

Fiction: The Facts

A guide to making and shaping fiction
by Harriet Smart

Distributed exclusively with



Writer's Café
a place to be creative

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Published by Anthemion Software Ltd., Edinburgh, UK
www.anthemion.co.uk

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INTRODUCTION



This is how it happens for me: I see something – a picture in a museum, or a photograph. Or I hear something – a snatch of angry conversation or a piece of juicy gossip. Or perhaps I just feel something – a rush of sudden and breathtakingly powerful emotion. These are the things that get me going, give me the urge to make a fictional world and people it with characters. It's an urge I've had for as long as I can remember and it's no accident that it keeps happening again and again, that act of seeing and then reflecting, because it is a habit: one I was lucky enough to fall into by accident.

I can remember the very moment when I became aware of it. I was eighteen, sitting on a swing in a dilapidated but very picturesque garden of a country hotel in Cheshire. It was high summer and the red walls of the garden were groaning with monster roses. So like every eighteen-year-old should, I enjoyed the delights of the moment – a warm day, a swing, being on holiday, my exams behind me, university and life in front of me. But I also realised that the place and the moment was useful to me as a potential writer – it was a setting I could one day use in a story, and the person who sat on the swing could be anyone I liked. So I took a special mental note of it all, photographing the place with my mind. I realised then that life was more than just for living. Life was a material to be reprocessed and reformed into art by writers and painters and – well, yes, apparently by me. That was what I had to do.

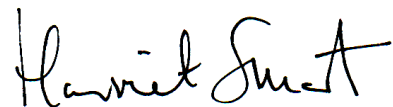
Nearly twenty years and half a dozen novels later I still feel that. It's a constant challenge in the back of my mind to be struggled with. It can't be ignored. The craft doesn't come easy, and the necessary concentration and energy – and sometimes the will – can just fail, like an engine dying. But the desire to do it never leaves me. And I think this is something all writers share. That impulse to transform life as they experience it into a world of their own

making; something that might, with a bit of luck, delight, enchant, or move another person.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book has been written as a basic guide to the process of crafting well-made stories. It is a distillation of concepts that I have found helpful in the course of my writing career, but it is not intended to be the last word on the subject or to promote a particular theory of story. Like *Writer's Café*, it is intended to liberate your creativity rather than strangle it with particular forms or patterns.

I hope you enjoy the book and the software. Good luck with your projects!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Harriet Smart". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Harriet" and the last name "Smart" clearly legible.

Harriet Smart, Edinburgh, June 2004

1

Beginnings

Making a start is sometimes the hardest thing.

Make no mistake, writing is a big thing. Just as you can't run a marathon without training, you can't sit down and write a novel or a screenplay just like that. Fiction has the illusion of being effortless – creating that impression of effortlessness is just part of the craft of writing. Fiction writers are constantly in training. Think of yourself as a creative athlete.

One of the first things you might find is that as a creative athlete, you will be competing against yourself – a resistant side of yourself that is determined for you to never get to the end of the course, and sometimes won't even let you start. That's why you need to go into training.

But training – that sounds like hell. Like getting up at five in the morning and jogging through the freezing streets until the sweat pours off you and your muscles ache and you think death would be preferable. Fortunately it isn't as bad as that. You get to stay indoors. You get to sit down, and drink the beverage of your choice (though I suggest whisky isn't the best idea). You can listen to music if that helps. Take off your shoes. No makeup or tie is required. All you have to do is write something.

You don't have to type on the computer if you don't want to. You don't have to have an expensive leather-bound notebook. You can use the back of an old envelope if that takes your fancy – not a bad idea as it creates an air of 'I don't care' eccentricity – or you can use a state-of-the-art laptop. It doesn't matter. Whatever you feel most comfortable with is the key.

All you have to do is write something.

I love looking at the sketchbooks of artists and designers. All those blobs of colours and tiny vignettes. The vivid scribbles in pen and ink. The pencilled notes listing the shades of clouds or the texture of some fabric, carefully noted for future reference. Sometimes a photo or a clipping will be stuck in. They are often beautiful in themselves, these works in preparation, because they record a fresh and honest response to the visual world and they are all about detail.

This is the approach that you should try to emulate in keeping a writer's notebook. When you start, try to forget about writing the bestseller or the script that will be optioned by Spielberg on the strength of the first page. That isn't going to get you where you want to go. As carrots, such ambitions are too big, too golden for the purposes of starting out as a writer. They will distract you from what you actually have to do: write something. What *will* be productive is getting into the habit of observing and reflecting and recording the world.

There are many tricks and games that you can use to get into the comfortable state of just writing for the sake of it. You can set yourself a subject, perhaps choosing random words in the dictionary, or maybe using the Writer's Café writing prompts. Write a letter to someone you admire and tell them why. Write a love letter to that person you never managed to speak to, but always longed for. Write a list of the ten most beautiful things in the world. Make your mind pick up the tools of language and use them in earnest.

This is not the stage to worry about the quality of what you write. It doesn't matter if it seems clumsy or downright rubbishy. Just keep on writing, even though you hate what you write. It is much better at this stage to write something, anything, badly rather than sit not writing anything at all. You are not going to show it to anyone. It is just your notebook, a rough book where you practice. Because the notebook is a private place, you can write what you like without fear of reprisal. You can give vent to all your anger and anguish. You can say exactly what you think of your boss and exactly why you hate the way your mother always thinks she knows what is right for you. You can confide all your fears and hopes and desires to the page. You can write

raunchy sex scenes if that makes you write and write; or you can describe what you want for supper.

In her excellent books on writing, Natalie Goldberg sums all this up beautifully with a four word mantra: "Keep your hand moving".

Many writers use a journal as their writing notebook, as recording the day's events gives them a subject to go at right away. What happened at work may not sound very promising if it was a grim day, but recreating that grimness in words is something to strive for. And if you can get on top of the annoyances of life by writing about them, using them as your very material, you have got yourself a valuable tool not just for your writing but for life itself. For a long time I found it inexplicable how painters could bear to paint pictures of their dead relatives. For example, the Scottish portraitist Allan Ramsay painted a haunting portrait of his dead toddler while Monet painted his dying wife, Camille. I think that both artists were using their craft to deal with the suffering of the moment and face death and what it means in the best way they can.

As you write in this way, a little each day about oranges or embarrassing weddings or the state of your sock drawer, you will find that words and ideas come more easily. The problem of having nothing to say will dissolve and you will find yourself with another tricky problem: what to do with the lava flow of ideas?

2

What if ...

So you are ready to start on a project.

Successful stories start with a premise – a question – a *what-if?* situation that immediately gets the audience interested and intrigued.

- What if a governess falls in love with her employer? (*Jane Eyre*)
- What if a poor boy unexpectedly inherits a fortune? (*Great Expectations*)
- What would happen if aliens invaded the earth?
- What if Napoleon had won at Waterloo?
- What if there was an evil conspiracy to poison the water supply and make us all mindless zombies?

Finding the right *what-if?* is crucial to finding your story structure. It's the essential first building block.

Take the genre romance formula. The basic spine of these stories is well known. A woman meets a man and they fall in love. But that is not what sends readers back to romance novels time and time again. They know what is going to happen at the end of the book. Indeed, they would not buy the books if they did not deliver the obligatory happy-ever-after. They are looking for the story of a pair of interesting, attractive and sympathetic people being subjected to the trials of love. They are particularly looking for conflict between the lovers and how it is resolved. In other words they are looking for a specifically romantic *what-if?* situation.

What might happen if a tempestuous person collides with a headstrong person? What if a Duke falls in love with a milkmaid? What if an eco-warrior

falls for a property developer? What if a cop falls for a criminal? Or to use a film example – what if a Hollywood actress falls for a mild-mannered London book shop owner, as in Richard Curtis' *Notting Hill*?

These stories have plenty of go in them because they at once introduce the element of conflict. What common ground can there be between the Hollywood star and the book shop owner? Isn't the policeman supposed to be pursuing that criminal female mastermind, not wooing her?

Two interesting characters placed in opposition to each other creates a conflict, and makes an excellent story premise.

Imagine two astronauts on a space station. A sexy US Navy man and a sexy Russian female scientist – Todd and Larissa. Both coming from different worlds and stuck alone in space trying to repair a dodgy space station. The stakes are high. There is only so much time and so much oxygen. They have to get along. But there's a real personality clash and it's a constant struggle, and this makes their job of repairing the space station much much harder. And the stakes go up, making the story inherently more exciting.

Spotting a good premise for a story, hunting the elusive *what-if?* thought that will sustain the action of a story is like bird watching. You have to have your binoculars with you at all times.

But there are places you can look to make it easier.

Newspapers

Some writers are avid newspaper readers and find seeds for their work in those odd little stories. Good news is no news, as the saying goes, and newspapers are full of bad news resulting from conflict situations which can make you wonder how and why that situation arose. For example, Henry James got the idea for *The Spoils of Poynton* from a court case he read about in the Times.

Warning – don't spend so much time reading the newspaper that you forget to write. It can easily turn into a displacement activity.

History

This can be the inspiration for the straight historical novel about Queen Elizabeth the First or a novel in a particular historical setting.

Traditional stories

Pride and Prejudice is often referred to as a Cinderella story, as is *Jane Eyre*. The poor heroine bags herself a wealthy man, her own particular Prince Charming. Traditional stories are full of rich meaning and their patterns can be played with endlessly to come up with something fresh. Greek myths to native American stories all have something to offer.

Stories by other writers

This isn't copying. It's just that some stories have situations and conflicts that are universal and timeless. *West Side Story* was inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*, and Shakespeare borrowed that story from someone else and made it his own. *Clueless* reworked *Emma* by Jane Austen, while *Cruel Intentions* was inspired by *Les Liasons Dangereuse*.

Personal experience

The autobiographical first novel is a classic cliché now but sometimes your own life can be a springboard into fiction.

Chance

Ideas are everywhere – you just have to know how to find them, by which I mean putting yourself into a receptive, speculative state. When you pick up a stone and see the teeming woodlice scurrying about beneath, don't replace the stone at once in disgust but wonder how their world works. Anywhere can yield the story gold you are looking for. A delayed flight is an opportunity, not an inconvenience. Look at your fellow passengers. Imagine who they are and what their lives are like. Why are they travelling?

Things happen all around you that can provoke a story idea. Go on a long bus ride across town and you will see and hear things that might contain something to spark your imagination. What about all those old family stories you've heard – what was it that Grandfather's brother did that was so dreadful that the rest of the family never spoke to him again? How did that make him feel and what was he like? What was his side of the story? You may soon find from such fragments you have the idea you have been looking for.

When you have located an interesting possibility, I'm afraid it isn't just a question of recording it in a little book like a bird watcher. Write about it, yes, but with robust disrespect. Don't allow the original circumstances, that newspaper report or that juicy piece of office gossip to rule your imaginative process. This is just raw material and you can do what you like with it. And firstly you have to test it. You have to kick it around, pull it to pieces, put it back together again and then turn it upside down to see if there is enough in it to sustain a proper story. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this an idea that really interests me?
- Is this an idea with legs?
- Is there something at stake for the character at the heart of the story?
- Is there a big dramatic question?
- The end of it all – has the idea got the potential for a satisfying resolution?

Let's explore these questions in detail.

Is this an idea that really interests me?

This is important, as you can sometimes find that an idea, especially one that someone puts to you, is not the right story for you to develop.

For example, a friend enthuses, "Hey, I had this really great idea for a story for you," and then rambles on at you for ten minutes about aliens secretly running hospitals. Do not be seduced by such rambles, even if the

idea sounds really exciting and you are feeling short of inspiration. Listen to the suggestions, but critically. You may conclude it is an interesting scary idea, and that your friend has got it just right, that this is a good story idea and you want to take it further.

But if you hate the idea of aliens, hospitals leave you cold, and you can't get a handle on it at all, don't worry. The great thing about being receptive to ideas is that the more you are open to suggestions, the more you will get, from all sorts of sources. It's like turning up the volume, or developing a focus.

It's crucial to find a story and a subject that you can personally commit to, that fascinates and intrigues you, let alone anyone else. Marketing considerations aside, personal passion for a story and a subject will show in your writing, making the whole story more convincing and involving.

So choose with care!

Is this an idea with legs?

OK, so we like the idea of *Aliens Secretly Running Hospitals*. It says something – it is scary and intriguing, but it isn't a story yet. For a start it isn't very specific. Stories are always specific. They are about particular people in particular places doing particular things. So the next questions to ask are: which aliens and which hospitals?

This is where the fun starts because you can now do what you like. There is no right answer to either of those questions: only those answers that come out of your imagination and please you. There is a lot of self-amusement in story making. You can be a child again, and play make-believe.

Your first job is perhaps to invent a race of aliens. Will they be hairy little grey ones who suck detergent out of a straw and leave odd sticky marks? Or do they all look and sound like super-fit Australians, except that they can't hold their beer? The thing here is to come up with something that satisfies your own standards of plausibility. If you can't believe in this race of aliens, then your readers won't. And if the aliens don't work then the story won't work.

Having created your satisfactory aliens, you then have to decide why they have decided to secretly take over the hospitals. Are they doing research? Do they need our blood? Are they evil in their intentions or are they trying to save our lives with their superior medical skill? The technical word for this is motivation, and it is fundamental to good storytelling. It is the string that holds up the puppets and makes them dance. Without adequate motivation, characters in a story fail to convince the audience of the need for their actions.

Who is the focus of the story?

Are the aliens the centre of this story? Or are they going to be discovered by someone else? Who is this story actually going to be about? Who are the principal cast members that the audience can identify with and become emotionally involved with?

Once again, at this point of testing the premise you have plenty of choices.

- Female alien sent undercover to ransack human hospitals for life-giving organs is horrified by the job she is asked to do and tries to stop the trade.
- Female alien sent to secretly heal sick humans falls in loves with human doctor and blows her cover.
- Woman doctor discovers that her colleagues in the hospital are not human but blood-sucking alien monsters.
- Ambitious male doctor forges uncomfortable alliance with an undercover alien healer in order to promote the reputation of the hospital and his own career.

These are all expanded versions of the original *what-if?* suggestion, and they still leave lots of doors open for development and transformation. None of these stories has an ending. They are just beginnings, but they all have potential to be turned into fully worked and satisfactory stories. Some of them could be combined in order to make a more powerful whole.

What all of these examples also have is a focus on an individual character. And that's the next step in developing a *what-if?* scenario – characterization.

Is there something at stake for the character at the heart of the story?

Storytelling is in effect an act of manipulating the emotional responses of the reader. So having something really important at stake is one of the key things to make readers and audience care about the fates of the characters. It is always a good question to ask when making a decision about the direction of the plot, or a character's actions in the plot.

What will they feel if he does that or if that happens? Will they like him more or less?

Look for story ideas where the characters have something important to gain or lose in the course of the story. It does not have to be earth-shattering but it does have to be convincingly important to the person involved. For example:

- A man wants to get rich.
- A woman wants to find her adopted son.
- A detective wants to find the murderer.
- A couple want to start a new life.
- A prince wants to find the girl he danced with.
- A wolf wants to find something to eat.

WANT is the important thing here.

We are not talking about whims. A character might want a Gucci Kelly bag but it would not make a satisfactory story just to describe the complicated business of getting hold of a bag – how she had to get herself on the waiting list and then wangle a raise out of her boss. Why not? Because ultimately it's just a bag, and even if it is made of beautiful leather, handcrafted and totally desirable, in the end a bag is just a bag.

But what if wanting a bag is driven by something more fundamental? Jealously, perhaps. Maybe there is a girl she was at school with who always had everything and who has just got engaged to the man our heroine secretly loves. A girl who has a Gucci Kelly bag. So our heroine thinks: at least she can have the bag, to assuage the raging envy that is overtaking her. She can't have that girl's life, let alone her fiancé, but she can save her pennies and get the bag. So the struggle to get the bag represents something bigger, and something important to her. Especially when she gets the bag and she finds she feels no different.

So the ultimate desired destination has to be something important to the individual involved. Something that will ruin their entire existence if they don't achieve it.

Is there a big dramatic question?

The audience likes to have something to worry about. The outcome of any story questions raised should not immediately be obvious.

For example:

- Will they manage to stop the planned assassination of the president?
- Who will the heroine choose to marry – the right or the wrong man?
- Will Al overcome the odds and run a successful restaurant?

Let's look at that third example in more detail.

- Will Al overcome the odds and run a successful restaurant?

Well, the answer to this depends on two things – the character of Al himself and the forces of opposition that are lined up against him. Premise (*what-if?*), Character (Al) and things that happen in the story are all intimately related.

Questions to ask and to answer might then be: Who is AI? What is he like? Why does he want to run a successful restaurant? What is going to stop him? What odds does he have to overcome?

Thinking about these questions, you might come up with these sort of answers. Or not. But this is what occurred to me: The restaurant is in a bad part of town. There is an awful smell of drains. Mario's Pizzeria is brighter, better and cheaper. Also, maybe AI doesn't like cooking. Perhaps AI is only running the restaurant because his mother told him on her deathbed: "Keep the family restaurant going no matter what." And for the *coup de grace*: AI has been struggling but failing to write a science fiction epic for the last five years.

These answers make me realise that the big dramatic question of the story is not just "Will AI succeed at running a restaurant?" but also "Can AI liberate himself from his dead mother's shackling legacy?"

The solution to such a situation might be: AI lets the restaurant to a keen young chef and goes away to write the novel he has always wanted to write. But now he understands what it should be about – not a war between alien planets but a rich saga about a family running a neighbourhood restaurant for three generations. The novel is a critical success and the restaurant is immortalised in fiction.

This example shows that the story so much depends on the sort of people that are in it. If AI had liked cooking, it might have been a different story altogether.

Has the idea got the potential for a satisfying resolution?

By this, I don't mean a happy ending. Can you answer the big dramatic question in a way that is satisfying and not contrived? What sort of ending do you want? Happy or sad? Triumphant or pessimistic? Life-enhancing or cynical?

At this stage of your planning you might not know the specifics of that ending. This is a chance for you to play with ideas and see what might work. It's like holding up lengths of material against a window and seeing if they look

right. You don't have to decide yet – you just have to create some possibilities to choose from.

It may be that from this process of rumination, you come up with a very specific idea for the no-holds-barred finale to your piece, complete with invading army, exploding castle and redemptive self-sacrifice for the heroine.

Which is helpful, but it is worth remembering that although such planning is useful and desirable, it is best to leave a little intellectual space for the possibility of change. Staying flexible in the course of your writing, even while having well-laid plans, allows you to substitute better, more realistic solutions as you work on the piece – realistic solutions which work better for your story and characters.

3

Characterisation

Characters make the story work.

No matter how hair-raising a sequence of events you have formed into a story or how involved the puzzle at the heart of the mystery, these things will be meaningless to the reader unless they have a set of complicated, credible characters who grow in the course of the story to guide them through the experience.

Make sure your characters are professionals!

Imagine for a moment two different productions of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* – the one by a group of top-notch professional actors, the other by a rag-bag, suburban amateur group. *Twelfth Night* is by no means a straightforward play in terms of involving its audience. At the opening of the play Viola is rescued from a shipwreck and, arriving on the coast of Ilyria, decides on a somewhat slender pretext that she will dress up as a boy and go and serve the Count Orsino.

This is quite a plot hump for the audience to be pulled over, even though there is a certain willingness for them to go half-way over that hump because they sense there will be a payback in terms of some delicious confusions. However, the actor playing Viola still has a lot of hard work to do. She has to convince the audience that she could pass as a boy, albeit a very pretty one, and that she is doing this for reasons other than setting up a plot that depends for its effects on mistaken identities and confusions of gender.

(Of course, when the play was first staged with a boy playing Viola in the first place, this transformation of role was a little easier to accept – however

one might also argue that it is harder to be a boy playing a girl pretending to be a boy than just being a girl pretending to be a boy.)

In such a play, a professional actor is going to have a clear advantage. She will be able to speak the verse clearly and give it meaning to the audience – her manners will be very like a boy's and she will alter her voice: in short, she will use all her experience of stagecraft and her own natural talent to satisfy the audience as to why Viola is doing this ostensibly extraordinary thing. The amateur Viola, on the other hand, may have been chosen for the part for reasons other than her stage skills –she's the director's girlfriend, perhaps, or she can act a bit, but more importantly has an identical twin brother who will do for Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, if he can be persuaded to give up his five-a-side football for the sake of the production.

Now, if you were given the choice of seeing the amateur or the professional production, which would you choose? Lay aside the suspicion that the amateur production might inadvertently by its glorious incompetence give you more laughs for your money than the professional company, and remember you do not have to go to the amateur show because your friend from the office is playing a bit part. Choose honestly – I will even pay for the tickets – and I think the choice will always be for the professional production.

Why? Because you don't want to have to do all the work. You know *Twelfth Night* is a difficult play to pull off but that it is delightful if it does work, and that's why you want to go to the theatre anyway – to see a group of thorough professionals taking something good and making it even better. You want to sit there and be enchanted, uplifted and amused. You want to believe in Illyria, in mistaken identities, in absurd goings-on in the box garden. You want to understand why and, more importantly, to care deeply that Olivia can fall in love with a girl dressed up as boy. You do not want reality to interfere with the fantasy being set out for you on the stage.

It is the same with all fictions. When we pick up a novel or tune into a soap we are willing to suspend our disbelief, but only so far. The rest is up to the creators of those fictions, and the best way to do it is employ a thoroughly professional cast. The people in your story must be solid, three-dimensional

beings with a past and a future that lies beyond the compass of your story. They must have quirks, failings, secret fears and passions, mannerisms and bad habits. They must, for the space of the story, seem utterly credible, no matter what extraordinary circumstances they may be in or what peculiar things they decide to do.

As far as I'm concerned, creating imaginary people is one of the best parts of writing fiction. Observing a particular type of person, reading about a set of individuals or simply conjuring up someone from nowhere often sets my brain whirring round with those marvellous what-ifs that can lead to a really strong story. Deep, detailed characterisation is possibly one of the most creative and useful processes in building up a novel, and the character profile tool in StoryLines will help you start what is always a very enjoyable process.

So how do you create characters? Here are some ideas.

Drawing characters from life

There is a great deal of difference between a portrait photograph and a painted portrait.

Even in a very studied photograph, there is still a stamp of recognisable reality, but in a painting, although you might recognise the person, the view of that person is the artist's interpretation, their subjective view. Often, a successful portraitist takes a very ordinary sitter and transforms them into something quite extraordinary and memorable. It is much the same with fiction. You look at people and you interpret them for your own ends.

If your best friend Sally strikes you as a fascinating character, with an interesting lifestyle, don't create a character called Sue, who matches Sally in every detail. Use Sally as a spring-board into a totally new character which you create for yourself but who has some elements of Sally. The reason this is important is not because you are in danger of losing your best friend if you do this, or that she will sue you for libel, although these are considerations: do not do it because it will constrain you. You must make a character belong to you. You must be able to do with a character what you like.

For example, for your story to work, if Sue needs to rescue a child from a cliff edge, and you know that Sally hates the country, loathes the seaside even more, would never be near a cliff edge and doesn't much like children either, you will have difficulty getting Sue to do the necessary heroic deed. In such a case forget about Sally and remember that Sue is your character and she will darn well do what you tell her. Characters are a bit like your personal slaves. You can exercise your authority over them.

The best way to make sure that characters inspired by real folk, whether historical or living, is to fill in the StoryLines character profile, keeping the aspects and foibles that really appeal to you and you know will be useful in your story and discarding those that are too constraining. Often this is a very stimulating exercise, which will make you think of far more plot possibilities.

What if Sally, a committed vegetarian volleyball player, is transformed into a meat-eating rugby forward called Jim, who is equally committed but to entirely different things? Sometimes you will find it is a fundamental state of mind that has drawn you to that person in the first place – their practicality, their kindness, their determination in the face of difficult circumstances.

Pictures, photographs and people on the bus

A box of old family photographs seems to contain a hundred stories, as can a ride on the subway. Everyone has a life story, and a long journey can be whiled away by imagining exactly what sort of person the man opposite with the dirty overcoat is, and what he has in his battered plastic bag, and why.

Actors sometimes begin a characterisation with the externals – the walk, the voice, the set of peculiar gestures, adding a facial tick or a habit of pulling at the earlobe when nervous. These are the details that add authenticity, and taking someone on their appearance alone is not the superficial act it suggests. The trick is to suspend judgement. You are not weighing up the worth of that man from his dirty fingernail, rather you are speculating as to why that fingernail is so dirty. Unlike other professional observers, such as policemen or journalists, it really does not matter what you come up with. You

can construct the most elaborate fantasies you like and never be called to account for them. This can be a very good way to kill a long journey alone.

Starting from scratch

Although it might seem daunting, this approach can lead you into some unexpected and fascinating territory. Look at the list of questions in the StoryLines character profile – or make a list of your own. Come up with a profession or a style of dressing or something someone might dislike.

For example, take something like the old cliché of women jumping on chairs, afraid of a mouse. Imagine a real woman jumping on a chair afraid of a mouse. Ask yourself why? Ask yourself where she is. Is she in a kitchen? Imagine the kitchen, then: is this her kitchen, and what is she doing there? Is she a pest-control officer who wants a career change, or a seventeenth-century housemaid who knows that rodents mean plague? Immediately you have quite a lot of story fodder and a clearer idea of this woman who is afraid of mice. Go to the character questionnaire now and fill in some of the blanks if you can. After a while you will find you have a real person on your hands.

Characterisation as a design process

Entertaining though creating and deepening a character is, traits and quirks should always be designed with a strong sense of the story that is going to be told in mind. Good characterisation is the business of finding the right people with the right background and personality for the story you intend to tell. A little like recruiting someone for a job.

Making characters work for the story

Stories are made up of happenings. If nothing happens it's not a story. If things are going to happen, people have to move. From A to Z or even just from A to B. From Milan to San Francisco, from one end of Neasden High Street to the other. From sadness to happiness. From tragedy to triumph.

From glory to despair. From understanding nothing to understanding something.

Action shouldn't happen for its own sake. It should have a consequence for someone on stage. The fireworks have to mean something in the overall design.

You want to write a story about a volcano erupting. Why not? Volcanoes are fantastically exciting and dangerous. They are indiscriminate destroyers – no-one is safe in the path of a molten lava flow. You read a couple of books and see some documentaries. It's all great material – an epic setting which really challenges people. So where do you start to make a story using that material? You put people in that environment and see how they react or respond to the challenge.

This is a bit like a scientist putting rats in a laboratory maze and observing from above. Half a dozen white rats and they all look the same. But what if we look at the maze from the viewpoint of each rat, go inside each rat and explore their personality? It doesn't take long to see that each rat has a different character, and because of that each rat will go through the maze in a different way. A careful, logical rat will go steadily, trying to find the best route through. A restless, nervous rat with claustrophobia will go at breakneck speed, desperate to get out. And sometimes those rats will bump into each other. Sometimes they will fight each other and sometimes they will help each other. Experimental scientists put rats in mazes to determine the nature of their behaviour. Experimenters themselves, fiction writers put characters in mazes to reveal their characters and explore what happens to those characters under duress.

Nameless rats in a maze might be cute and furry for a few moments but are easy to forget. More memorable and involving would be a pair of rats in a maze called Percy and Henrietta. If Percy and Henrietta talk and wear jumpers they are more memorable still. And if they also crack jokes, fight and then fall in love while trying to get out of a cruel scientist's extra-complicated maze, we have a story you might want to hear.

If you take a simple, old story like Little Red Riding-Hood, you will find that the events that unfold in the story are directly related to the personalities in the story.

We have Red Riding-Hood, the virtuous and curious little girl; the greedy and manipulative wolf; and Grandmother, who behaves like an old woman, staying in her bed all day. The characters determine the opening scenario: Red Riding-Hood is a good little girl and therefore goes to see her grandmother. She does not sit at home playing with her Nintendo Gameboy. Grandmother has not remarried and moved to Australia. She lives nearby in her cottage in the woods and behaves like a traditional grandmother and is therefore available to be visited. And the wolf, true to his wolf nature, does the sort of things you expect wolves to do. He dines on respectable old ladies who live in the woods and have not yet discovered the local group for the empowerment of senior citizens, let alone locks on the door. The stage is all set, because of what the people are, for a nicely nasty little tragedy. Wolf eats Grandmother, and because he is a conniving baddie, he does not just run away to digest. He dresses up in her pink flannel nightgown, climbs into her goose feather bed and awaits the inevitable arrival of the virtuous granddaughter. Red Riding-Hood will do for pudding.

Grandmother's problem is that she is old and cannot defend herself. The Wolf's problem is that he is a wolf and he can't help himself. He must be true to his wolfish nature. Red Riding-Hood has to learn it isn't safe to go and visit grandmother in the woods, even if it might be very virtuous.

What can we do with this story by altering the characters and their emotional journey?

Give the wolf a conscience. Make him hate what he is, but make him hungry. Make him struggle – and either overcome his urges or not, as you like. You will see immediately that a lot more possibilities have opened up to you. If the wolf's problem with living is that he is a wolf, you have a journey for him to take. And if Grandmother's problem is that she has never learnt to stand up for herself, you have a journey for her.

So imagine the scene. The wolf, hungry but conscience-stricken, breaks into Grandmother's house. Grandmother being what she is, offers herself up like a martyr. But he can't bring himself to kill her. There is a stalemate. Grandmother is disappointed by this un-wolf-like behaviour. She has always been a rigorous traditionalist who can't cope with such a liberal idea as a vegetarian wolf. She expects to be eaten, just as she expected labour pains and all the other miseries of a woman's lot. But here is this wolf, refusing to eat her and making her, in his consummate wolfy way, question everything she holds dear. In some ways that is far worse for her than being eaten by him. What does she do then? Well, off the top of my head come three options:

1. She can listen to the wolf. She can offer him a place by the fire. They can form a strange trusting and caring relationship. The wolf will nurse her on her deathbed and then pine on her grave like Greyfriars Bobby.
2. Grandmother can argue with the wolf. She can persuade him that it is his duty, in the scheme of things, to kill her and eat her. He does it with the utmost reluctance, but feels so guilty that he dresses up in her clothes and tries to become her, in order to assuage his conscience about depriving Little Red Riding-Hood of the world's best grandmother. In this version, Little Red Riding-Hood doesn't notice the difference for ages.
3. Grandmother gets assertive and kills him. She has never done anything so tough in her life before. This act of self defence changes her view of herself and of women in society. She goes on to become a feminist guru in the forest.

Variations in character and the resulting interactions with other characters leads will stimulate ideas for story events.

Each situation thrown up by this sort of exercise leads to more story complications and events if you know enough about your characters and their situations. If you take the conclusion to option three, for example – Grandmother becomes a feminist guru in the forest – and think about it for a few moments, you can see that it isn't really a conclusion at all. It could be the

start of another journey altogether, perhaps for her family and friends as they struggle to accept the strange new person that good old Grandmother has become.

Build characters who can grow and change

I think it's crucial to spend a long time day-dreaming about the people you might want to put in your book. I even subscribe to that dreadful cliché of falling in love with them. The more you think about them, the better you will know them and the more story events will occur to you as a result. You can do this in all sorts of ways – you can conduct interviews with them, write their diaries, mentally go shopping with them, draw their family tree, you can list their favourite foods, imagine what they wear, think up what happened to them when they were ten and then again at fifteen.

Do what you like – just do it! And in as much detail as possible. You don't have to write it all down, though some people swear by it, and it is useful to keep track of dates of birth and eye colour and that sort of thing when you come to edit, but there is a lot to be said for just keeping it all fermenting gently in your mind.

This stage shouldn't be rushed. As you think about your people, try to put them in a solid social context – visualise their world as concretely as you can. Try to see what they see when they wake up each morning. The more you know about their state of mind, the easier it will be to think of interesting things to do with them.

Some of the writing books suggest that you focus on one main character, and give all sorts of alarming advice about main plots and sub-plots, i.e. the hero deals with the principal plot, his sidekick or girlfriend has or is the sub-plot. The way to avoid this sort of misleading hierarchy is to think of each character as having their own story to explore, or rather a road to travel along. In the Little Red Riding-Hood story, we have the wolf's story, the Grandmother's story, and Little Red Riding-Hood's story, rather than the wolf sub-plot or the Grandmother sub-plot.

I find it much easier to imagine each character's personal journey as a thread which interweaves with the other characters, or more dramatically, gets knotted up with the other character's threads, and has to be untangled or whatever. A group of well-drawn characters, with conflicting aims and agendas, are the stuff of interesting stories. All should have their own emotional journey to take and the possibility of enlightenment at the end of the story. Of course, some threads will be thicker and more dramatic than others, but that is one of the interesting choices you have to make.

Take, for example, a soldier going to war and his mother suffering quietly at home. Nothing much may happen to the mother externally, but her inner life might be fascinating, and what you choose to focus on. Or you can have a few vignettes of the mother, to contrast with your gruesome and dramatic battle scenes. If you really know the mother and son well, you will probably know how you want to treat this sort of situation.

As you spend all this time thinking about characters, lots of possibilities for events will begin to occur to you. Making the people concrete and credible in your mind will make the world in which they act and react that much easier for you to grasp.

But remember to focus, after a while, on how you want each character to be at the end of the process. What do you want to change about them – or rather, what needs to be changed? Is the rake going to be reformed or is he going to defiantly leave the country to be even more dissipated elsewhere? Which man, if any, will the heroine end up with and why? Basically try to work out the ultimate destination of the character, and of course once you know where you want that person to go, you can start finding a suitable route.

However, unlike normal travel, you do not want them to take the most direct route to the destination you have decided for them. Nothing would be more dull for the reader. Drama comes from the characters taking one step forward and then two steps back, and the goal should remain tantalisingly elusive.

Shakespeare's *Othello* is a wonderful example of this. Othello goes resolutely on in the opposite direction to that which the audience wants him to go, believing all the rubbish that Iago tells him and letting his heart rule his head until he is locked into such a downward spiral that he can do nothing other than murder Desdemona. And of course, only when he has killed her does he realise that he has been wrong all along. Murdering his wife is the moment when he begins to change and realises exactly what he has done, and when Iago's machinations are finally revealed, he shows the sort of insight into his faults that the audience have been longing for throughout the play:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set aught down in malice: then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme; one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe.

After that, it's OK for Othello to fall on his sword because he's changed, he's learnt something. If he just killed himself in a fit of jealous despair, the play wouldn't be nearly so satisfying.

The moment of important change for a character, then, is the beginning of the climax of their story, and it's quite useful to have in mind at an early stage some scene or circumstance when you feel that revelation will begin to strike, when the direction of that character's story begins to flow more in the direction that the reader will want.

For example, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth realises that Darcy has helped save her sister from the disgrace of her elopement with Wickham, she is able to own up to her own deep feelings for him. The elopement plot, a dramatic and sensational happening after so much drawing-room activity, focuses Darcy's and Elizabeth's minds on what they really want – each other – and they each begin to take what steps they can to achieve that, within the limits of the time. Darcy finds Wickham and Lydia and pays Wickham's debts, while Elizabeth spiritedly defends herself and her position against the imperious onslaught of Lady Catherine de Burgh. Of

CHARACTERISATION

course, there are still quite a few complications before everything is ironed out, but the important thing is that the tide has turned, and by then reader will be desperate to keep reading on.

In fact the pleasure of a book like *Pride and Prejudice*, where you can guess pretty much from chapter one whom is destined to end up with whom, is the tortuous journey of those people muddling through towards the finishing line.

Remember: The characters *are* the story!

4

Genre

At this point it is worth considering the issue of genre. Genre can be a help or a hindrance depending on how you look at it.

People want stories that are familiar and yet surprising at the same time. They want to know that the prince will kill the dragon and win the hand of the princess and yet be told that story in a completely fresh and original way as if the story were completely new. This is the paradox that lies in the heart of genre. A novel labelled a romance or a movie labelled 'horror' comes with an enormous amount of pre-existing baggage which the creator of those stories cannot ignore. If she does, she fails to deliver the story that the reader or the audience wants.

Many people fall into the trap of thinking romance novels are easy to write, try to write one, and of course fail. The literary merits of a book are no indication of the ease with which they were written. After all it's much easier in some respects to do your own thing, indulge your own tastes and preferences. It's much harder to fit your work to the expectations of others.

If you ask people around for a particular sort of evening, be it an evening of gourmet French cooking or takeaway curry, beer and football on TV, you are creating an expectation, and if you don't deliver they will be disappointed. So it is with genre. A novel labelled 'high tech thriller' will create expectations, as will one that says 'touching love story.' Publishers are of course looking for books that can be easily pigeon-holed and commoditised. Genre helps them to do this and they will be looking for work which delivers in its chosen genre, and does more. And that is the crucial point – the liberating, exciting thing about genre, paradoxical though it seems – within genre you can be innovative. You can expand the envelope.

This is what writers have always done – and genre is part of the ongoing relationship between writers and their audiences. Writers do not stand separately from the people they write for; often enough they *are* the people they write for. Genre, the traditional story forms which people love and turn to time and time again to find sustenance and meaning, consists of a dialogue between readers and writers, a dialogue that creates evolution in those forms.

Romances have changed out of all recognition in the last twenty years. They reflect the changing position of women in our society and also the changing fantasies that women have about themselves and men. The heroine of a contemporary romance is not a humble girl secretary – she's more likely to be running her own business. She not very likely to be an innocent virgin either.

Crime novels have gained respectability and a sense of literary merit because many good writers have taken the genre and run with it. Bodies in locked libraries have given way to subtle characterisation and moral ambiguity. Many crime writers find that the crime novel is the place to discuss the most serious issues in society today.

All genres spawn subgenres. If something proves popular, more of the same gets commissioned and published. "More of the same, but different" might be said to sum up what the public wants.

If you are strongly attached to a particular genre – for example, you adore detective fiction and mysteries – then it isn't a bad idea to try your hand at that genre, rather than try another because it seems easy.

Genre films and novels generally deliver their stories with closure. This doesn't mean a pink and fluffy ending. It means the audience or the reader's tension is pumped up and up, and then pricked like a balloon, leaving them feeling comfortable again rather than merely deflated. "Art" or "literary" projects reserve the option not to deliver such comfort and certainties – they can leave you more uncomfortable, unsettled, distressed and disturbed, and with insights that cannot be pushed aside. Genre can give insight, it can illuminate the human condition and reflect the world in loving detail, but the

raw truth is blunted, tempered with the optimism of a world in balance where the abhorrent can be dealt with. The serial killer is caught. True love prevails. After a fashion, the world works and has some point to it. And this is the sustenance offered by stories, the reason people return again and again to fill their pockets with tales: escape, entertainment, vicarious experiences, profound emotional reality and under it all, a sense of order.

5

Point of View

Who is telling the story?

Point of view is one of the great tools of fiction but it is not always easy to decide how to use it. The kind of story you are writing, the sort of effects you want to produce in your audience, and also the nature of the plot itself, are all aspects that need to be considered when weighing up from whose point of view the story should be told.

Sometimes there's no question – a voice, a style or a tone is the obvious way to go. Sometimes it is a lot harder to decide. Ask yourself how objective you want to be. Do you want your readers to be coolly detached from the narrative, or deeply involved?

First person

If you want to immerse the reader in the story world and present a very specific view of it, then a first person narrator is a good choice. Famous examples are *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. A first person narrator communicates directly with the reader, as if across the table, and the style can be as intimate and confessional as you like. An interesting and sympathetic narrator who is the centre of the story he or she is telling can be one of the most compelling experiences in fiction.

Of course, only events in which that character is directly involved can be used, unless you resort to mechanisms such as: "Later she told me that when Meg confronted him, he had been angry and defensive. 'How dare you, of all people, accuse me of that!'" which if used at any length takes away from the immediacy of the effect.

It is also worth considering how truthful your principal character and storyteller is. If your story is a heartfelt tale of a good man's triumph over devastating experiences then his story will be plainly told and he will be honest. But there is also a great opportunity when using the first person to create an unreliable narrator – someone who appears to tell the truth but is in fact manipulating and misleading the reader. One of the early Agatha Christie novels does this – *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, where the narrator turns out to be the murderer, and there are other memorable examples. In Ian Pears' much more elaborate *An Instance of the Fingerpost* creates four first person narrators who recount the same set of events according to their own view of the world, so it becomes almost impossible to establish what really happened.

Third person limited viewpoint

Terry Rossio, one of the screenwriters for *Pirates of the Caribbean*, brilliantly describes this in terms of a parrot who sits on the shoulder of a character and observes what that character is doing. His viewpoint is essentially the same as the character and he can only see what the character sees. He is also an intuitive parrot who can feel what the character feels, but his intuition doesn't extend to the other characters.

For example, if the parrot is on Matt's shoulder:

Matt left the shop, pulling up the collar of his coat against the sudden gust of wind. He caught sight of Mary, and found himself smiling. He waved to her. She smiled back and waved in return, so he quickly crossed the road to speak to her. It seemed he had been forgiven.

Or if the parrot is on Mary's shoulder:

Mary saw him coming out of the shop, pulling his collar against the sudden gust of wind. For a moment she thought he had not seen her, but then she saw him smile, and raise his hand in a salute to her. She smiled back, pleased to see him crossing the road and coming in her direction. It had been too long. She was exhausted with being unkind and hard towards him. She was going to forgive him completely.

Either of these scenes could be easily translated into first person narrative, with either Matt or Mary as the narrator. This is the test to run if you think you have accidentally slipped out of the limited viewpoint.

However, if the passage from Mary's point of view continued this way:

Matt was in front of her now.

"It's cold," he said, feeling the icy dampness in his bones. "Let's go for a drink, shall we?"

We have lost the focus on Mary – the parrot has flapped away and is now sitting on Matt's shoulder.

Personally I hate this. I think it weakens a text immeasurably. There is something flat and inelegant about it. After all, in life, how often do we know exactly what the person we are talking to is thinking and feeling? Unless they are being unusually frank and open, we are pretty much in the shade.

In the following passage, consider who the reader is supposed to identify with. Is the story about Sarah, or the lippy bank clerk Sarah has to deal with when her ex-husband's alimony cheque bounces, leaving her with an enormous overdraft?

Sarah came into the bank and queued for some minutes, wondering all the time if she would get a parking ticket. Finally she got to the head of the queue.

The bank clerk looked at the woman on the other side of the counter, and felt a mixture of pity and contempt for her worn-out prettiness. What a hideous coat – and such awful hair. And yet the way she was demanding to see the manager, it was as if she was the Queen or something. Only ten minute till lunchtime, thank goodness.

A passage like this will mislead the reader into thinking the bank girl is important because we've gone inside her head. But in fact she never appears in the story again. What is important here, though, is not what the bank clerk actually thinks of Sarah, but what Sarah, the protagonist, thinks she thinks:

She probably despises me, Sarah thought, noticing the grime and wear on the cuff of her old jacket. Or maybe not even that. I'm almost invisible.

This says a lot more about Sarah's current state of mind.

Limited viewpoint alternating between significant characters

This is my personal favourite. It gives great flexibility to tell a complicated, exciting story, with rich characterisation and a rounded world view. However there is a risk that your readers will not be so emotionally involved. This can be avoided by establishing a pecking order, a hierarchy of characters, so it is clear who is the protagonist, with the bulk of the narrative seen through their eyes.

For example, you might be writing a mystery with a stodgy yet brilliant senior detective and his inexperienced but bright female assistant. Perhaps, because of the nature of the story you are telling, it might seem that the young woman ends up doing all the leg work in solving the crime, uncovering the clues and reporting back to her less active senior officer whose role is to sift the information and then interpret the information, thus solving the crime. In a case like this it might be worth considering from the beginning who the most important person in the story is. If you are committed to your senior officer he has to do more and earn his place in the story as the protagonist. If, on the other hand, you find you care more about the other, make sure that most of the scenes are seen through her viewpoint.

A narrator who is not involved in the story

This is a narrator who is a minor character in the story and presents the story to the audience. He or she has knowledge of the innermost thoughts and feelings of the characters about whom he is telling the story. It is the sort of device that can work brilliantly in the hands of an expert but should be used with extreme caution, with a very good reason. For example, the senior detective in the last example could relate how his young colleague managed to solve an insoluble crime and he overcame his prejudice against her. But this sort of device is probably best limited to a novella or a short story. A long piece of fiction where the reader can't get direct access to the protagonist is essentially alienating. For this reason I've never been able to enjoy *Wuthering*

Heights by Emily Bronte because we never have direct access to Heathcliff and Catherine. We only learn about them from Nelly Dean the housekeeper who in turn tells the tale to the narrator.

Omniscient Viewpoint

In this style, a narrator who knows all and sees all hovers god-like above the action, making the odd moral comment. It is common in nineteenth century novels.

It should be pointed out that Mrs Wardly, for all her vulgarity, was a good-hearted woman and wanted nothing more than to see Caroline respectably settled. Caroline knew this, and it pained her that she could not express her gratitude as she should, but the folly of the creature seemed ever to prevent it.

Point of view is one of the most useful tools a writer has at his or her disposal. Well-used, it can bring the audience directly and powerfully into the world of your story.

6

Setting

This chapter is about finding and using the right setting for maximum dramatic effect. Here's an example of what I mean.

Coffee at Patisserie Anastasia

She had written the name of a café on the back of her business card.

"I'll be there at four," she said, handing it to him. "If you are interested."

He found the Patisserie Anastasia on a broad street that in a city other than Edinburgh would have counted as a boulevard. Under the dirt, the frontage was a brilliant yellow, and there were clumsy sunflowers painted on the plate glass windows. Inside was a jumble of junk shop tables and rickety chairs culled from an old church. The tables were covered with sticky oil cloth and the chairs had grimy cushions tied precariously to the seats. Once it might have looked fresh and charming, when French patisserie was a novelty, but now it looked tired. Even the newspapers on sticks look wilted by the constant outpourings from the espresso machine. It was hardly the sort of place he had expected to find her, but there she was, neatly sitting at a small table in her neat black suit. She looked more crisp and precise than ever. Her briefcase occupied the other chair at the table.

"Euan," she said, removing it.

"What is all this about?" he said, wishing she had suggested meeting in a pub. He wanted a single malt and a cigarette.

"Some new evidence has come to light," she said.

"How?"

"I did a little digging. Won't you sit down?"

He glanced through the sunflower smeared windows. The rush hour traffic was howling past and dusk was settling on the city. A blanket of pleasant anonymity, he thought, wanting to be out there with the cars roaring past and the lights coming on.

"Just let me get a coffee," he said.

What a well-defined sense of place brings to the story

If handled correctly, the setting of a story can be like another memorable character. It's worth spending a good chunk of story development time thinking about the setting and how it affects the story. A sense of time and place is one of the most powerful things any storyteller can bring to a piece of fiction. After all, it's those ingredients that provide the magical element of escape and transportation that we want from stories. Think of setting like the scenery for a stage play.

Stock settings about which you know nothing or have not researched adequately can seem as flat as a badly-painted canvas backdrop that one amateur drama company has borrowed from another because it will 'do'. This is a sloppy half-measure which can ruin the chances of your fiction being effective and convincing. Make your scenery yourself.

This doesn't mean you have to build a complete world, and then describe it to the reader. But you do need to have a firm idea of what the places in your story are like. I like to have a model in my mind, taken from a real house or town, and I can spend hours worrying about the details. None of this comes out in the story, but I like to know that my characters exist in a convincing landscape, at least in my mind.

Imagine you are writing a detective story set in an English village. Perhaps a classic 'murder at the Rectory' story.

What's it made of? Are the cottages stone, brick or half timbered? What's appropriate to the area where your story is set? It isn't hard to find out this sort of information from a guidebook.

What facilities has it got? Is there a proper village shop and post office where everyone gathers for a good gossip or did that close years ago? Is

there a school – a big modern county primary with flat roofs that leak or a proper little village school in a Victorian building?

A big English village often has a couple of pubs – one might be distinctly down at heel, the sort of place where you will meet all the local farm employees, whereas the other pub has been taken over by a talented chef and is more famous for food than for darts. That's where the farmers drink and also lots of people coming in from the local town in their big cars for a nice meal out in the country. One will be shabby and probably intimidating for outsiders while the other is 'designer rustic'.

And since this is going to be a murder at the rectory, what is that like? Does the rectory even belong to the church anymore, or did they sell it off and replace it with a characterless modern house? And who lives in the old rectory? All these things could influence the events in your story.

Just thinking about a setting like this can throw up story ideas. Often places that you visit can inspire particular feelings: a dilapidated house in a street where everything else has been done up to the nines might suggest a story as might a recently opened designer bar in a big city on a Friday night.

How to make something convincing when you have never been there

According to conventional wisdom you are supposed to write about what you know. But that doesn't mean you have to have experienced everything you write about to describe it with authority. This is where research and then your writing skill comes in.

Immerse yourself in your subject so that you do know about it. If part of your story is set in Paris but you have never been to Paris, you can read everything you can lay your hands on about the subject: study maps, guidebooks, autobiography, novels. Watch films. Look at paintings and photographs. You can't expect to get everything one hundred percent accurate, but you need to be able to find your way around mentally, so that you can place your characters there and have them behave in a plausible and

consistent manner. The same goes for fantasy settings such as an alien planet, of course.

Create very specific and memorable details to hook into the imagination of your audience.

Think in terms of the five senses – sight, sound, taste, smell and touch. What colour is the stone? Where does the light come into the room? What's on the floor? Is the floor dirty or clean? You don't have to use all this information but you need to prepare it, just in case a character drops something.

Don't put bleeding chunks of pure location description into the text. Details are best slipped in subtly – for example, through the view or reactions of the characters.

Stories should tap into universal emotions but have specific settings

Consider the example of *Othello*. Shakespeare's version was set in sixteenth-century Cyprus but recently the story has been reworked in the setting of the modern metropolitan police force and in an exclusive American preparatory school. The story is the same but the setting brings something completely fresh to it. *West Side Story* is another example – *Romeo and Juliet* reworked in the gang wars of nineteen-fifties New York.

A setting can be used to reflect the thematic elements of a story – it can add an aesthetic quality. A poetic atmosphere in a tragic love story, for example, or a cold, uncaring world in a violent crime novel.

A carefully chosen setting will showcase characters to their advantage. Imagine the city slicker forced to bed down in a country town. If the town and its inhabitants are really well visualised, the greater the contrast with the urbanite characters. *But*: description of such a setting is more effective when filtered through the consciousness of an individual character. One woman's bucolic idyll is another person's prison.

Use the setting to amplify or contrast with the emotional states of the characters.

Amplification

This is the 'creepy old mansion' school of scene setting. Every stair creaks, every doorframe has cobwebs hanging from it and it really isn't any surprise that there's something very nasty indeed in the attic.

Contrast

A sterile, hyper-professional teaching hospital where everyone is supposed to be very focussed on their work. A great setting for a steamy illicit love affair?

A well-drawn, well-realised setting adds texture and dramatic possibilities to a story, and gives the writer all the pleasure of vicarious travel!

7

Conflict

This chapter deals with identifying the tensions in the story, and how to build on them; and how characterisation combines with conflict to make the backbone of a story.

I want this and you want that – who's going to win?

Conflict is at the heart of storytelling. It is the single most important part of the dramatic jigsaw.

It can be a muted moment of self-doubt that stops the heroine from pursuing the career she should take, or a battle between hundreds of men on a wintry plain. It represents a place where something is at stake, where the characters we care about are tested – physically, emotionally, morally or psychologically.

Conflict of one sort or another drives along the action.

Physical Conflicts

Example: How do I get across the river when the bridge is broken?

Often the easiest thing to set up, there is a danger in strewing physical obstacles just for the sake of creating a complication. In real life we are constantly plagued by late trains and muddy fields and domestic mess, so it does not seem too unreasonable to have the heroine get into trouble with her boss because her bus broke down, especially if she is already in trouble with him for something else.

Physical obstacles should be set up to appear like natural parts of the landscape, no matter how artfully you have placed them there. That rake lying

face up on the garden path, left by a gardener drunk on cowslip wine, should be there to slap the hero in the face because he is short-sighted. And when the hero ends up in the emergency room, the pretty nurse who tends him – but accidentally wrenches his shoulder – should not just be a callous instrument of fate, tormenting the hero, but a person with some significance in the story, perhaps another big complication because the hero soon finds he prefers her to his stuffy fiancée.

Illness and injuries are classic story obstacles and can lead to lots of complications. But they are tempting to use without proper grounding in the onward thrust of the story, because of the drama inherent in them. Don't break the hero's leg just so that the heroine will feel sympathetic towards him and have to nurse him better; or if you do, let the sympathy be earned through the struggle between the two of them to understand each other better. Or if the sympathy comes at once, make the hero undervalue it, or be so wrapped up in his own self-pity that he cannot see it. Suddenly the broken leg is a means to an end – the end being more complications that have to be faced by the characters.

Emotional conflicts

Feelings get in the way. Example: do I side with my mother or my husband, when I love them both?

This sort of thing is at the heart of much storytelling because it is the stuff we all have to deal with at some time in our lives. My friends are getting divorced, whose side do you take? I'm jealous of the attention my husband gives to the children from his first marriage. Which girl do I love better? And so on. Our emotional lives are complicated by the very nature of existence and the storytelling world has to reflect that.

These are big themes – but expressed in small details, small moments of conflict, all of which hold up the progression towards the goal.

In Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, the heroine Fanny is about to go to her first ball. To mark the occasion, her dearly beloved cousin Edmund gives her

a chain on which to wear a cross her brother has sent her. But she has also been lent a chain by her new and glamorous friend Mary Crawford, a woman who has treated her as an equal. She sits at her dressing table, torn. Which chain should she wear? It is a wonderful moment, beautifully dramatising a teenage girl's emotional turmoil.

Moral conflict – ethical dilemmas

Example: is it right to steal some documents to save a child's life?

Stumbling blocks test character. These are the sorts of obstacles that can make heroes seem truly heroic because you are making them stand up and prove what they believe in. Or not. If they act against type, you are forcing them further away from their goal and setting up more complications for them to deal with.

Take the example above.

Is it right to steal some documents to save a child's life? If the heroine decides it is not, she might have to:

1. Work out a legitimate way to get the documents which might involve some other moral compromise (for example, sleeping with someone to get them).
2. Work out another way to save the child's life that does not involve stealing the documents.

If the answer was "yes it's OK", then possible complications might be:

1. She gets caught stealing them.
2. She gets away with it and then feels guilty.
3. The documents are not enough to save the child's life.

It's like the branching of a tree, dividing and subdividing. One good dilemma throws up more and more complications for your characters to deal with.

Psychological conflict

Example: can I overcome my fear of strangers and go and tell them they are in mortal danger?

Inner flaws provide great fuel for story complications.

Notice that these examples were all questions. The character should always have a choice in situations of conflict – to do one thing or the other. Of course, what they decide to do depends on their character.

Characterisation linked to conflict

Taking our earlier example of the broken bridge: there are two people at the water's edge. One has torn jeans, a bandana around his forehead and a full upper-body set of tattoos. The other, a woman, wears a Chanel suit, a fabulous pair of high heels and hair extensions. Obviously, crude stereotypes though they may be, they will each tackle the river crossing obstacle quite differently. And if you have taken care and attention with your characterisations, we might discover that the girl with the suit and the shoes and the hair extensions is only dressed like that because she has to, in order to go undercover on a mission. She is really a very highly-trained espionage operative and will have no trouble using her strappy sandals to rig up a winch. She will need the winch because the guy with the tattoos is scared of water and cannot bear to go near it.

And having solved that one, it's on to the next obstacle, just like an army assault course. Maybe now that he has used her to get across the river, the tattoo guy can try to kill her. The ultimate conflict situation, in fact.

Designing for conflict

- Give characters ambitions – a real burning need to get round the obstacle: I must defeat the dragon because I love the princess and must marry her. Or – I must find the money to pay for my child's education.
- Give characters ideals – a view on life, no matter how misguided, to make things doubly difficult. For example: I am a vegetarian and my hostess has served me meat.
- Give characters flaws.
- Give characters back-story.

All these things affect how a character will negotiate an obstacle.

- Use the setting to promote the conflict – if possible.
- Make sure characters have opposing goals and dreams, or contrasting personalities. Everyone rubbing along together just fine is the essence of dull.

Remember: put conflict at the heart of the story and you find your story practically builds itself.

8

Shape and Structure

This chapter covers the inciting incident, complications, crisis and resolution. It explains the four pillars of a well-built story and how to bring them into your story design.

The inciting incident: where and how to start

This might be one of the hardest decisions you have to make. The objective of the task, no matter what sort of story you are intending to write, is to grab attention.

The classic Hollywood solution is the explosion – and as a metaphor that is very useful. Something has to happen, no matter how small. But it must be enough to raise a question in the mind of the reader or audience.

The temptation with an opening is to use it as scene setting: get the atmosphere going, let the audience see the world where this story is going to take place, and see the people who are going to be the life and soul of the story. That's important, isn't it? Yes, but -

In his venerable oak-panelled study, situated on the south side of the rectory with the most favourable aspect over the immaculately tended and sweet scented gardens, sat the Rector of Haversham. A portly man in his fifties, yet still handsome, he sat in his favourite armchair musing gently on the theme of the sermon he would give tomorrow.

This is vaguely interesting as far as it goes. In fact it works quite well because the very quietness of the moment sets up an expectation of something happening. The audience are sophisticated in the language of stories. A moment of calm almost always means something is going to

happen. The moment will not last and they do not want it to last. They want the Rector to be interrupted. And they want his life to be changed for ever by that interruption.

Imagine if the Rector's musing went on for several more pages, with a minute description of what he was wearing, what the room looks like, what he is thinking about. Imagine that in a movie. Three minutes of a half-asleep clergyman sitting in his armchair. The audience would be waiting on the edge of the seats in a mixture of annoyance and anticipation. What is going to happen?

How about another three minutes of musing? If that's the case, you have lost them.

Make something important happen in the opening scene

Of course, what is important all depends on what the story you want to tell is all about, and of course what emotional journeys you have planned for you characters.

For example:

- A broadly comic story about the Rector would have his wife Lady Hermione bustling in and telling him that Cousin Freddie is threatening to publish his scandalous memoirs and must be stopped.
- Or he might get up from the chair, sit down to write only to have a terrible stroke, die and leave his family destitute and struggling.
- Or if it's a crime story of the cosy variety, there will be an interesting quarrel under the window, disturbing the rector, but giving him the vital clue that will later allow him to deduce who murdered the reclusive film actress who has come to live at Haversham Hall.
- Or in a crime story of a different sort, he will get a mysterious visitor who strikes fear and panic into him. And later the Rector will be found dead, and the detectives will arrive.

The last example leads to the other big problem you can have with an opening. Is it necessary to have the scene where the Rector is threatened? Or should you go straight to the scene where your detectives are examining the body? Not an easy decision.

Seeing the Rector, a benign, good man, threatened raises the stakes. The Rector is not an anonymous corpse about whom we, like the detectives, have to discover everything – he has an existence and it becomes more important to find out who his killer was. And if in the course of that investigation, we learn that the rector was not the benign man we thought he was, the situation becomes even more involving and interesting.

But what if your story focus is slightly different? You want to explore what it really feels like to be a detective working on a very unsavoury murder case. A murder case which perhaps stirs unhappy memories of your own childhood, when your mother remarried an authoritarian clergyman and took you and your siblings to live in an uncomfortable rural vicarage just like the one in which the Rector of Haversham has just been found murdered. Then starting with the Rector might not be the right approach. Better to have the call from the duty sergeant to the detective in the middle of the night and the drive in the dark up to the ugly Rectory:

Dripping laurel bushes by the door, a massive wooden porch like a lych gate and in the hall beyond, a red and black tiled floor – the place was a carbon copy of the Vicarage at Selmerby. It even smelt the same – of dogs, cheap disinfectant and creeping damp. Waiting for the scene-of-crime officers to finish and give him a clear view of the body, Detective Inspector Tom Reid found he remembered too much.

This is of course not the moment for a lengthy explanation about Tom's childhood. He hasn't got time for a flashback. Whatever details you do need about his past are much better subtly threaded into the ongoing action. And here, less is more – the more you keep back, the more the suspense will be heightened. If Tom feels uneasy because he once, as a furious eleven-year-old, plotted and attempted to murder his own stepfather, that is a secret that will be all the more dramatic the longer it is kept.

Generally speaking, it's not a good idea to start with a detailed account of your central character's childhood, no matter how fascinating and character-forming it was. Stories where the characters grow from five to eighteen in the first five chapters and then go on to be about something else are slowing the reader down. But if it is the childhood that is the story (for example in *To Kill a Mockingbird*), that's a different matter.

Another danger area is describing how and why a couple met and fell in love, if the story is about their marriage falling apart. It is much more interesting to come in when the crisis of the marriage is in full flow.

Complications – finding the shape of the story

It can seem that once you've set up a great opening, there is a huge space in the middle of the story; an empty desert with no tracks, let alone signposts to guide you across.

Work out your ultimate destination in some detail. Will the hero and heroine get together? How would you like that scene to play? A bit of creative daydreaming here is really useful.

Now you know where the characters have to go; but the trick is to not let them go there, at least not by a direct route. This is done by engineering obstacles which they have to negotiate. And each obstacle is in effect a mini-story within the whole story. It makes a footprint in the desert, a small step towards the climax.

Imagine that in the *Mystery of the Dead Rector*, the murderer comes in and confesses to the crime. This is a good outcome in real life – but a lousy solution for a story.

If you have set things up right, the reader will really want the detective to find the murderer, but would be disappointed if the murderer just fell into his hands. The audience wants the slow road to justice, full of suspense and challenges for the central character they have come to care about.

Take our policeman, DI Tom Reid, with his troubled past and his murderer to catch. How can we make life more difficult for him? What are the potential obstacles?

- The cunning of the murderer and his determination not to get caught – this can take all sorts of forms. Is it a particularly clever and unbreakable alibi that the murderer has set up? Or maybe the forensic evidence has been fabricated to frame someone else.
- Other leads and clues which make the detective pursue the wrong person – red herrings. Another person has just as good a motivation to kill the rector and was in the right place at the right time. It's really hard for the police to see that this person isn't the guilty man.
- Internal weaknesses – things in his character that makes him look in the wrong direction. A prejudice against the clergy because of what he experienced as a boy makes it difficult for him to see the situation as it is.
- Political situations at work which make it impossible for him to take the right actions to find the murderer. Tom's superior officer takes him off the case because he is becoming obsessive and unbalanced about it. So Tom has to fight to get put back on the case.

There is plenty of potential for incidents and mini-stories there. Things for Tom Reid to do, to sort out, to solve, to investigate. Actions, not reactions, and often in highly charged situations which have him with his back against the wall.

Always look for situations that are the best test for your characters – their worst nightmares. These are the ones with the greatest potential for conflict, and the more conflict there is, the more tense and involving the drama will be.

Rising conflict – things get worse

As the story progresses things should get more difficult, rather than easier. The rock face should be more slippery, the bad guys should have more guns, there should be more to lose at each new challenge.

Convergence of conflict

If obstacles can be lumped together to form alliances to better block the passage of your central character, so much the better for the tension levels in the later stages of the story.

For example:

- A woman who hates bloodshed in any form finds she is faced by a ruthless man and must kill or be killed.

And when you get to that "can things get any more difficult?" moment you have reached the climax of your story. The make or break moment – when you get to decide whether the characters can attain the goals that have driven them through the complications of the story and have a happy ending, or whether you spoil it for them, thwart them and give them something quite different as a prize at the end of the story.

Crisis

This is sometimes called the black moment – with good reason.

Our policeman hero Tom Reid has, because of his prejudices, blundered into a dangerous situation. He's realised at last who the murderer is, but too late, because it seems as though he is going to be the next victim. How on earth does he get away alive?

So hard on the heels of the Crisis comes the:

Resolution

How do you sort out the mess?

It's good when readers or the audience can't imagine how the dire situation in which you have placed the people in the story can possibly be resolved. Of course they may have guessed that the dark-haired heroine is going to end up with the handsome hero, but the threads of the story have been so successfully woven that they are now puzzled and a little alarmed by the potential outcome. Then comes one of the hardest parts of story structure: to solve the mess in a manner that makes perfect sense, without resorting to tricks.

Design the characters to have the potential to solve the crisis events for themselves. Personal or professional skills are useful, as are previous experiences of the sort that can give insights into the nature of the situation. If someone is about to jump off the building, and your heroine contemplated doing the same thing once, then the heroine might be just the person to stop the jump.

Or to use the example of Tom, the detective, again. Yes, he might be about to be the next victim of a psychopath, but he has knowledge he can use to save himself – his professional experience as a police officer, of course, but also his experience as the survivor of an abusive step-parent. He can identify with and therefore outwit his captor.

Don't let the cavalry arrive just in time or use a coincidence to solve the story. It is much better to have the characters solve the problems presented by an event. Much better to have the peasant boy kill the nasty dragon using his native cunning and bravery than for the King's guard ride up and do it for him.

The personalities of the characters created the obstacles in the story – let their personalities solve the story.

9

Troubleshooting your story

The blueprint isn't sacred

With luck you have a rough outline of your story – an idea of where you want to go and how to get there. In some places the details are going to be hazy. That's good – you want to leave yourself some room for surprise. Following a plan too slavishly is inhibiting. When you are in the thick of actually writing a screenplay or novel, it is a bit like being in a sensory deprivation tank. Only the world you are creating seems to matter. And in that state, you can have some brilliant insights which might not have come up at the planning stage. The brain seems to work in a different way, and problems that seemed really intractable can be solved. It's pretty exhilarating when it happens.

Checklist

This is not supposed to be a big “have you done your homework yet?” kind of nag list. These are suggestive questions to help you keep straight and to give you something to think about if you are a bit stuck. Writing is a process of constant testing. You have to be like a cook and get in there and taste the mixture. Is the mixture right? Is something missing? Too much spice – or not enough? What flavour am I aiming for here?

Warning!

There is a right and a wrong time for this testing process. There are times when I wouldn't look at these checklists at all. When you are feeling creatively vulnerable, perhaps, unsure of your voice and your ideas. That is not the time to engage in pen-stopping critical thinking. Push on and write and resist the

temptation to review your material. Keep reviewing and testing procedures until the mixture has cooled a little – or else you might burn your tongue and never make soup again.

In fact, making soup is not like writing. If you put too much salt and pepper or tabasco in the soup, basically it's ruined and it's hard to save the day. But bad writing can always be rewritten and turned into good writing. Good to know, isn't it? Nothing you write is ever wasted.

Helpful diagnostic questions

Is the idea right? Does it work – for an audience and for me personally?

Are the characters sympathetic and credible?

Is there a clear point of view?

Are there too many characters?

Do the characters do what they do for good enough reasons?

Does the story have enough conflict?

Is the conflict real or contrived?

Is there something important at stake for the central characters?

Is there a big climax?

Does the ending feel right – does it work? Is it satisfying?

About a story idea or project

Do I like it?

Is there a 'tingle factor'?

Does it speak to me personally?

What angle do I as a human being have on this? Does this remind me of something in my life, for example?

Does the idea really have legs or is it just a cute concept?

Is it capable of being characterised and dramatised and made into something more than a cute concept?

About Characters

Do I know this person well enough?

Not just physical attributes, but am I inside them?

Do I know the world of the characters well enough?

Can I visualise their daily life?

Do I know the back-story?

A character's back-story is always interesting to do. I like finding out those trivial things about my characters which might never find their way into the story.

Does my flat character come to life if I put him in a different situation?

Have I written a monologue from his point of view to explore him in more depth?

Does my villain have any redeeming features to make him more credible?

Is the character from central casting or is there anything unique about him?

Has the character an internal emotional journey to take in the story?

Is that journey credible and does it give the character adequate motivation?

If the character does something uncharacteristic, is it clear why?

For example extreme circumstances make an honest respectable woman into a shop-lifter – she is stealing food for her child as her husband has left them and they are nearly destitute.

Setting

Is this setting chocolate-box set dressing or does the place add something to the story?

Is the setting as convincing as it can be?

Check for howlers (patios in regency romances, for example). If you're not sure about something, do the research.

Is this the right setting for the story and for this people?

My fourth novel *The Lark Ascending* started off being set in Gloucestershire. It didn't work there, so I transferred the action to Scotland and it all seemed to fall into place.

Structure and storytelling

Have I paid off everything I set up?

Have I accidentally overemphasized something and led to false expectations as to the direction of the story?

Are the readers going to root for the right guy?

Are there any plot holes or missing scenes that make a nonsense of the story?

This is a big problem, particularly in a fast moving story. How does a character know what he knows, when you haven't shown him getting the critical phone call from the informant? Or how did the hero get to the villain's lair so easily?

Are all the scenes necessary?

Do all the scenes do something?

This ought not to be taken in a purely mechanistic sense. A scene in a novel or screenplay can justify its existence in many ways, the crucial issue being that it must work at least one way, and preferably in more than one way. For example, does it move the action on? Do we learn

more about the characters? Do we learn information about the setting? Is this a set-up scene for later? Is it for mood and atmosphere, i.e. to help the aesthetics of the piece along? Once again I would caution asking this question too early. This is a script editor's fault diagnosis question *par excellence*. You cannot ask yourself this sort of thing in the middle of your material – it is too critical and harsh on yourself. It is guaranteed to block you. Write the scene and cut it later. The more you write, the more you mull and plan, the more prepared and practised you are, the fewer mistakes you will make. You won't write so many redundant scenes – the process and practise will guide your hand.

Am I having trouble writing this scene because it's boring?

If you are bored, there is a good chance the audience will be too.

Where do I end the scene?

Sometimes this isn't obvious. Often I just stop when I run out of steam, or I've run out of things to say – things that *need* to be said, that is. This means I don't add anything superfluous – a lazy solution but an effective one! If you are writing a scene with a blazing row with the hero and his brother, you really don't need to tell the reader that afterwards the hero left the building and climbed onto a bus into town – and if you were writing a screenplay you wouldn't dream of doing that unless something very important was scheduled for that bus ride. It would diminish the impact of the row between the brothers. "I'll never see it that way. I'm sorry, Jack, but I can't" or whatever. Much better to leave the scene abruptly. Come in late and get out early is the rule.

Have I started this story too early?

Is there a good story hook?

Have I started too late?

Why is my heroine immediately having a flashback? So you *have* come in late, at a nicely poised moment when the story is ready to spill forward in time, driven by the momentum of neatly dovetailing bad

circumstances for your heroine. So you write the scene, where she finds the intruder in her house and has to figure out how to overcome him. Certainly that will hook the audience. The situation is a good one. But then this happens:

As she stood frozen behind the bedroom door, watching the flickering shadow on the wall, she felt the soft velvet of her dressing gown brush her cheek. Its faded scent of lavender send her rocketing back through time...

Kent, 1956

At the end of the long garden, glittering in the June sunlight, Esme picked daisies for her grandmother.

And so on, for the whole of Esme's childhood, adolescence, first love affair, going away to university, studying to become a vet, failing to become a vet and running a pet shop instead, and so on. Her life story, in fact. Meanwhile the intruder is still prowling about the house – or perhaps he has sat down for a nice cup of tea and some biscuits while we catch up on Esme's life story. Whatever, the tension of that initial set-up is completely ruined and the story which promised to be one thing, has turned into another.

Flashbacks like this one can be seen as the ultimate in lazy exposition and characterisation. They interrupt the onward dramatic flow and give the reader a real incentive to skip forward just to get back to the main story which they have already invested in.

Is the digression into the past really necessary?

Firstly ask yourself, is this in fact back-story that you need to write as a preparatory exercise to get to know your central character and her milieu properly? Does the reader really need this information to make sense of the events that follow? If not, it may be best to write the back-story and then put it on one side. Your depiction of Esme will be stronger for it. You will know what she is and where she has come

from, and will be able to integrate that information subtly into the ongoing action.

For example, through the back-story, you may know that Esme is not going to cope well with this intruder because it is her own personal nightmare. Why? – because her beloved grandmother was mugged and left for dead in her own home. Now this is an important piece of information that readers need to know to understand Esme – but you must consider whether they need to know it at that particular point. You can make it clear that Esme dealing with the intruder is under extra pressure because of some past situation as yet unresolved, and by teasing them with this extra mystery, you are adding considerably to the tension.

What is the flashback for?

Are the events described in the flashback absolutely crucial to the way that the future story plays out? Does the flashback set up the Big Obstacle of the story? Is there a big secret, such as a revenge story? You then need to consider the best way to present this information and whether a flashback is a suitable way of doing it.

Does this ending deliver what the audience expects?

By this I mean closure of some sort. You can surprise and shock them as much as you like if there is a good reason – an artistic, intellectual or emotional reason that will offset the negativity that the totally unexpected can produce. For example, when Frank Oz shot the movie *Little Shop of Horrors*, they stuck to the original off-Broadway ending, where the evil alien plant triumphs, the heroine is killed and the hero commits suicide. This blackly comic ending had succeeded in the theatre. But when they tested the completed film on the audience, the ending was greeted with dismay and horrified silence. The audience had invested too much emotion in the likeable hero and heroine and they could not cope with a grim ending, however ‘true’ it might be. They wanted the happy ending, which is what the movie seemed to have

been promising all along. They did not want unjustified death and destruction but answers to the story questions posed – would Seymour and Audrey get the happy future they had been dreaming of? So they reshot, and gave the story a triumphantly happy ending, with the evil plant being electrocuted. The only hint of the original dark ending that remains is the closing shot of an evil-looking little plant lurking, grinning and biding its time in the border of Audrey and Seymour's suburban dream-home. This give a spooky and satisfying little twist but does not destroy the overall feel-good finish to the story.

This is not to say that all stories should have happy endings. But there are signals in fiction that the audience pick up on and which lead them to expect one thing, resulting in disappointment if that thing is not delivered. *Romeo and Juliet* with a happy ending, for example, would seem flat and pointless.

Are there any loose threads?

Stories have a way of disintegrating very easily if not constructed properly. One loose thread and the whole thing can unravel. Negativity on the part of those consuming the story is a powerful antagonistic force to the success of a story. The case you present in the story has to be watertight – there can't be anything to argue against, and this means making sure that the direction in which a reader is taken is actually the direction you want. You don't want them lifting the curtain and asking how the baddie knew where the hero's hideout was when such lengths have gone into concealing it. This will need to be explained properly.

10

Getting published

Getting published is like trying to get a job and should be approached in the same spirit. You are selling yourself as much as your work. Letters to publishers and agents should be business-like, focussed on the task in hand and presented properly. This is not the place for gimmicks. Act professionally and you will be taken seriously.

Firstly, think about the current market. How does your book or story fit in? Is it an easily identifiable genre novel, for example? Read around and be aware of what is fashionable and current. This does not mean you have to alter what you do or you write to obey the latest trend. You have to stick to your vision and yet be aware of the pressures of the marketplace. Not an easy thing to do, of course.

Try not to succumb to the temptation to write something because lots of those are being sold at the moment. Only write a funny chick-lit story because you love to read those sort of books. If you are a loyal, appreciative reader of a genre you will understand it more and write it better than someone who does not like the genre.

Publishers love books but they also see them as commodities. They need to be able to sell books and they like books that have a clear marketing message. Is there a clear story that you can sell to an agent or publisher? Is the story a package?

Research publishers and agents. Many big publishers these days do not accept unsolicited submissions – that is, manuscripts from unknown or unrepresented authors. Some do, but the position is always changing. It often depends on whether they have enough staff available to assess and comment upon them. Research here is the key – there is plenty of information available

in the standard annually produced reference books or on websites. Some publishers even produce tip-sheets to brief writers on what they are looking for.

Approaching an agent

Remember, agents need writers. They need good writers who can deliver a book a year that reflects the current needs of the market. They are always looking for gold in their slush piles. That is their business model. Agents are listed in the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* and the *Writer's Handbook*. They should not charge a reading fee – and be wary of those who do. Reputable agents (members of the Association of Literary Agents) will not steal your wonderful manuscript and rip it off as your own. They are trusted intermediaries. Collect together a list of suitable names – agents who deal in your area. There is no point sending a children's novel to an agent who does not handle children's fiction – he or she will not have the contacts in publishing and will not be interested.

Then write a query letter pitching your project. Don't send the manuscript. Don't send part of the manuscript. Don't telephone them unless you have a specific enquiry such as finding out their post code. Write a proper letter.

Create a pitch

A pitch is a film industry term which means the summary of a story in order to make a promotional statement. To create a pitch from your story is a bit like distilling the story into the most powerful essence of its elements. It is not a teaser, nor is it advertising. The idea is to explain the important parts of the story in the simplest and most intriguing way.

A pitch should answer these questions:

1. Who is the story about?
2. What is the central conflict that the character faces?
3. How is that conflict resolved?

Here are some examples of pitches.

Teenagers Romeo and Juliet fall in love despite the deadly enmity of their respective families. They marry in secret, but fate conspires against them and they die tragic deaths.

When Jack Smith is thrown out of his high flying job in the City, he goes on a quest to find his lost parents and finds unexpected redemption on a picturesque Scottish Island.

A childless couple question their own motives and struggle with their relationship while undergoing the tortuous process of adopting a child from Mexico.

A Regency young lady who gives into temptation is forced to deal with the consequences of her reckless behaviour and suffers before she can find true happiness.

What's the story about your story?

Is there an angle for the publicity people to work on? This makes your work more attractive and should be included in your query letter. Authenticity and authority are plus points in selling so you should mention any relevant experience. So If this novel is about the pains and perils of international adoption, it helps them to know that you have first-hand experience of the process having adopted two Chinese children yourself. And for the second pitch above, for example: "I was a broker in the city and now live on a working croft on Harris."

But make sure this kind of experience is to the point. "I had a holiday in France when I was twelve" is no good for a book set in thirteenth century France, where living in France for several years and studying French History at the University of Tours would be worth mentioning. And of course don't exaggerate, or worse!

Relevant writing experience

Relevant is the keyword. Writing four in-house company reports is not of much interest to an agent or publisher as it says nothing about your storytelling skills. But, “I have published three short stories in Peculiar Tales Magazine. I am studying for an MA in Creative writing,” is more to the point.

Even if you have nothing relevant, a well-honed pitch may catch someone’s eye. Be patient and be prepared to send out quite a few letters. There are many reasons why they might not respond and often it will have nothing to do with the quality of your work. Don’t take rejection personally – or at least try not to, for this is the hardest thing.

To summarise, luck is important, but you can decrease the odds against you:

1. By actually finishing work and sending it out;
2. by sending it to the right people – researching the right agents;
3. by sending it out in the correct manner, *i.e.* a query letter first which contains a pitch, relevant experience and some clue that you understand the marketplace;
4. by sending a really good piece of work when the manuscript or partial is requested;
5. by having thought through the marketing angles;
6. by offering yourself as more than a one-book-wonder.

If you do get published, please bear in mind that high financial rewards are even more unlikely than the likelihood of getting published. It is an unpalatable fact, but most writers struggle to make a proper living from writing alone. They tend to do other things. It is not an easy route to wealth and leisure. The most successful commercial writer is under enormous pressure to perform consistently. In some ways that must be worse than being obscure. At least at the bottom you can always go up, but from the top, it is a long fall, especially when fashion and the critics turn on you.

In the end it is the satisfaction that writing creates itself that is the prize – not celebrity, nor money. As Terry Pratchett remarked: “It’s the most fun you can have on your own.”

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Final thoughts

The only way to write a story is to write it.

Actually staying the course does require a degree of self discipline and concentrated energy. Harness that on a regular basis, even if it's only an hour or so a day, and you are winning the battle. Be selfish and make yourself some writing space. Make the project the most important thing in the world to you. Obsess about it. But sometimes you just can't write – this can be for several reasons:

- Problems in the story structure are hindering the flow. Thinking rather writing is required. Fault diagnosis is needed.
- Fears of various kinds and lack of self-confidence.
- Mental exhaustion – the creative store cupboard is empty and needs restocking.

Be on guard for all these. When they hit you, sit them out, as if you are stuck in a traffic jam. Write about something different just for fun. Read books by other writers on how they cope. Buy a new hat. Do whatever helps. Just don't give up altogether.

Good luck!

