Ten tips for Creative Writers as posted on the Center for Writing Excellence Blog from October 13, 2010 through February 21, 2011. Each post is accompanied by the comments that were posted by readers of the blog.

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Over the next few posts I am going to give you some tips and ideas for your creative writing projects. While I would like to claim ownership of these tips and ideas, I must confess right off the bat that I gleaned them from a variety of sources and will provide links to those sources as we go along. I also invite your comments, tips, and ideas as we proceed, making this a truly interactive discussion.

Getting started is probably the hardest part of a creative writing project. I like to start from prompts, but if a prompt is not available, there are some other things to be considered. Think about the main character or characters. In writing classes you will hear the main character called the protagonist (click on the word to see the definition at Dictionary.com). There needs to be someone that is at the center of the short story. Who is this person? What are his or her goals? How does she or he fit into the plot, with the other characters, etc.? What do you, as the writer, want to accomplish? Be specific when thinking about the main character. This is a good time to write a character sketch. If you are having problems filing out the characters in your story, it might be a good idea to take a class on character development.

Your audience wants to identify with your main character, whether they like the character or not. They need feel that the character is real somehow. To add dimension to the character, give him or her some personality traits. Don’t TELL your readers what your character looks like, SHOW them. Give the readers a mental picture of the character through narrative, actions, and other descriptive methods. It is much more effective to write “…Jim Bob’s head almost scraped the top of the doorway when he stepped calmly into the room, a dark brown cheroot dangling beneath a pencil thin mustache, the spiraling smoke making him squint his steely eyes.” instead of, “…Jim Bob was tall and smoked cigars.”

Think about what the protagonist wants. What has already happened that will affect the outcome of these wants? For example, your protagonist is a
woman who on the surface, is a bit complacent about her life, things are going along very well and she just moves through life without any real thought. There is one thing, though. She has a secret life – what is it? And how does she manage this other part of her? Is she aware of it? What happens when she is in her alter-ego self?

Now that you have established who the protagonist is and what he or she wants, what conflict, or unexpected action comes along to upset the apple cart, as it were? What event is directly related to the protagonist that will give the reader an emotional tie to the story, draw him or her in?

Finally, where is the story taking place? What is the time frame? Is it in a house, an office, outside? Is it a few hours, days, weeks? What kind of tone do you wish to convey to the reader? Do you want the reader to be scared for the protagonist? Curious about what happens next? How will you incorporate dialogue into the story?

Once you have decided on all these things, you have a pretty good start to your story. You know who the main character or characters are, what they want, what they look like, what they have done or what has already happened to move toward the climax of the story, what the setting and tone of the story are, and how the characters are going to communicate with each other.

Now, start thinking about writing the story! In the next post I will share some more ideas for getting the reader’s attention in the first paragraph – or even first sentence. Like the first line from Herman Melville’s famous book, Moby Dick: “Call me Ishmael.”

Happy Writing!

Comments
I’m going to post a blog later this morning that links to your site. I think I told you that I have written a book for teachers, “Teaching the Story: Fiction Writing in Grades 4-8” that has been used by many adults to learn many of the same aspects of writing that you mentioned in this post.

Comment by Carol Baldwin — October 19, 2010

- That’s a great idea, Carol. I am very interested in your book. I have another blog you might be interested in: the Center for
I started writing a series of tips for my web site but ran out of ideas after four or five of them. But here’s one on “Writing for Your Audience.” — Pat

When you give a speech, you know who will be in your audience. You prepare your remarks accordingly. You present information your audience will appreciate. You slant your speech to the topic that will most appeal to your audience.

Writing is much the same: you write for your readers, yet the voice inside your head is yours. You need to put yourself in the place of your readers. What are they hearing as you write? Where do your characters reside?

Your first audience is probably a relative, maybe a parent. Then you branch out to your teachers and fellow students. Finally, when you reach a stage of professionalism, your audience is others who identify with your ideas and characters. If you write fiction for a specific genre, such as mystery, romance, sci-fi, or westerns, you should have an idea about who will buy and read your book. After all, you have read other books, written by other authors, in precisely that genre. If you enjoy them, others should enjoy them, too.

Some genres have informal guidelines that your audience expects you to follow. If you deviate too far from those, you run the risk of losing your audience.

Comment by Pat — October 13, 2010

- Thanks, Pat. Knowing who your audience is critical to the tone you will use with the story. Great information!

Comment by Janie Sullivan — October 13, 2010
Creative Writing Tip #2  
October 21, 2010 at 9:10 am

You want to capture your reader right off the bat with your story. We live in a very fast paced, “I want it now” world and if your reader is not captivated in the first few sentences, he or she will not stick around for the rest of the story. The old adage, ‘show me’, don’t ‘tell me’ works very well here. Starting off with a dry, dull description of the hallway where the murders took place is not going to convince your reader to come back and read more. Instead, try something like this: “Underlying the usual hallway smells of dust, stale air, and old Mrs. Baker’s burned chili was an oddly sweet, but cloying copper smell.”

Now you have your reader wondering about that copper smell, which is obviously the smell of blood. The reader also has a vague picture in his or her mind of what the hallway looks like, and can put himself in the scene. Follow the ‘hook’ up with more descriptive narrative or even dialogue that will keep the reader interested. The protagonist needs to make some decisions quickly and embark on a course of action that the reader will understand and identify with.

The back story (the information written or thought about before writing the story) will give the writer a basis on how to describe the scene and introduce the characters. Long descriptions of rooms, clothing, etc. do not belong in a short story, but there should be enough information on those things that the reader can make his or her own conclusions.

How do you start your stories? What do you think about using dialogue vs. a descriptive ‘show me’ sentence?

Happy Writing!
Comments

Ken Follett’s new book, Fall of Giants, starts with this sentence: “On the Day King George V was crowned at Westminster Abbey in London, Billy Williams went down the pit in Aberowen, South Wales.” Right away the reader knows that this story will be about at least two events: the crowning of the king and someone’s life in “the pit.” Although the reader does not know what “the pit” is, the stage is set – the royal chambers in London vs. something that is not quite as elegant – hence the name “the pit.” Follett draws the reader in by creating this juxtaposition between the two elements and causing the reader to ask several questions. Reading on, the reader will get those questions answered, and, hopefully, be hooked on the story. I am a big Follett fan, and was hooked even before I read the first sentence, but new Follett readers will not have my preconceived notions about the story.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — October 24, 2010

- I’m a fan of Follett, too. After taking three large bags of books to the library for them to sell, however, I’ve decided not to buy any more books. At least not for a long time. I checked with our local library and the latest Follett book was out. Of course. I’ll put my name on the list to read it when i can get it.

Comment by Pat — October 24, 2010

- If you are interested, check out this online book swap club. [http://www.paperbackswap.com](http://www.paperbackswap.com). You list your books there, others order them, you ship them and get credits for each one you ship – then you go through the listings (over 4 MILLION) and pick the books you want — they will be shipped to you free — I have been a member for years, it is a great way to get lots of books free, and to clear out your shelves of books —

Comment by Janie Sullivan — October 24, 2010

- An example of a good first sentence is: “Fiona Glass was trained to notice faces, but even if she hadn’t been, she would have noticed this one.”

It’s from a book by Laura Griffin titled “Thread of Fear.” Fiona is a forensic artist. The reader instantly knows this is going to be
about some hunky guy, or possibly a criminal. Since the author writes romantic suspense stories, it’s probably a hunky guy.

Here’s another one: “One fine August Evening in South Carolina, Agnes Crandall stirred raspberries and sugar in her heavy nonstick frying pan and defended her fiance to the only man she’d ever trusted.”

It’s from a tongue-in-cheek mystery by Jennifer Crusie and Bob Mayer titled “Agnes and the Hitman.”

Both of these first lines tell a lot about the main character. The second one also indicates the setting and the fact that there will be a lot about cooking and that frying pan. They both grab the reader’s interest immediately.

Comment by Pat — October 23, 2010

• Good examples, Pat. I especially like the second one – it not only tells the reader about the setting, but sets tone as a light-hearted, but somewhat serious circumstance. Sounds like a fun read!

Comment by Janie Sullivan — October 24, 2010

• I’m not so sure a copper smell indicates blood. I didn’t get it. You’d need a qualifier, I think.

I just read a French book for my mystery book club and a lot of the French words weren’t obvious to me. One of the policemen said, when he was either promoted or demoted—I couldn’t decide which—“now I am a flic.” I looked all over for a translation of it until my husband finally found out it meant “cop,” or something similar. So don’t assume your reader knows what you mean.

Comment by Pat — October 21, 2010

• I agree about the copper smell. I didn’t catch that either.

I start my stories in the middle of an action scene. The ensuing passages finish the setting and it plunges the reader
into immediate anxiety – but if I wrote in your style, I’d do it your way.

Dialogue is an excellent way to introduce new material. I’ve seen writers who used it to introduce a story – I mean, they literally began the story with it and it didn’t work. Not to say that it couldn’t be done, but it would take a hearty, engaging conversation and experience to pull that off.

I’ve noticed something – new authors try to use stunts that they see professional authors get away with it and the new authors think they can get away with it, too. They forget that those authors know the editors/publishers and they have a track record.

Comment by Deborah Owen — October 22, 2010

- Nice comment, Deborah. Beginning with action is a great way to catch a reader’s interest, though, as you say, it takes some experience to make it work. Maybe we should each find some outstanding first sentence and explain why we think it’s good. I’ve heard people do that in workshops and it’s always fun.

Comment by Pat — October 22, 2010

- I like that idea, Pat. Let’s go with it — find a great beginning sentence and let us know why you think it is good. I am going to go look for one right now!

Comment by Janie Sullivan — October 22, 2010

- Excellent point, Pat and Deborah. Not everyone would equate the smell of copper to blood, although I have seen it in many different stories. A follow up sentence could identify the smell or even further in the paragraph the character could ‘remember’ what the smell was. At the very least, the reader would wonder what the copper smell was and want to read on to find out.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — October 21, 2010

It would be so easy to say “the copper-smell of blood,” or just “the smell of blood.” Of course, it depends on
who is smelling it. If it’s a detective or policeman, he would probably know what the smell was.

The sentence is good overall and your point is well made. Get creative when writing a description, don’t fall back on something that’s been said before if you can help it and don’t get too technical with your descriptions.

Comment by Pat — October 21, 2010
First, let me apologize for my tardiness in getting this third tip written. I have been very busy with the Institute for Instructional Excellence’s new contract with a learning company on the East Coast (more details as that firms up) and expanding the courses page in the Center for Writing Excellence. If you get a chance, click on the Writing Courses tab above and see what I have been up to over there.

Now, on to Creative Writing Tip #3. Today we are going to talk about character development. This is a complex topic, one that can be explored only superficially in a blog post, but I welcome your comments and insights into this subject. One of the most important aspects of character development is simply this: know your character. Know your character better than your reader does. You need to develop a ‘back story’ to go with each character so you know how they will react in the situations as they arise in your fiction writing. Know your character well enough to give them a voice that fits as well as ideas, thoughts, and opinions that will color his or her words and actions.

There are all sorts of lists available online that will give you ideas of what kind of character traits you will come up with, but there are four very important areas to consider as you start to develop descriptions of your characters using the details in the character sketch. Those areas are:

1. **Appearance.** Letting your reader ‘see’ your character gives them a visual anchor and a glimpse of their personality.

2. **Thought.** Let your reader into the mind of the character through inner dialogue. Give the reader a sense of the characters unexpressed desires, fears, hopes, and memories.

3. **Speech.** Use the character’s words to round out the character as a person, not just someone who moves the plot along with announcements.
4. Action. This is where ‘show – don’t tell’ comes into play. Don’t just list adjectives to tell about the character’s actions, but describe them.

Here is an example of a character sketch about a person in a short story I am currently working on. Jenna is a 10-year old girl, she likes to be with her friends, but her big brother bugs her. She trusts everyone and is very open and generous. Her family is not rich, but not terribly poor, either. She does not have a dad, and her mother works very hard, and loves her children fiercely. Jenna is always inviting strangers home for dinner. She is very open and outgoing, but also quite naive. (You can find the story of Jenna and the Burglar here. It is unfinished — suggest an ending for it if you like.)

Happy Writing!

Comments
Good to “see” you again, Janie. You are right about character development. In my opinion, if you want your characters to gain strength, you need to start out portraying their weaknesses. Then show them conquering those weaknesses as the story progresses. This also builds conflict, essential to any story.

Comment by Pat — November 29, 2010

Hello Pat. I’m back — got a bit busy for awhile but will try to be more consistent with the blog. I really like your tip about showing weaknesses early on in the story and then having your character overcome those weaknesses – a good way to keep the story going.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — November 29, 2010
Creative Writing Tip #4
December 7, 2010 at 1:44

Today’s area of discussion is on point of view. As you are thinking about your next creative writing endeavor, consider the point of view you want to tell the story from. You need to determine who is going to tell the story – one of the characters? Or will it be ‘narrated’ by a third party? How about directly involving the reader in the action? First person point of view means the story is told from the viewpoint of “I.” The narrator is telling the story from his or her perspective, either as the main character or as a secondary character who is describing the actions of the main character. First person perspective is the easiest point of view to write and is often the first choice by novice writers. It is also the choice of more experienced writers who want to write the story from a personal viewpoint. Here is an example of a secondary character in a story writing in first person about the main character:

I was surprised to see my mother like that. I had never seen her so much as take a drink ever before. I was embarrassed and at the same time a bit fascinated by the transformation in her after several slugs from the whiskey bottle.

Second person point of view is also very easy to write, but is possibly the one that should be avoided unless the writer deliberately intends to involve the reader in the story. Second person is written with the pronouns you, yours, and your. Using this point of view, the writer is telling the story directly to “you,” the reader, and you then become part of the story. Look at this example:

You ran down the street, screaming at the top of your lungs. Your sister chased you as far as the corner store, where you ducked inside and hid from her.

The third person viewpoint, possibly the most common viewpoint in fiction storytelling, is a narrative format where the writer tells what is happening through the use of pronouns “he,” “she,” or “it.” Plural forms in third person are “they,” or “them.” A third person technique might be limited to telling the story of only one character’s viewpoint or broader
where the narrator knows everything about all the characters and tells everyone’s viewpoint. An example of using third person viewpoint is:

_She took the flowers from the delivery boy, burying her nose in the delicate blossoms and breathing deeply._

It is important to choose the right viewpoint for telling the story, and then sticking to that viewpoint. If the writer switches around from first to third and back to second, the reader may become confused and not know who is talking or performing the actions. Think about the viewpoints you use in your story creation. Which do you use most? What kind of story would you write using each of the different viewpoints?

Happy Writing

**Comments**

- Another great column, Janie. Well done. I’d like to see an article on 3rd person limited versus omniscient voice.

  Comment by Deborah Owen — December 10, 2010

  - that is a good idea, Deb. I will work on it! Thanks!

    Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 10, 2010

- Nice work, Janie. When I was a technical writer, I used 2nd person. It prevented the question of saying his/hers or he/she, etc. I shied away from 1st person for a long time, since it limits the action. I couldn’t say something happened unless “I” was there.

  More and more novels I read seem to be in 1st person. If the author wants to switch point of view, he’ll do it in separate chapters. Only well-established authors seem to use this, as the publisher isn’t so critical of their work.

  What do you and others think?

  Comment by Pat — December 7, 2010

  - I agree, first person is used a lot in novels, which makes them seem more personal. The reader feels like he or she really gets to know the character if the story is in first person. When I am
teaching research writing classes at the university I find that all the students invariably use second person the first time they submit a paper. It is just habit and something that needs to be worked on.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 7, 2010
Dialogue. Getting the characters in a fiction story to talk to each other using realistic, believable dialogue will help the reader relate to them and to the story, making the story that much more real. Dialogue is not always easy to do, but it adds so much to the story that it does not make sense to leave it out. So, the question is, how do you make your characters talk to each other in ways that your reader will understand? Remember, it is always better to ‘show’ than ‘tell’ in fiction writing. Your dialogue labels (those bits of explanatory text that come between the dialogue) should give the reader a picture of the character who is talking, not tell what the character is feeling while talking. For example: “What do you mean?” Sarah nervously asked. Instead of this, the writer should ‘infer’ through the words or labels what the character is feeling, not tell the reader. Let the reader draw some conclusions on his/her own. Here is a better way of writing that same scene: Sarah jerked her head up. “What do you mean?” Now we have a picture of Sarah obviously nervous.

Remember, as you are creating dialogue in your story, each character gets his or her own paragraph to speak in, even if it is just one line. Use the paragraph to show the reader things like mannerisms, physical actions, etc., about the character.

One thing to be careful of as you are writing dialogue is creating accents or dialects that the character has. For example, I was in Kentucky once and I overheard someone say they had eaten what sounded to me like “frod paws” the night before. It took me some time to figure out they were talking about what I knew were turnovers – or ‘fried pies.’ If I were to write ‘frod paws’ in a dialogue scene my reader would be as confused as I was when I first heard the phrase. But you don’t want to ignore the speaker’s accent and/or dialect for the sake of clarity in a story. What you need to do is show the reader that the speaker has a distinct pattern of speech through the dialogue labels, rather than the actual dialogue. In this example, a way to do this would be: “We’re having fried pies for lunch today,” Caleb said, although in his quaint Kentucky accent it sounded more
like ‘frod paws’ to my Montana ears. This establishes a couple of things: Caleb is from Kentucky and has a very pronounced accent to the narrator, who is from Montana. The reader now has a lot of information to form his or her own visuals of these two speakers.

Do any of you, dear readers, have examples of how you help your readers create mental images of your characters through dialogue? I would love to see them.

Happy Writing!

Comments

- Because I write quite a bit of western literature (books and articles), I throw in a y’all now and then and some slang from the 1800s. I know that accents aren’t as popular any more as they once were. If you read a lot of westerns, you don’t have much trouble weeding out the meaning between the dialog.

Comment by Pat — December 16, 2010

- some accent will enhance the dialogue, especially when it is something that is familiar enough to the reader to set the stage. A simple, “howdy, ma’am” will take the reader right to the wild west, and present a picture of a dusty cowboy knocking his hat against his knees when he sees a fair maiden.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 16, 2010

- Excellent article. I used to be so scared of dialogue until I became an expert eavesdropper and paid attention to how people talk. Use of half sentences, contractions and poor language lend authenticity. Also, save the accents for folks who only flavor the scene. Ever try to read pages full of accents? Egads! ‘Minds me of da tar beby and Brer Fox.

Comment by Deborah Owen — December 16, 2010

- I remember those books! LOL. yes, accents are hard to duplicate in writing
Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 16, 2010

- Nicely done, yet again, Janie. And at least you and I have a dialog. You know you’re not putting forth just a monolog.

I might add that when you are punctuating dialog, you use double quotes. And if the dialog goes beyond one paragraph, the 2nd paragraph doesn’t begin with double quotes. That way the reader knows the same speaker is still speaking.

Comment by Pat — December 15, 2010

- Good point – I was confused about that myself a couple years ago. It does make sense to keep things in order with dialogue. And thanks for continuing the dialogue. 😊

Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 15, 2010
Creative Writing Tip #6
December 27, 2010 at 12:22 pm

Setting and context will give your readers information about the characters, reasons for their actions and reactions, and give the reader a ‘picture’ to think about when thinking about the character and the story line. So, whether your story is set in a rainforest or the suburbs, be sure your reader knows what the setting is.

Setting isn’t just the location, it is also the time, context and atmosphere where the story is taking place. If it is a short story set in the evening, let the reader know that the sun has gone down, and remember to show the reader, don’t tell him or her!

As you are creating the setting and atmosphere, you will want to be sure to combine it with the plot and characterization. It would not do to have your lumberjack character driving around in a limo in the city unless that is part of the plot! When you are describing the setting, provide enough details to let your readers picture the scene, but not too many details that the story gets lost in them. Give your readers credit for an imagination!

One tactic is to use a couple of senses in your setting description. For example, “…Mary wrinkled her nose as the tarry smell from the factory across the street seeped in under the door jamb.” In this example the reader will experience the sense of smell as well as sight as he or she imagines the black smoke pouring out of the chimneys at the factory.

The key with setting and context is to make your reader feel and experience the scene the same way the character does. Instead of listing statistics, or telling how far it is to the store, use descriptive details that will show your reader exactly what is going on in the scene.

In the next tip, we will explore some ideas on how to set up the plot of the story.

Happy Writing
Comments

• I forgot about the semi-colons. Yep, lots of them in British books. Too many, and often mis-used (my opinion). My new favorite mystery writer is British, though: Susan Hill. I recommend her books, if you like a lot of character development amongst the mysteries.

Comment by Pat — December 27, 2010

• Brits definitely write differently. They do a lot of telling and they think the semi-colon is the greatest punctuation ever. I used to write like that; but I’ve found that leaving semi-colons out gives sentences more clarity; and that showing has telling beat all to pieces. 😊

Comment by Deborah Owen — December 27, 2010

• Deb, I am a big user of commas — and probably use too many of them! I like this idea of exploring the grammar rules of other languages.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 27, 2010

• One reason I started paying attention to the differences in British writing is because I went to a workshop at the Cal. Writers Club branch near me (South Bay Branch) and the speaker said he had taken his “class” (something about developing characters) to London and had made a statement about not ending dialog with an adverb. For example, you shouldn’t write, “he said, angrily,” or “she said snidely.” That sort of thing and somebody in the audience called out, “you’re kidding, right?” If you start looking for this in British novels, you’ll see what I mean. Also, their quotation marks are opposite of ours and go inside the punctuation.

Comment by Pat — December 27, 2010

• I never knew. But it does make sense that other countries will have different grammar rules. Thanks, Pat, for the insight! I will look into this and maybe see if we can get some writers from across the pond to comment.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 27, 2010
Another good one, Janie. I just finished a novel titled “The Good Thief’s Guide to Vegas,” by Chris Ewan, a Brit, and it was full of excellent scenes describing the casinos and the city. However, Mr. Ewan, perhaps because he’s British and doesn’t have to adhere to US rules, didn’t shy away from Telling. He’s writing in first person: “As I walked, my feet beat down on a gaudy nylon carpet that charged my body with … static electricity.”

Next time you read a novel written (or translated) by a Brit, see if they adhere to our “rules” for writing.

Comment by Pat — December 27, 2010

hmmm. that is interesting. I always thought rules for writers were the same everywhere. I do know that it is harder to ‘show’ when writing in first person. I will have to look at writing by Brits and others.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — December 27, 2010
Hook Your Readers with Plot

You want your readers to read the story, right? You need to have a plot, or storyline, in order to do this. The plot is what happens in the story. It is what the characters do at the end to resolve the situation you created, and it shows the turning points in the story. According to Janet Burroway in her book, Writing Fiction: a Guide to Narrative Craft, plot is a series of events deliberately arranged so as to reveal their dramatic, thematic, and emotional significance.

There are several methods of planning the plot for your story. It is important to know how to use these elements to develop the action that defines the plot. Be judicious in your use of them, however, and do not over-use them or try to use too many of them in one story. The result could be confusion for your reader. Some of these story elements are:

- Climax: when the action peaks in the story.
- Roadblock: when something impedes the character in his/her quest to reach a goal.
- Flashback: a tactic that takes the reader back to before the story takes place.
- Conflict: different from a roadblock in that the character is pitted against something or someone either internally or externally.
- Hook: something that grabs the reader right away. This can be an action, problem, or event that is gripping.
- Back story: the background information that is needed to explain the character’s actions, thoughts, or words.

All of these elements and others will figure into the plot. Having the plot in mind when starting the story will help keep the characters on track. Having an idea what the final resolution is going to be will help you, the writer, focused which will keep the story tight.

Starting your story out with an attention grabbing headline or title will bring the reader in. The plot will keep him or her reading. One way to
develop a plot is to brainstorm a situation, then add the logical consequences to that situation. For example, what happens next after your character is in a car wreck on the way to her sister’s baby shower? List several things that could be a result of this accident, then choose one item from that list and develop another list from that one item. You see? Your plot is forming.

Happy Writing

Comments

- Using who, what, when, where, why and how answers all the questions and produces myriads of directions for the story, but I think it’s good to point out that characters will come to life and run their own course if you don’t hold them in check. You must have a general idea of where they’re going and how they’re going to get there.

Comment by Deborah Owen — January 10, 2011

- You are right, Deb. Sometimes my characters get out of control — and sometimes I let them because the new direction taken by the story seems to work.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — January 10, 2011

- Overall, I don’t think I could even start a story (short or long) without having an idea about the plot. I couldn’t even tell a joke without the plot (beginning, middle, end).

Some of the more modern stories I read look at the plot from different character’s eyes. The authors split the book into chapters labeled with which character takes over in viewpoint. I’m not sure this is good or bad, but I’ve certainly run into several books like this.

Comment by Pat — January 10, 2011

- I’ve seen several books like that, too, Pat. I find that I really have to pay attention to what I am reading to follow the story line when a writer does that. I always like to have a plot idea in mind when I start writing a story, but sometimes find the plot changing as the story unfolds.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — January 10, 2011
Creative Writing Tip #8
January 30, 2011 at 8:11 am

Conflict and Tension, Essential Elements of Fiction

Janet Burroway, author of Writing Fiction, a Guide to Narrative Craft, said this about conflict and tension:

“Conflict is the fundamental element of fiction, fundamental because in literature only trouble is interesting. It takes trouble to turn the great themes of life into a story: birth, love, sex, work, and death.”

Tension is what makes the story begin, and tension is created by creating conflict between the characters or other elements of the story. This tension can be either internal or external. The trick is to balance the tension so you keep your readers involved in the story. If you are having trouble deciding just what the conflict should be, consider these ideas:

- Main character against him or herself
- Main character against society
- Main character against another character
- Main character against nature

I think you get the picture. The key is to have some kind of conflict to build the tension around, and keep that tension going through the story so the reader does not get bored half way through. You don’t want to give too much away too early in the story but give enough detail about the conflict that the reader will want to stick with it to find out how it turns out. Getting the reader to identify with the character will ensure that the story is not put down before it is finished.

Dr. Laurel Yourke, author of Take Your Characters to Dinner, presents this checklist of conflicts:

- Mystery. Explain just enough to tease readers. Never give everything away.
- Empowerment. Give both sides options.
• **Progression.** Keep intensifying the number and type of obstacles the protagonist faces.

• **Causality.** Hold fictional characters more accountable than real people. Characters who make mistakes frequently pay, and, at least in fiction, commendable folks often reap rewards.

• **Surprise.** Provide sufficient complexity to prevent readers predicting events too far in advance.

• **Empathy.** Encourage reader identification with characters and scenarios that pleasantly or (unpleasantly) resonate with their own sweet dreams (or night sweats).

• **Insight.** Reveal something about human nature.

• **Universality.** Present a struggle that most readers find meaningful, even if the details of that struggle reflect a unique place and time.

• **High Stakes.** Convince readers that the outcome matters because someone they care about could lose something precious. Trivial clashes often produce trivial fiction.

These steps to building effective conflict and tension will ensure your readers come back for more.

Happy Writing!

**Comments**

There has been another sort of conflict added in the past twenty years or so: Man against machine. I think this applies to computers, too.

Comment by Pat — January 30, 2011

• Yes, sometimes this is lumped in with man vs. nature (or technology). It certainly makes sense with technology the way it is today!

Comment by Janie Sullivan — January 30, 2011
Creative Writing Tip #9
February 14, 2011 at 8:35 am

Turning Point of Your Story

Creating a dramatic or exciting moment in the story is what happens when the character recognizes something, understands what he has not understood before, or figures out what must be done and then does it. This is the turning point in the story. Make sure the timing of this event is not too early, or your reader will think it is one of two or more crisis or climactic event. If the climax comes too late, your reader will become impatient with the character, wondering why he or she does not ‘get it’ and ‘get on with it.’

Janet Burroway describes the crisis as the scene or moment the reader is waiting for. Take the story of Cinderella – the “payoff for the reader is when the slipper fits.”

One thing to remember about the crisis is that it must contain conflict of some sort so the reader cares about the character. A sudden illness or a car crash is not always the crisis of the story unless the car crash or illness caused (or was caused by) some element that creates conflict for the character to overcome.

Conflict that leads to the crisis or climax can be internal or external, or sometimes both. The character must make a decision or take some action in order to overcome the crisis. The reader wants to be engaged through this point in the story in order to confirm his or her feelings about or belief in the character. The character does not always have to resolve the crisis in order to keep the reader engaged, after all, we are all human and we all fail at times. Making your character have faults and failing at certain times will give your character believability, keeping the reader interested in the story.

How do you deal with Crisis and Climax in your fiction?

Happy Writing!
Comments

Excellent point! Man against himself is the hardest conflict to write. Newbies should stick with man against man or man against nature, don’t cha think?

Comment by Jill — February 14, 2011

- Jill, I agree, when just starting out writers should not try some of the more complex techniques, but it is good to venture into those after gaining some experience.

Comment by Janie Sullivan — February 24, 2011
Creative Writing Tip #10
February 21, 2011 at 9:37 am

This is my final post in the series of Creative Writing Tips. Fittingly, this post will cover a variety of ways to end a story – and find a resolution to the conflict or crisis that was revealed in Tip #9. But, this is not my last post on these pages! Starting Wednesday this week I will post the first of 10 Tips for Nonfiction Writers. So, let’s go finish our fiction stories now and get ready to learn about nonfiction writing later this week!

Finding a complete resolution, especially in short story writing, is not always easy to do. Longer fiction will give the writer the room to develop the resolution and let the reader see how the character is changing or how the situation impacts the story. In shorter fiction the writer can sometimes only show that change of some kind is taking place. Dr. Laurel Yourke, whom I have mentioned on these pages before, is a writer and a recently retired writing teacher in the UW-Madison Department of Liberal Studies & the Arts. Dr. Yourke looked at a variety of ways to end a short story in her books on writing. The following list was originally published in the book, Take Your Character to Dinner.

- Open. Readers determine the meaning: Brendan’s eyes looked away from the priest and up to the mountains.

- Resolved. Clear-cut outcome: While John watched in despair, Helen loaded up the car with her belongings and drove away.

- Parallel to Beginning. Similar to beginning situation or image: Beginning: They were driving their 1964 Chevrolet Impala down the highway while the wind blew through their hair. Ending: Her father drove up in a new 1964 Chevrolet Impala, a replacement for the one that burned up.

- Monologue. Character comments: I wish Tom could have known Sister Dalbec’s prickly guidance before the dust devils of Sin City battered his soul.

- Literal Image. Setting or aspect of setting resolves the plot: *The aqueducts were empty now and the sun was shining once more.*

- Symbolic Image. Details represent a meaning beyond the literal one: *Looking up at the sky, I saw a cloud cross the shimmering blue sky above us as we stood in the morning heat of Sin City.*

Have any of you used any of these techniques in your fiction writing? I used the both the Symbolic Image and the Parallel to Beginning in my story, Tumbleweeds, which you can read on my [creative writing blog](https://example.com). I also recorded the story as a [podcast](https://example.com) if you would rather listen to it.

Happy Writing!
Keep in Touch

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