

The Basics of Writing Short Fiction

While you might be able to find much of what you read here in books about writing fiction, I can promise you that what I have to say is gleaned from my own writing experience. And it has been quite useful to me. In this introductory piece, I will discuss the basic elements of writing a short story. Later installments will explore the nitty-gritty of each. But first, here are two prerequisites:

Recognize you are a rookie Make no mistake: there is a continuous learning curve involved in writing good fiction. My advice is to lower your expectations in terms of what you think you can do right away. It was a long time before I was able to write well enough to get my first story published. And the first is the toughest. Fortunately with each story published, your résumé gets you into more and more doors.

FUHGETABOUTIT—if you are not an avid reader Most people who want to write fiction are voracious readers, usually novels. If you are not at least a regular reader of fiction, I would advise you to reconsider the whole idea of trying to write it. Why? Because if your reading diet doesn't include large portions of good writing, you won't recognize good writing—or why it's good—when you see it. And most certainly, that would include your own writing.



Ok, here are the basics:





Come up with a story idea Kinda obvious, huh? For me, this is one of the tougher things to do, but it can be fun. I generally sit down and try to hammer something interesting out in my head. And that is all I am after—a rudimentary story plot, a mere idea. If it's a good day, I will pop out two or three ideas. If not, I just drill dry holes. I'm surprised my house hasn't collapsed from the Swiss cheese of dry holes.



Outline the story Now you take the idea and write a few paragraphs about it to give it a little spine. Then, try to expand the spine into a full skeleton by forging it into a basic outline. Voilla! There is your story line. (Later, I always visualize scenes and outline each scene). I know that some think the outlining process is constraining. But every time I felt lazy and tried to write a story without creating an outline, in short order I wind up writing myself down blind alleys and up dead ends. If you don't know where you are going, you usually won't get there. But don't view the outline as rigid. I always change a number of things as I write.



Get your facts straight Every story has a setting and relies on certain facts. Some are general knowledge and others lesser known. For example, my story *A Small Sin in Nuremberg* has scenes in Auschwitz and in the Nuremberg jail. The story also relies on timelines and processes followed during the Nuremberg Trials. Imagine what a turn-off it would be to a reader if he caught me making up what Auschwitz looked like or made-up facts about the Nuremberg Trials. Maybe not every reader would catch such errors or omissions, but I when they do it's a turn off. My advice is to do your research. Luckily, these days you can find out just about anything with a few keystrokes on the Internet, so the process is hardly arduous.

- **Choose a narrator** Briefly, there are three kinds of narrators (I am leaving out the second person, because it is rarely used and clunky, besides): The first is the Omniscient Narrator, who knows everything—including background information and what is in each characters head—and he isn't afraid to tell you about it. This powerful narrator is easy to work with, but it's more difficult to get the reader involved with the characters, because of the narrator's distance. The second is a third person narrator, whom you can endow with varying powers, such as knowing the thoughts of the protagonist, but not of other characters. Typically, a third person narrator is not aware of background information. When the narrator only knows what the protagonist knows and thinks, he is called a Close Third Person Narrator. You can also choose to allow the Third Person Narrator to know the thoughts in any characters' heads, but his distance from those characters increases. Finally, there is the First Person Narrator, whom is usually the protagonist. Obviously, this narrator only knows what the protagonist knows and thinks and obviously is closest to the protagonist. We will get into the pros and cons of each of these narrator styles in later installments. 
- **Give your characters some character** A good plot by itself does not make a good story. It needs to come alive with characters the reader cares about (or despises). To do this, you have to let the reader get to know your main characters, and most importantly, the protagonist. I don't include character development in my story outline, but I keep a side list of attributes I assign to each major character. Then, while drafting the story, I look for opportunities to work in a character attribute and check it off my list. The fourth paragraph on page 2 of *Boy Interrupted* is a good example of how a lot of characterization can be packed into just a few sentences. Character development, in my opinion, is the most challenging part of writing fiction.
- **Point of view** There seems to be a majority opinion in the writing community that each scene in a story should have a single point of view. It used to be that an entire story had to preserve a single point of view, but I have noticed more and more exceptions to that, mostly in novels, where there may be two or three major characters wherein different scenes are written from each of their points of view. What do I mean by point of view and why is it the subject of a rule? Well, if you are telling a story and the protagonist is the one who is interpreting and reacting to developments in the story and letting us know his thoughts, that story is written from the protagonist's point of view. The rule in this case is to stick to his point of view, which means not allowing other characters to reveal a silent thought or unspoken word. The reason for the rule is that it is jarring and confusing to a reader to jump in and out of the heads of different characters, at least in the same scene. The rule applies to narrator styles other than first person, because in that narrator style everything is automatically from that person's point of view. A story can be written from the omniscient narrator's point of view, which is the case with my, *Welcome to the Global Community*.
- **Show, don't tell** Remember, you want your readers to become involved with your main characters. If characters/narrators are constantly telling the reader how they are feeling emotionally, or conjuring up some traumatic memory, or thinking how they hate windbags, the reader is being lectured to—being *told* about the characters. Boring and dry! And it's hard to love a lecturer; harder still to make it through the story. You must strive to *show* who characters are by their actions and reactions. Quick example: Say you want to convey how someone is afraid of the dark. 

A lazy narrator might say, “Stepping into the black void of the room, he instantly knows that someone must be hiding there, someone who would do him harm.” Alternatively, the *show me* narrator could have said, “An instant after his eyes take in the black void, his legs seize mid-step, arms explode from his sides like the wings of a bird frantically taking flight, fingers scratch and claw for purchase at the jambs of the doorway.” Which writing better conveys the fear the character is feeling? Do characters we encounter in real life run around always telling how they feel or what they are thinking every moment? No. Characters in stories whom reveal themselves by their actions and reactions act like real people—people you learn to care about.

- **The story must advance** A common error new writers make is to forget that the plot of the story is its main ingredient. It’s easy to digress with excess character development or too much detail. People are impatient. If the story doesn’t advance



fast enough, they are likely to bail out. Even character development should advance the story. Purge your of any unnecessary detail. Be ruthless. It is easy to fall in love with a sentence or an entire series of paragraphs. If they don’t

advance the story, kill them!

- **Write realistic dialogue** Opening the front door, the woman stiffens and says, “Yes, what can I do for you this fine morning?” the man in the dark blue uniform responds, “I have a warrant for the arrest of your husband, ma’am.” The woman takes a step back, her hand springing to her mouth, “My goodness! Would you like to come in and have a cup of coffee?” Ok, so this example might be a little over the top, but it does demonstrate some common mistakes made in writing dialogue. First, when someone opens the door to her home, unless she expects someone, she is apprehensive. The visitor might likely be greeted with a stiff, “Yes,” but certainly not the cheery addition of “—what can I do for you this fine morning?” The words are out of context with the person’s mindset. The second mistake is being out of step with how someone in a certain role would act in a given

situation, demonstrated by the cop announcing out of that he has an arrest warrant. Wouldn’t you think that would first verify he has the correct household? The mistake is similar to the first, when the woman is taken by the cop’s announcement, but invites him in for Her words are out of sync with the situation as well as



the box he third aback coffee. her

body language. Here is a better approach to the dialogue: Stiffening, the woman opens the front door, and says, “Yes?” The man in the dark blue uniform responds, “Are you Mrs. Thomas Kincaid?” She takes a step back, “Yes—yes, I am.” The cop says, I’m afraid I have a warrant for your husband’s arrest, ma’am.” Her hand springs to her mouth, “My God, you must be mistaken.” When you write dialogue, always think of the situation each character is confronted with and how they might react. Also, match their body language with their words. (Body language, as in real life, adds texture to written dialogue). A good litmus test of dialogue is to read it out loud. If it sounds funny or forced, pick up your pen and try again. My story, *Wading in Brooklyn* is one of my best efforts at achieving natural flowing dialogue.

- **Use metaphors** The reason writers use metaphors is similar to why it is wise to show and not tell. Metaphors conjure up an image in the reader’s mind that shows the characters’ feelings, or reactions. They can also evoke emotions in the reader. In the case of scenery, metaphors add texture. Sure, you can use adjectives to do the same thing. But before you decide adjectives are as good as metaphors, you be the judge of

which of these sentences is more vivid: Take #1: Her hands felt wet and clammy. Take #2: Her fingers were slick, like she had grasped a greasy doorknob, and the palms of her hand squished like ripe tomatoes when she made them into fists. A note of caution: when you use metaphors, avoid clichés. A cliché effectively reduces a metaphor to a mere adjective, because the brain has encountered it so many times it no longer bothers to create an image.

- **Set the scene** Writers often forget to do this, and the result is like a movie with characters acting in front of a blue screen. Our minds need texture and context. If two people are talking in a room, populate the room with color and a piece of furniture or two. Better, match the room to the characters' situation. If they are arguing, make the light harsh and the room stark. Or if they are cooing at each other, the room might have soft light—perhaps candles—warm colors, maybe even a fire in a hearth. Setting the scene is important, but you have to do it subtly. Writing is most effective when the reader is lost in the plot, taken with the characters, and forgets he is reading something that has been written. So don't *always* describe surroundings at the *beginning* of each scene, it eventually becomes predictable and distracting to the reader. He becomes aware he is reading, not experiencing, and what he is reading seems contrived. So, be careful and clever how you work in scene descriptions, and don't overdue it. A single sentence is often all that is necessary, or a metaphor, and often you can work it into the middle of a scene seamlessly. Page 2 of *A Small Sin in Nuremberg* provides a good example of a description of the Nuremberg Jail interwoven with the thoughts of the main character.



- **Edit and re-edit** Those who claim they get it right on the first draft are either incredibly talented or lying. I would wager the latter. There are a number of things to look for in editing your story, and a fertile area is metaphors: look for opportunities to insert them and to improve those you already wrote. Obliterate clichés and excessive adjectives. Other opportunities include loosening up stiff dialogue, a dearth of description, lack of character development, the story advancing too slowly, etc.. During this process, you will be amazed how many opportunities you will find to improve the story, sometimes even rearranging the order of scenes. When you think you have it perfect, put it in a drawer for at least a week. In the meantime, start another story. When you drag the first story out of the drawer, I guarantee that you will find more things to fix. Magic, you say? No, just a fresh perspective.



- **Feedback/Critique** If you rely on yourself as the sole editor of your fiction, you may forever remain ignorant as to why it didn't get published. The writer is too close to his writing to see all its problems. We all need feedback as a basic part of the learning process. Also, if you have ever been on a team that is tackling a project, you know that the knowledge of a group is superior to the knowledge of one individual. So, seek out feedback; ideally from several people. On my website, I provide a link to what, in my opinion, is the best of the internet short story critique sites, *Zoetrop.com*. In a later installment, I will give you some insight how to “work” Zoetrope to maximize the quality of your feedback.

