of a piece of work is the way it feels. It's the style of the work that creates a sensation in the reader. Tones are often considered light and dark, with stories about subjects that are inconsequential being light, and heavy, emotionally serious or life–threatening are darker. Tones can also be humorous, serious, sarcastic or silly.

Trope

A trope is a figure of speech, theme, plot element, symbol, character or image that is used many times over in many kinds of works and is familiar to a typical audience. These can be very simple ideas like a reluctant hero, a prophesy, a macguffin, or a space ship landing on a planet for the first time in exactly the place they need to be for the plot to unfold. In essence, they're very similar to clichés but without the automatic negative connotation. On the contrary, their inclusion and occasional deliberate exclusion is essential in helping to direct or subvert the audience's expectations, making them feel like more of an active participant in the story. An episode of *Better Call Saul* had the protagonist driving through a desert, and at one point he glances at his phone and notes there is no service. This directs the audience to anticipate that he will later find himself stuck in that same desert with no means of contacting anyone for assistance. This remarkably specific scenario appears so frequently in stories that all it took was a glance at a cell phone screen to successfully hint that it was coming.

Truism

A statement that is entirely self–referential, and provides no information beyond the scope of the statement itself. This is commonly found in legalese to hint at an instruction without actually committing to saying it. 'Do not make illegal copies of this disc' can be found written on any Microsoft software disc, and while it seems to directionally imply that making copies of the disc is heavily frowned upon, it's really just saying 'Don't break the law,' which we could have figured out ourselves by looking up the word 'law' in the dictionary.

Understatement

An understatement is when someone presents a situation as being less serious than it really is, often understating its seriousness. This would be like saying *The Last Jedi* wasn't very good or Americans seem patriotic.

Utopia

A utopia is a place where everything is perfect. Not many stories are set in such an optimistic place since it would be very difficult to find drama in a world where every issue has been solved. For this reason, when an apparent utopia is represented in fiction, there is often a revelation that it's really not at all what it seems and there is a dark, underlying power working against people's best interests.

In *The Time Traveller* by H.G. Wells, the titular character ends up in a far distant future which is represented as being a sort of utopia. It's later revealed that the people, dumb and lazy, have no idea they're being abused by an underground threat that is living off of them. They are incapable of understanding that this was written as a metaphor for the way the world actually works.

Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude is an overcomplicated word that simply means that something has the quality of resembling reality. Any piece of work, art, writing or movies that has this quality is believably realistic.

Villain

The villain is a person who is apparently evil for whatever reason. In a well–written story there will be an antagonist or adversary with clear and understandable intentions but sometimes it's just easier to use a villain who's evil because their kitten/pony may have died some time ago and it sent them over the edge. Who knows?

Wit

Wit is a smart use of humour. It's the kind of thing you don't expect to see in American sitcoms but should expect to see in literary comedy. It's often cynical and insulting which is why less intelligent people are offended by it.

Word Salad

An overly complex argument comprising multiple instances of nebulous buzzwords strung together with the intent to simply confound the listener into assuming that the speaker has the first clue what they're talking about, and that they've made some kind of point. They rarely do, or have. Ironically, those likely to argue in word salads rarely understand what they're saying, and make the same erroneous assumptions about themselves.

The technical name for people that engage in word salad arguments is a '*schizophasiac*,' which actually makes rather a compelling counter–argument.

Zeugma

Zeugma is when a sentence uses an ambiguous meaning of a word to convey two meanings in a single instance. It's a rhetorical trick for fooling the reader into thinking the writer is clever. A common example is, 'He held her hand and his tongue.' In this example he's literally holding her hand and figuratively holding his tongue to avoiding saying something. Two different meanings are explored in the same sentence. Another popular one is, 'Time flies like an arrow, and fruit flies like a banana," which doesn't really count because it's a two word expression, and it's used twice. Or does it count? Honestly, nobody really knows.

Not to be confused with *syllepsis*, which it is always confused with.

Exercises

Here are some simple exercises to get you started. They should help you to begin honing your abilities and improving your overall scope. These are a good place to start on your journey towards literary greatness.

These are just some ideas and you should easily be able to build on these and develop new challenges of your own to help push yourself further. There are a host of online resources to use and forums that you can join. Use them as much as possible and network with others so you can share ideas and criticisms. Remember, you can't grow as a writer unless you're writing and you need the constructive feedback of others to know where your work is successful and where you need to focus your efforts. Share your stories often because each time you do, it gets a little easier and your work gets a little better for the experience.

The first exercise is a random story generator. For this example it's played with a normal six–sided die. It can also be done with drawing choices from a hat and there are a host of free ones on the net. You can change the options around and create your own, taking out the elements and changing them to suit yourself. While there are lots of different versions they all do the same thing: they give you a template to write a story around that's unfamiliar and gets you out of your comfort zone. There's no better way to get better than by being pushed to go further.

Dice–Based Story Generator

Roll a dice four times to create your short story. The first roll decide the genre that your story must fit into. The seconds sets the theme. Your next two chooses the kind of protagonist and antagonist you will have to use. Roll a six–sided die to choose your short story and then find a way to put those things together.

Genre

1) Science–Fiction
2) Horror
3) Comedy
4) Drama
5) Crime
6) Romance

Theme

1) Death
2) Bullying
3) Crime doesn't pay
4) Heroism
5) Equality
6) The environment

Protagonist

1) A young man with a drinking problem
2) An old woman whose husband recently died
3) A child who dreams of being a police officer
4) A man who feels like he's really something else
5) A young woman who secretly isn't good at her job
6) A heroic person who always does the right thing

Antagonist

1) A corrupt police officer
2) A woman who always tells lies
3) A thief who only steals because they are hungry
4) A crazy man who thinks all people are out to kill him
5) Someone who can't dance
6) A slightly evil dentist

Plot Development

Plots work by taking the character from the beginning to the end of the story through a series of events. Along the way there will be a moral message played out, a theme made apparent or the character will develop in some way. The events will normally be interrupted, or driven by problems the character will have to overcome.

Building a plot that has five elements.

- An introduction that shows where your character begins.
- Three additional plot points, each with a problem to overcome, a challenge or situation that makes it difficult for them.
- A clear ending where your character has changed.

For this exercise create a character that's very much like yourself and build on that. Repeat the exercise with a number of different characters of your own creation.

Your overall plot will look like this:

- Introduction (Where we find out who the protagonist is and what their situation is.)
- Plot point one (Plot moves away from the introduction, taking the character into their journey.)
- Difficulty to overcome (Something happens that makes plot point one difficult.)
- Plot point two (Overcoming the difficulty moves things along to the second point in the journey.)
- Difficulty to overcome (Another challenge makes the journey difficult somehow.)

- Plot point three (The solution to the difficulty move things to the next point towards the ending.)
- Difficulty to overcome (One last unforeseen problem makes it seem almost impossible to finish.)
- Ending (The final solution leaves the character exactly where they need to be. They have grown.)

Complete a Story

This exercise helps you find new ways to build on something that's already started. For this example, an interesting opening paragraph has been written for you. Your job is to complete the story and take it in your own direction.

The opening deliberately creates a difficulty for the writer in that the antagonist appears to be more of a victim and the author has to find a way to turn that situation around so that the final line fits the story and gets the audience to sympathise with the protagonist.

Practising this will help you with overcoming writer's block when you're faced with your own work and need to find a way to continue a story. It's a valuable skill we all need to master, the ability to find a way to continue with something when the odds are against us.

The following example invites you to find a way to put the inside back into the story and provides a challenge. You can do the same exercise by taking the opening paragraph of other stories and completing them in your own way.

The Inside Story

She was on her knees. There was a small cut on her temple and blood was running from it, tracing down over her cheek and dripping slowly to the floor. She looked up at me with defiant eyes, brave and strong but she knew she'd lost and the blood mixed with her tears.

I stood over her, the gun in my hand was pointing at her head. Our eyes were locked together as my finger tightened onto the trigger. Could I fire it, killing her, ending her life and carrying that on my conscience forever?

The wind picked up and a chill ran down my spine. They were coming and time was growing short.

Complete the story and end with the final paragraph below

I pulled the trigger. A flash lit her face and the sound of a crack filled the air. Her lifeless body fell to the ground in a crumpled heap.

Perspectives

Perspectives are how we see the world. No two people see the world the same way, even if they were looking at precisely the same thing. To a vegan, the act of eating meat is questionable, to a woman who has just given birth, abortions might seem immoral. As an author, it's important to know how to use human perspectives as part of your storytelling to create more rounded and believable situations and characters. Protagonists and antagonists are connected and have a relationship. They are opposite sides of the same coin, two people in the same situation together but seeing it in different ways.

Write a story that tells the following situation
A police officer and a suspect face each other in an alley. There is nowhere left to run and the suspect has no choice but to turn and fight. They each draw a pistol and point it at the other. If one fires, it's likely the other will shoot too and, at this range, neither will survive. There are probably more police on the way and so the officer tries to talk to the suspect, to convince them to lower their weapon and give themselves up before it gets worse. The pair talk as they wait to see the outcome of this situation.

It's natural for the reader to feel like the police officer has the moral high ground so at the beginning of the story it seems that she is the protagonist. In the story, change your perception to show how actually the suspect is really the victim. End the story with the

audience's sympathy being with the suspect and knowing they are really the protagonist. The beginning of the story has been written for you**:**

She ran into the alley, huffing to herself under the weight of the police equipment strapped to her uniform. She had been chasing the suspect for several minutes and now she was too exhausted and breathless to do anything more than keep up the pace. The alley was dark and foreboding, uneven red bricks covered in peeling plaster lined the walls. Dustbins were scattered uneasily around and rats crawled around among them. She was between two tall buildings and they cast deep shadows, almost cutting off the light entirely. She levelled her service pistol and pointed the gaping muzzle into the shadows. At the end was a wall, this was a dead end and her suspect had nowhere left to run.

"Come out!" she said, huffing wearily. "I know you're in here. Backup is on the way. There's nowhere to go." She scanned the area, peering behind gigantic metal dustbins for where her suspect might be hiding. "I know what you did!" she told him. "You haven't killed anyone yet, we can work this out. Come out and I'll arrest you." She heard a noise behind her and her finger tightened on the trigger.

A voice said, "I have a gun too. Drop yours and I'll walk away. I don't want to kill you." She turned and saw a battered, beaten–up old revolver aiming at her.

She pointed her own pistol at the suspect and said, "Backup is on the way. Nobody has to die today!"

Complete the story…

Write a Story

There is no better to practice writing stories than to actually write stories. The following exercises help you to focus your efforts by getting you to write stories that help you practice using some of the things we've discussed in this book.

Protagonist Vs Antagonist

The relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist will be at the heart of your story. They will often be tied together in the same situation from opposite sides. The difference between them will usually be one of perspective with the audience siding with the protagonist purely because we're showing the story from their point of view.

Write a story that tells the following situation

Two men are locked in a game. It can be any kind of game or sport. They could be arm–wrestling, playing chess or boxing. The only thing that matters is that a game is being played and there are only two people involved. Both of these two men are competing only against the other for their own reasons.

The winner receives a prize of some kind and both of the men are desperate to win it.. Choose one of them to be your protagonist and tell the story from their point of view, explaining to the audience what the competition is, why they are involved in it and what their reasons for doing this are. During the course of your short story you should also let the audience become aware of what the antagonist's reasons for this are as well. Show how both are in the same situation and that while they are opposites, they are very alike as well.

Setting

The setting of a story is a crucial element of the narrative process. The setting must give the characters sufficient space to develop and allow the action of the plot to take place.

Write a story that tells the following situation

Your protagonist is a desperate young person who wants to escape from their home. They are faced with a final obstacle to leaving their country: the border is staffed by several armed guards and a wall that's too high to climb over.

Have your character search for a way out, explaining why they are looking to leave and how they have managed to get as far as they have. Show what reasons have made them feel like they have to leave and why they are so determined to do so that they're willing to risk their life. Explain what is beyond the wall and how that's different, or better, than where they are. In this story, the setting functions as the antagonist so there is no need to add any additional characters if you don't wish to.

Character Development

Character development is a key element in building your plot. A main character will usually be changed by the events they experience throughout the story. It's important that you learn to show how your character grows and develops as you move along.

Write a story that tells the following situation

It is the night before an important battle and an old soldier, a leader of men, is walking along inside his camp, checking one last time that everything is ready. He hears a noise and moves to investigate.

He find a young soldier cowering behind a guard tower. The man is terrified and has been crying to himself, afraid of what the morning might bring.

Instead of rebuking him, the old soldier sits down and tells him a story of his first battle and how he lived to be the man he is today.

Relate the story that the old soldier tells.

Alternating Artists

This final exercise needs to be done with other players. The first paragraph has been written for you and your job is to write the next one. Once you've written your paragraph that continues the story, you pass it along for another author to add the next one.

This can be done with two or more writers but it's best not to have more than four.

This exercise is a fun way to learn how to continue a story and to work within difficult guidelines, a skill we will need as we progress.

There are some examples below to get you started and afterwards you can begin writing the first paragraph yourself. All of the opening sections pose a question that makes it challenging to continue.

1) She looked around the empty room. Her heart pounded in her chest and she began to realise where she was and what had happened to her. The walls were tattered with peeling yellow plaster over worn grey bricks. The windows were full of jagged, blackened glass and the floor was strewn with debris. Beside her was a terrifying object and she gasped as she caught sight of it.

2) He looked at himself in the mirror and saw something that didn't fit. He raised an eyebrow suspiciously. He began mumbling to himself as he scratched his head in confusion.
"Hello," he said dubiously and the face in the mirror did exactly the same back. The only problem was that it wasn't *his* face.

3) "Give me all your money!" the robber said. He pointed a rusting and ancient–looking pistol forward, shaking nervously.
She sighed to herself and opened the till. She could feel herself getting angry and when that happened, the terrible thing would happen again. She wondered how many times it would happen before she learned to control it. She wondered if she ever would.

4) The dragon flew through the air, soaring high in the blue, cloudless sky. Bob watched in awed silence as the creature beat its mighty, leathery wings. It cried out, something between a scream and a growl and a flicker of flame blew out through its gigantic nostrils.
Bob said to his terrified friend, "You don't often see those flying over London, do you?"

Story Starters

And finally, write a story that uses these prompts to start you off. After this, it will be time to find concepts for yourself and then your stories truly will be your own.

1) A spaceship is crashing to Earth and nobody knows what to do.
2) A big, hairy alien wants to find a friend but he smells like a burning cat.
3) A man is turning into a weird ugly blob after being bitten by a red and yellow mosquito.
4) A supercomputer is made from a bucket of sand.
5) An evil scientist takes over the world with robot rats.
6) Someone finds a way to travel through time but can only travel back five minutes.
7) A robot that looks totally human can only feel sad.
8) Waking up in a different world.
9) Someone vanishes in front of lots of people.
10) Someone finds a way to talk to the dead through a mobile phone.
11) Someone builds a car powered by human waste.
12) A school in space where they're learning the history of our planet.
13) Children born on Earth are starting to do strange things.
14) Someone clones his pet dog and brings it back to life.
15) Trees take over the world and enslave mankind.

16) A man invents a machine that makes him invisible for 1 hour.

17) A man discovers the meaning of life but can't tell anyone what it is.

18) Aliens arrive on Earth and they want to party.

19) A woman falls in love with a robot .

20) Aliens invade Earth but their ships are the size of ants.

21) Scientists discover that the world is actually flat.

22) A new energy drink lets you run faster than a bullet.

23) Your mobile phone starts receiving texts sent tomorrow.

24) Your pet wakes up able to talk.

25) You can tell your computer what to do by thinking.

26) A man discovers he has a weird super power.

27) A person goes to the cinema and the film is their own life.

28) It is 50 years in the future.

29) A man sitting next to you says he built the Earth.

30) You wake up in hospital and are given shocking news.

31) There is a monster under your bed.

32) A person finds out they were adopted by the people who killed their family.

33) A policewoman dreams of killing someone.

34) A suicidally depressed woman finds something worth living for.

35) An IT worker finds a sentient computer virus hiding inside the office server.

36) A woman find out her best friend has a terrible secret.

37) A man attends his father's funeral and sees him hiding at the back of the crowd in disguise.

38) A girl brings her boyfriend round to tell her parents that she's pregnant.

39) A woman is dead but is trapped in the real world where nobody seems to be able to see her.

40) A person buys a second–hand laptop and finds something amazing on it.

41) An archaeologist decodes an ancient text that tells him that cats are the true masters of Earth.

42) The next President of the United States is an elephant named Cuddles.

43) A woman finds a suicide note hidden inside a library book.

44) The entire planet wakes up in the morning to find they've all had the same dream.