

The Algonkian Novel Development and Craft Guide - 2022

Introduction

The following novel development and craft articles are a subset of the New York Write to Pitch conference pre-event schedule. In fact, they have long been a part of Algonkian Writer Conferences pre-event materials in one form or another. Over the years, the quantity and quality of these materials have increased, and we thought it best at this juncture—in partnership with Del Sol Press—to provide an e-Book collection, a definitive one that is not all inclusive, but sufficiently so.

Readers will notice a predilection in the following essays to employ novel prose and structural samples from semi-classic and classic literature. Why? Because literary and genre writers only truly learn by standing humbly on the shoulders of great authors gone before. As both writers and readers we decode their essence on the page, seeking to discover how their concepts and imaginations continue to inspire others. And let's not forget, these "others" are also the authors of today, all around us, beckoning for our attention.

We ask that writers begin at the beginning, with our familiar friend, "Imaginary Bob," and then proceed down the list one at a time. This is preferable to skipping around, for as you read, you will see an order taking shape. The dawn will break over your opening scene and the dusk will settle over your final page.

Aside from this collection, we highly recommend supplementary materials to be found at <https://algonkianconferences.com/authorconnect>.

There is always more to learn. And always keep in mind, there are no great writers, only great rewriters.

- Michael Neff

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WRITER EGO AND THE IMAGINARY BOB

FACT: We all begin our first novels with equal parts ignorance and false optimism.

Many months, or even years later, many of us (if we're lucky) finally learn the enormity of our mistakes. Those popular writer magazines and the [sociable little group](#) of amateur writers that looked like a great plan, at first, now appear unreliable and even time wasting. At this juncture, we either deny reality, quit altogether, or else vow to become true and humble apprentices to the art of novel writing.

Ne confondez jamais une seule défaite avec une défaite finale.

- F. Scott

The process above is nearly inevitable for the vast majority of aspiring authors, and only the eternal narcissist is incapable of achieving a productive second stage. We've [discussed this subject](#) more than once. Of course, such a personality will always disagree and fume like a child, but what about less volatile, less serious forms of counterproductive ego?

About a year past, a screenplay writer I knew who lived in Kalamazoo called and asked me to help him [convert his screenplay into a novel](#). I'd known this fellow for years (let's call him BOB) and he'd won various contests, even had a thriller-action screenplay optioned a few times by major studios, including Lions Gate. Nonetheless, he decided one day to convert one of his script creations into a full blown commercial novel, and he intended to accomplish this incredible transformation in no less than six months. After all, he needed to make haste in order to attend a writer conference in Seattle where he felt reasonably certain a "smart agent" would sign him.

Now, I knew that Bob wasn't a narcissist as such. I'd been present when he accepted critique, and I'd been around him and talked with him enough that I would have seen the N flag raised more than once. Like other writer workshop leaders and teachers, I possess a fairly good sense for narcissist eruptions in the making, even in the early stages. But this wasn't Bob's way, as I've noted. However, upon speaking with him on the phone about his forced novel conversion deadline (keep in mind, he knew zip about novel writing), he reacted with disbelief. He could not grasp that [transforming a 96 page screenplay](#) into an 86,000+ word novel could actually take longer, perhaps far longer than six months.

Even if he were already a veteran novel writer working under the best of circumstances, it would most likely take eight to 12 months to augment and gilt a sufficiently suitable masterpiece. But as a rank beginner, we must assume that between the clueless planning and actual execution (that would include at least three

major revisions), then a final editorial scolding of one kind or another (barring any Oh-Shit-I-Neglected-to-do-XYZ), Bob was looking at *a minimum of two years, but perhaps upwards of four or more*. If he devoted full-time and worked closely with a professional novel editor, page by page, scene by scene, line by line, perhaps only one year? But the dollar cost would be tremendous.

Regardless, Bob avoided me after that phone conversation for a long time. I emailed him, inquired now and then, but he would always sound optimistic without divulging details. Finally, more than four years later, we got together one night for dinner. He was excited to tell me he'd written a new thriller with a major Hollywood producer behind it, and when I inquired about the novel conversion, he just shook his head and said, "I've moved on."

Via a few other bits of information reluctantly delivered, I surmised that Bob had finally assembled a creaking shipwreck of a manuscript within a year's time, sent it out to agents, and following 50 or more boilerplate rejections, the ms finally served as cheap tinder for the living room fireplace.

The above is one of my stand-out examples, but there are many. These writers in question were not narcissists as such, no, but their egos just couldn't allow them to believe they were wrong in certain crucial circumstances or accept they did not yet possess the necessary skill set to accomplish the huge task before them.

BEST 10 STEPS FOR STARTING THE NOVEL – ALL GENRES

As you explore the nooks and literary crannies of NWOE, you'll find considerable words devoted to warning you away from foolish and terrible advice.

But what about professional, tested, and proven advice? Below are ten bullet points for aspiring authors designed to help them overcome any confusion or misdirection when it comes to starting the novel. However, before you investigate, make certain you've already prepared by reading [this sensible prologue](#).

Note: the list below makes a base assumption that the writer is a relative novice and currently searching for direction and focus--the same stage every one of us passes through. For those in the second stage, or higher, the list might well begin further down. Nonetheless, we cannot stress enough how important it is to fully understand your genre. Eat and breathe it. Know the currents in the market, what makes for a "high concept" story in this context. You'll never be published otherwise.

KEY CONCEPTS: genre, high concept, Publisher's Marketplace, self-editing, readers, core development strategies, craft and research, story premise, SATG Novel, novel hook, first draft outline, inciting incident, plot point.

Choose Your Genre First

Historical, thriller, women's fiction, mystery cozy, etc. Focus on one that will consume you, one you have passion for. Passionless choice never bodes well (can you guess why?). If on the fence, consider *what kind of author do you wish to be known as five years from now?* A thriller author? Horror author? Mystery?... Makes a difference, no? So be specific and take a slot (no "slot" shaming). You are attempting to break into a crowded and tough marketplace with a breakout novel. As of this point, you have no real idea how difficult it will really be in a country as big as America.

Best to begin wisely.

WARNING: failing to locate yourself firmly in one genre *will only result in failure*. And believe us when we tell you that agents and publishers will be merciless in their demand that you understand and obey the rules of that genre. *From the heart, but smart*. One last thing--you cannot invent your own genre. Don't try. Don't even ask. For the love of all that is holy!

Mercilessly Immerse

Read the classics in your genre combined with the latest and hottest. Look up "best book" lists, read reviews on Amazon, dive into review journals dedicated to your genre, and obtain a membership at [Publisher's Marketplace](#). It's never too early to familiarize yourself with who is publishing what in your genre. At PM it's all there. *And no, we don't get a kickback.* As a bonus, you get to review expertly written hook lines for new novels bought by publishers, thereby also getting a chance to note the type of [high concept stories](#) in the works. Invaluable! Truly.

Via obsessive immersing, you'll also get an idea which authors and novels might compare favorably with you and your own work. Strongly consider analyzing story progression, character introduction, and scene development in three to five of the best in your genre. Take notes. Compare what you've learned to what you read here at NWOE.

Avoid Writer Groups

Do not join a local or online writer group, however socially alluring it may be, and regardless of what its apostles tell you. *Don't fall for it.* We know, it feels like the right thing because so many recommend it, but it's the wrong thing by a lightyear. You **might** consider it once you've developed enough novel writing savvy to actually know the difference between an amateur group that **might** be somewhat productive and one that could be potentially ruinous or time wasting at a minimum. Review carefully our notes on [this crucial and controversial subject](#).

Begin the Reader Hunt

Following on above, attempt to engage upwards of five good readers, if humanly possible. It will take time to ID the right ones, so begin the hunt early. Take note, they *will not be in a group*. They *will not meet* to discuss your work. If possible, best they do not interact or know each other. This condition will disallow the inevitable evolution of group politics, groupthink, imagined slights, false flattery, etc. Yes, it can happen. Regardless, can your picks be reasonably trusted to provide generally intelligent reaction to your narrative? You might have to jettison a few. Be prepared. Additionally, serving as a reader for them will provide you with a form of editorial experience that might prove invaluable.

IMPORTANT: utilize "beta readers" for narrative purposes only (prose style, clarity, imagery, dynamic motion, dialogue quality--that sort of thing), NEVER for novel development, i.e., premise, plot, character roles, important setting details, etc.

Engaging in the latter imperiling act will only threaten your progress with those insidious major flaws inherent in 98% of writer groups.

Study Self-editing Technique

Do it carefully, it's an [art form](#), even if you're not onto your second draft. No reason to delay. It takes experimentation and practice. Relying exclusively on your betas or future freelance editors is a mistake. Ultimately, you are responsible for the final product. Faith should not be necessary. Also, keep in mind, *the more refined your fiction narrative waxes, the more productive the future editorial professionals engaged to review your work* will be, i.e., if you've already ascended to level 8, they can bump you to level 10. Now, what about that contract?

Craft Until Your Head Hurts

While researching your genre, immerse simultaneously into your core novel development strategy. Don't rush it or fret over it. You will inevitably revise. Meanwhile, utilize NWOE and especially [Algonkian Author Connect](#) as a staging platform for the illuminating pursuit of brilliant and necessary craft technique. This is NOT an option.

Devour every single article or essay on development, drama, plotting, prose, and viewpoints. Set aside a space for experimentation. Practice writing scenes, dialogue, complex descriptions for starters. Additionally, consume only the [best books](#) on novel writing. *You will ALWAYS be an apprentice to your craft.* Let [Truman Capote](#) be an inspiration.

Conceive Primary Premise

Given that you've chosen your genre and you're well on your way to possessing a true literary skill set (it's not easy, so don't be impatient), and given you've taken careful note of the quality of new novels coming to life at [Publisher's Marketplace](#) (have you?), you may now begin to formulate your own novel premise, the ["high concept" story](#) that will form the development, writing, and marketing basis of your genre novel from title to last sentence.

Uncertain on how to go about it? One way to initiate a bit of productive pondering is to visit the [High Concept page](#) first, followed by the [Loglines and Core Wounds](#) page. Read carefully. Note the three "hook line" examples. Consider WHAT WILL BE YOUR CORE CONFLICT, AND WHAT WILL BE THE CORE WOUND? (all caps for emphasis). Play with it. Write down options. Choose wisely. Seek discreet professional advice if necessary.

Begin the Planning Process

Engage in a careful examination of the [Six Act Two-Goal Novel](#). With your embryonic story concept nearing the birth canal, use the SATG Novel outline to assist with beginning to conceive smaller parts of the bigger picture. At each separate stage, from Act to Act, take a deep breath and sketch ideas, circumstances, characters. Be free and easy with the process. Jot down everything that comes to mind. Keep in mind it's all in dynamic flux. It can change. Just as importantly, attempt to finalize insofar as possible your [novel's major setting](#). Extremely important. Organize your thoughts, questions, commentary, and scenarios as needed. *Imagination is truly your best friend* (even if you don't like the original [Willy Wonka](#)).

Sketch a Draft Outline

Make certain your story premise is [commercially viable](#) and your chosen setting is simmering. Have on hand sketches of your major and [secondary characters](#). Use the SATG to locate and ruminate over your major plot points.

Sketch your inciting incident and first major plot point. Go from there to your first major reversal, pinch point, etc., all the way to climax. Keep in mind this is a draft, however, it should reflect your efforts to date at fleshing out your story.

Consider also, not just your basic plot but those special points, twists, and turns demanded by your chosen genre, e.g., if writing a cozy mystery you best get that body on the first page (or pretty close). Refer to steps 1 and 2 above.

Draft Your Hook Scenes

Don't think of the novel in units of chapter. Think of it as [units of scene](#), each scene dedicated to a particular task, and each driving the plot forward (a must) in one way or another. I use the term "hook scenes" to refer to that combination of [opening scenes](#) that will lead us through the initial set-up to the inciting incident and from there to the first major plot point that begins the next Act of the novel--30 to 50 pages into the novel, roughly. There are always exceptions.

TOP SEVEN REASONS ASPIRING WRITERS FAIL TO PUBLISH

At a conservative estimate, upwards of 250,000 writers in the U.S. are currently struggling to write or find an agent for their first commercial novel or memoir. If you understand this business, you also know why an enormous percentage are unable to make it happen. Below are my top seven reasons why otherwise passionate writers will join the 99.9% never to become commercially published.

1. NEOPHYTE SKILL SET AND A FAILURE TO COMPREHEND THE PROBLEM

In the case of the writer's prose narrative, it just does not display the kind of energy, cinema, creativity, and polish necessary to convince a gatekeeper professional to go deeper. The first line falls with a thud, and the graph dips from there into a pond of blah. This circumstance is perhaps the number one cause of quick rejection. Usually, the writer in question is sufficiently new to the game, not aware, or at least not enough to enable productive change. Perhaps this is a first stab at fiction, the neophyte not realizing that journalism or other nonfiction writing ill prepares one for the challenges of competitive literary or commercial narrative.

Perhaps the writer simply does not know a good editor or reader, and therefore, has never received truly helpful crit, especially not from their [amateur writer group](#). Or perhaps an ego obstacle is present, a father to the "birthed baby" phenomenon: the writer has produced a passage, a character, or scene they can't possibly do away with. It is sacred to them. So it remains, defacing the narrative like a major pothole, jolting agents and publishers alike each time they meet it, and to make matters worse, their "friends" are telling them to hold the line *out of principle*.

In the case of storytelling, the writer may not fit the above category and actually be accomplished at connecting the word dots. The agent gives it a read until about page 30 or so, then backs off. Why? Well, because the story goes nowhere. It flattens out and remains that way. Where is the inciting incident? The [first major plot point](#)? The first major reversal? The first pinch point? The story is eventually uninteresting or perhaps even confusing. Just recently a fine writer handed me sample of his ms. His prose skill kept me turning, but finally, I bogged down on [characters](#) who spun endlessly in place, who never really took action or engaged in any reaction worth noting.

2. FAILURE TO ADEQUATELY UNDERSTAND THE MARKET

We are not talking about trend chasing... Virtually every time I speak with a student I discover that she or he has not sufficiently researched their market. In other words, they don't have a clue as to what types of first novels are currently being published in their chosen genre (assuming one is chosen). Why is this important? Because the first novels provide the writer with a concept of what the market is looking for. Also, it helps steer the writer away from starting a project that will be DOA on arrival due to being way too *deja-vu* or trope heavy. Far too many writers make *the Tom Clancy mistake*, i.e., they [attempt to emulate a huge author](#), falsely believing it will get them published. They don't understand that author gods like TC could get away with terrible literary crimes in their old age and still become published. Instead, the writer must examine first novels published in their chosen genre over the past two years: investigate story types, settings, protagonists, etc. The research always yields productive results because first novels are the weather vane for where the market is going, and on more than one level.

3. NARCISSISM TIMES TEN EQUALS BOTTOM FEEDING

The [writer is puffed](#), living in a state of I-know-better. She or he is therefore incapable of successfully editing their work. Friends, relatives, or bad agents have told them their writing is good, and their story interesting (they dare not do otherwise!)... Perhaps the writer is a big success in their other career, so why shouldn't they also know-it-all when it comes to writing? OMG.

We once had a millionaire venture capitalist hand us their 15 page synopsis and the first few pages of their novel. The synopsis was absurdly long and unable to summarize the story in any coherent way; and the first couple of novel pages needed a good line editing because the prose was inadequate and one tended to speedbump over at least one awkward sentence per paragraph. Of course, these facts were unknown to the venture capitalist. He presented us the work with a grand TA DAH!, expecting a corroboration. Well, of course, irritation set in when we tactfully pointed out shortcomings. He also did not believe us when we explained that the vast majority of agents would not, repeat NOT read that 15 page synopsis regardless (and if they did, the novel was DOA). Later, he went on to self publish and sell a total of 136 copies at last count.

4. INCREDIBLY BAD ADVICE SPELLS DOOM

Whether the source is an article, a friend, or a writer's conference, the writer has been told something that steered them wrong, or built a false expectation, or made them believe a man-bites-dog story will happen to them. For example, a writer with a manuscript in need of a good final editing told me, "Not to worry. The publishing house editor or the agent will complete the edit for me." I explained that would not happen--not for a first timer with zero track record. Another piece of incredibly bad advice often heard from egoistic writers or agents: "Writers are born, not made." This is simply not true. A clever, determined writer who shelves the ego and seeks to research and learn their craft will succeed. Tenacity wins. See our [Top Ten Worst Pieces of Bad Writing Advice](#) and follow up with [The Top Worst of the "Worst Writer Advice."](#)

5. THE COMING OF MORALE LOSS

The most common form of morale loss occurs at such time the writer finally realizes their writing is not nearly as good as they suspected. The writer returns to a favorite slice of writing, seeking to admire, build confidence, only to discover their favorite slice has gone stale and offensive. So what happened? Writers who fail to understand that such realizations are necessary watersheds (and they happen to all writers!) and indicators of growth, become disillusioned. They quit.

The second biggest cause of morale loss results from no success in selling an agent on your novel. It's been dragging on for years. The novel ms has been shopped around. No one is buying and feedback is confusing. Or perhaps the novel ms is resting like a one ton anchor on your desk (waiting for neck) eight years later and still not ready despite several restarts and who knows how many total drafts.

If any of the above is the case, welcome to the club! Buy yourself a drink and get back to work.

6. IMPATIENCE EQUALS LOTS OF WASTED POSTAGE

The story might even be pretty good, fairly original, and the writing likewise, however, the writer is impatient and sends the ms out too soon. Flaws exist in the plot, character development, and God knows what else. No one knew! The [writer's crit group](#) was mistaken! Agents and editors will stumble a few times before reaching for a rejection slip. Most likely, the writer will never know why. She or he will just keep sending out the same damaged ms again and again.

7. INSUFFICIENT CREDITS TO PROVIDE COMPETITIVE EDGE

Credentials, platform, prior publications--these things can matter, especially for literary/upmarket writers. The vast majority of first novel writers do not get work published in viable short fiction markets. This makes it even more difficult to land a good agent. Many agents will not look twice at a writer whose cover letter does not demonstrate a track record of some type. A publishing record, even a meager one, helps convince publishers and agents that you have what it takes. Even in the mystery/thriller and SF/F markets, you go to the top of the stack if you've published shorts in reputable journals. Contest wins, past mentors, certain types of nonfiction, and participation in writing programs can also matter, depending on the genre and marketing desires of the publishing house.

COMING OF THE HIGH CONCEPT

Aspire to be a great genre author? So what's your high concept?...

If you fail to grasp the vital importance of this second question, you will fail to conceive much less write a publishable genre novel - thriller, mystery, fantasy, horror, crime, SF, you name it. Just not going to happen. *Don't let any writer group or self-appointed writer guru online or writer conference panel tell you otherwise.* You're competing with tens of thousands of other aspiring authors in your genre. Consider. WHAT IS GOING TO MAKE YOUR NOVEL STAND OUT from the morass of throat-gulping hopefuls who don't know any better?

Believe it or not, 99.5% of the writers in workshops all across the country *do not* arrive with a high-concept story. If anything, their aborning novel child is destined for still birth. They strut forward proudly waving their middle or low concept tale while noting how their hired editor from Stanford, or Iowa, or the Johns Hopkins MA program just "loves it!" As a professional, you inwardly groan, listen to them jabber, and realize within 30 seconds or less that you've heard a version of this story at least twenty times already. One of our WE contributors, famous literary agent Richard Curtis, talks about this sad phenomenon in [The Seven Sins of Novel Rejection](#):

"Writers don't always realize that stories that may seem unique to them are trite in the eyes of agents and editors. For every plot you write, we may see dozens of similar submissions. I freely confess to being easily bored, and I've stopped castigating myself for it, for I realize boredom is a critical symptom that a manuscript has gone wrong."

Btw, did anyone warn the hapless writers noted above of this "trite condition" before they submitted to Richard?... No. Of course not. And why? Because they didn't know any better. Now *you* will be the bad guy because you are ethically obligated to inform them in the next workshop that their story ideas are cooked to a char. You do so in the most tactful way imaginable, and you make it clear you will brainstorm the solution with them. Nonetheless, the usual symptoms are often observed: face drops, eyes freeze over, lower lip begins to quiver, and if the writer happens to be a narcissist, they begin to snarl and plot disruption. But let's return to the issue at hand.

First of all, what kind of story isn't a high concept? Several writer websites mimic each other and define a "low concept" story in this manner: 1. Not easily explained; 2. Character driven; 3. Talks about everyday life... Well, let's pause and reflect.

One could actually possess a high concept novel yet be unable, at least temporarily, to express or "explain" it properly in one or two lines. We must differentiate between the actual product and the communication of that product, and by doing so, invalidate the relevancy of the first point above. In truth, with proper communication, one can "explain" (*term should be "pitch"*) either a low or high concept, therefore, the nature of the concept itself, its relative complexity or simplicity, staleness or freshness, has nothing to do with the difficulty of pitching it, but everything to do with the ineptitude of the person attempting it.

As for point two above, a low concept pitch or hook line might be "character driven," but it doesn't need to be. It could be plot driven and still be low concept, therefore, "character" or "plot" driven isn't the real issue here (see [Log Lines and Hooks With Core Wounds](#)--character plays a big role in hooks). And as for point three, this is actually a false statement. For example, one could pitch or discuss a story idea that sounds like a GAME OF THRONES rehash, and last we checked, ice-eyed zombies bent on global acts of decapitation cannot be classified as "everyday life." Which also points out what? The aspiring author MUST know their genre inside out, else how can they reasonably determine what is an overdone story idea and what is not?

Alright, so how do we define a "high concept"? First from Wikipedia as it relates to film:

"The term is often applied to films that are pitched and developed almost entirely upon an engaging premise with broad appeal, rather than standing upon complex character study, cinematography, or other strengths that relate more to the artistic execution of a production. Extreme examples of high-concept films are *Snakes on a Plane* and *Hobo with a Shotgun*, which describe their entire premises in their titles."

Will we be fortunate enough to possess a novel title that describes our premise so efficiently? Most likely not, but we must possess a high-concept genre story nonetheless *if we expect to be as competitive as need be while immersed in this insanely competitive market*. A high concept must therefore be defined as "a story premise that presents itself as *sufficiently unique* and *commercially viable* at the same time." In other words, the premise when expressed as a hook or logline doesn't sound like one professionals have heard a hundred times in the past month. Instead, it immediately presents itself as relatively fresh, like a story publishers can market, perhaps even one that might make its way into television or film.

Let's look at examples from various genres (note they're "sufficiently unique"):

DRAGON RIPPER by Melanie Bacon (historical mystery) - The sister of Sherlock Holmes, anxious to prove herself and earn her rights in a man's world, teams with the daughter of Jack the Ripper to fight an ancient evil society threatening the streets of London with murder and mayhem.

GONE GIRL by Gillian Flynn (domestic thriller) - An unhappy and frustrated husband returns home to find his wife mysteriously missing, not knowing she has faked her disappearance and written false diary entries to implicate him in first degree murder.

DON QUIXOTE by Miguel de Cervantes (literary classic) - A delusional 50-year-old Spanish nobleman obsessed with chivalric notions asks a fat farmer to join him as his dutiful sidekick and the two venture forth to fight windmills.

THE HAND OF FATIMA by Ildefonso Falcones (historical fiction) - A young Moor torn between Islam and Christianity, scorned and tormented by both, struggles to bridge the two faiths by seeking common ground in the very nature of God.

THE BARTIMAEUS TRILOGY by Jonathan Stroud (young adult fantasy) - In seeking revenge on an elder magician who humiliated him, an apprentice mage unleashes a powerful Djinni who later joins him to confront a danger that threatens their entire world.

Again, strive to understand your genre before you initiate your [first steps towards writing a novel](#), and in this way, with a little wisdom and imagination, you've got a chance at inventing a high-concept that will sell to both New York and Hollywood.

We should all be so lucky!

Scimus Via.

LOG LINES OR HOOKS WITH CORE WOUNDS

HOOK OR LOG WITH CORE WOUND AND CONFLICT

Your hook line (also known as logline) is your first chance to get a New York or Hollywood professional interested in your novel. It can be utilized in your query to hook the agent into requesting the project. It is especially useful for those pitch sessions at conferences, lunches, in the elevator, or anywhere else. When a prospective agent or editor asks you what your book is about, your [high-concept](#) hook line is your answer. Writing one also encourages a realization of those primary elements that will make your novel into a work of powerful fiction.

The great novel, more often than not, comprises two stories: the exterior story or plot line, and an interior story focused primarily on the protagonist, one that defines and catalyzes her or his evolutionary arc throughout the novel. For example, a protagonist with a flaw or core wound that prevents her from achieving a worthwhile goal is forced to respond to a lifechanging event instigated by an antagonist, and in the process of responding to that lifechanging event (usually with the help of an ally) she is forced to overcome her flaw. In doing so, she becomes far more capable of achieving her goal in defiance of the antagonist.

The key elements of conflict, complication, and dramatic rising action are all pretty much related and serve to keep the reader's eyes fixated on your story. These days, serving up a big manuscript of quiet is a sure path to post-slush damnation. You need tension on the page, and the best way to accomplish this is to create conflict and complication in the plot, and narrative as well.

Elements of a Hook or Logline (examples below)

Character(s) - Who is the protagonist? What is his/her main goal? What is their CORE WOUND (see below)?

Conflict - Who is the antagonist? Is she/he implied or clear in the hook line? What obstacle do they create to frustrate the protagonist?

Distinction - What is the [primary unique element](#) of your story that makes it stand out?

Setting - for a novel, adding a little about the setting, time period, and possibly genre (if it's not obvious) is a VERY good idea.

Action - Your hook line should radiate verve and energy. Which hook as follows catches your interest more? A woman has an affair and runs off with her new beau, OR, a neglected wife begins a torrid affair with an ex-con, soon kidnapping her children to flee the state and join him in Vegas.

As for "core wounds," consider conscious motivation stimulated by both memory and subconscious pain. The "core wound" drives the character in certain unique ways, perhaps leads them on a journey to prove themselves. Resolution, if it ever comes, will make them happier, healthier, or more in tune with the world around them.

Every core wound is based on a basic knowledge that we are unacceptable as we are, so we have to adjust and change to be perceived as good.

Fundamental and popular core wounds include loss of a parent, a broken heart, an ultimate mistake (the character could spend a lifetime trying to make amends), a big secret (the revelation of which could ruin or harm the character), or perhaps a perceived terrible failure in the character's past (a primary desire forever denied by a moment's hesitation or a small mistake).

From *Psychology Today*:

"Core wounds tend to be things like a sense of not being enough, of being unlovable to a parent, of feeling stupid, dirty, unwanted, or ugly. No matter what your core wound may be, you can guarantee that your wound influences who you are and how you behave..."

"Every core wound is based on a basic knowledge that we are unacceptable as we are, so we have to adjust and change to be perceived as good. It influences our self-esteem and the very fabric of our thoughts."

Note that the sample hooks or loglines below are divided into two basic parts: the CORE WOUND and the resulting dramatic complication that drives conflict.

"The Hand of Fatima" by Ildefonso Falcones

A young Moor torn between Islam and Christianity, scorned and tormented by both, struggles to bridge the two faiths by seeking common ground in the very nature of God.

* The protagonist is scorned and tormented, thus the core wound, and as a result he seeks to fulfill an almost impossible task.

"Summer Sisters" by Judy Blume

After sharing a magical summer with a friend, a young woman must confront her friend's betrayal of her with the man she loved.

* The protagonist is betrayed by her friend and thus her core wound, and as a result she must take steps to reach a closure wherein conflict will surely result.

"The Bartimaeus Trilogy" by Jonathan Stroud

As an apprentice mage seeks revenge on an elder magician who humiliated him, he unleashes a powerful Djinni who joins the mage to confront a danger that threatens their entire world.

* Humiliated into a core wound by an elder magician, the story line erupts into a conflict with the entire world at stake.

Note it is a simple matter to ascertain the stakes in each case above: a young woman's love and friendship, the entire world, and harmony between opposed religions. **If you cannot make the stakes clear, the odds are you don't have any. Take note!**

THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF TRAGEDY—DRAMATIC ART PRIMER

Before the novel, there was drama...

Ancient dramatists understood the requirements of a good tale, one in which willful human beings engaged in major conflict, the goal being to possess or achieve something of value. A designated character, by virtue of position and personality, became the antagonist, naturally defying the efforts of the protagonist, or hero, to overcome. This basic conflict scenario resurfaces again and again in a myriad of forms, not only in life, but in novels, short stories, and of course, film and television. What makes true dramatic conflict so universally effective is not only its ability to create tension, suspense, and powerful characters, but its unique method for portraying the need for value in human existence.

Below we've created a drama primer with quotes ("European Theories of the Drama") from three important dramatists to illustrate the nature of the drama and its overwhelming relevancy to novel writing discussion here at WE. It's all pretty simple and brief, actually, but the major points are invaluable to the novel writing mindset.

KEY CONCEPTS: calamity, value in human life, universal human desire, dramatic art, essential character of drama, the "discovery," the wound, social conflict, the enlightenment of tragedy, tragic flaw, fear and pity.

J. W. Krutch

- Its action [drama] is usually, if not always, calamitous, because it is only in calamity that the human spirit has the opportunity to reveal itself triumphant over the outward universe which fails to conquer it.
- Tragedy reveals value in human life ... The death of a loved character, for example, reveals a value, something worth cherishing about life or humanity.
- Art should, at least in part, satisfy the universal human desire to find in the world some justice, some meaning, or at the very least, some recognizable order.
- The highest dramatic art is not achieved by pitting the most gigantic will against the most absolute necessity. The agonized struggle of a weak will, seeking to adjust itself to an inhospitable environment, may contain elements of poignant drama.
- The essential character of drama is social conflict in which the conscious will, exerted for the accomplishment of specific and understandable aims, is sufficiently strong to bring the conflict to a point of crisis.

– Drama should lead up to and away from a central crisis, and this crisis should consist in a discovery by the protagonist which has an indelible effect on his or her thought and emotion and completely alters his or her course of action.

Arthur Miller

For Arthur Miller, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his or her "rightful" position in society. "Sometimes he is the one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity."

It is this "tragic flaw," **this unwillingness to remain passive** in the face of what she or he conceives to be a challenge to personal dignity, that causes the protagonist to initiate the action of the tale, i.e., the rising drama. If the struggle of the protagonist is just, if she or he contests for a fair evaluation, then those conditions which deny this reveal a wrong, or an evil in the world. Thus, the "enlightenment of tragedy."

Pathos is achieved in struggling for a goal that cannot possibly be won, however possible it seemed in the beginning.

John Dryden

Insofar as the protagonist is concerned, the primary emotional reactions on the part of the reader are fear and pity. Fear during the course of the drama that the protagonist will meet a tragic fate, and pity for the protagonist at such time this occurs. Pity, or sympathy, cannot occur unless the character is respected. Thus, it is true concern for the protagonist that produces the highest emotion.

ANTAGONISTS PLOT THE NOVEL

Regardless of genre or century, antagonists remain the most memorable characters in literature.

Without them many of the best-selling novels of all time would simply cease to exist, their supporting beams cut away, the shell of remaining "story" quietly imploding to ignominy and self-publication.

Consider the impact on a scene, any scene as soon as the author moves the chess piece of antagonist onto the page. *The mere presence of a Javert from "Les Misérables," Assef from "The Kite Runner," or Nurse Ratched from "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," immediately energizes the environment. The narrative and dialogue literally crackle and groan with antagonist.*

What chances do you as a writer have of getting your novel manuscript commercially published, regardless of genre, if the story and narrative fail to meet reader demands for sufficient suspense, character concern, and conflict? Answer: none. But what major factor accounts for this debilitating condition? What precisely makes for a quiet and dull manuscript brimming with insipid characters and a story that cascades from chapter to chapter with tens of thousands of words, all combining irresistibly to produce an audible thudding sound in the mind?

Such a dearth of *Élan vital* in narrative and story, more often than not, results from the unwillingness of the writer to create a suitable antagonist who stirs and spices the plot hash. And let's make it clear what we're talking about. By "antagonist" we specifically refer to an actual fictional character, an embodiment of certain traits and motivations, and one who plays a significant role in catalyzing and driving the plot, or at bare minimum, in assisting to evolve the protagonist's character arc - and by default the story itself - by igniting complication(s) that the protagonist, and perhaps other characters, must face and attempt to resolve.

Writers new to the fiction game often shy away from creating an effective antagonist. If you are an editor, you see this time and time again. But why? Is it because they can't accept that a certain percentage of cruel and selfish humans are a reality of life? Is it because they live in an American bubble surrounded only by circumstances that reinforce their Rockwellian naivety? Do they not watch Sixty Minutes or even a shred of film footage portraying the latest repressions of the downtrodden by tyrannical government? Or is it because they don't understand the requirements of good dramatic fiction (no *good* guy without a *bad* guy, folks)? Or some combo thereof? Whatever. Though you would think after watching hundreds of films (even comedies), and reading God knows how many novels, they might catch on. And this doesn't mean they have to reinvent the black hat cowboy. We're talking about prime movers

of social conflict and supreme irritation that come in wide variety of forms, from relatively mild to pure evil.

Antagonists are often the most memorable characters in literature, without whom many of the best-selling novels of all time would simply cease to exist, their supporting beams cut away, the shell of remaining "story" quietly imploding to ignominy and self-publication. And what drives these antagonists? Whether revenge, zealotry, ruthless ambition, hubris or just plain jealousy, the overall effect on the narrative and plot in general is identical, i.e., a dramatic condition of complication (related to plot) and concern (related to character) infuses the story.

True drama demands they exist. Imagine [ANTIGONE](#) without the dictator to stir her into plot. And consider the impact on a scene, any scene, as soon as the author moves the particular chess piece of an antagonist onto the page. The mere presence of a Javert from *Les Misérables*, Assef from *The Kite Runner*, or even Marilla from *Anne of Green Gables*, immediately energizes the environment. The narrative and dialogue literally crackle and groan with antagonist.

Below we see five antagonists from very different novels--all multimillion sellers (and successful films)--also noting their vital roles in the development of the story. Consider them ranked from sufficiently annoying to *genuine super bastard*.

First, but not worst, we have Marilla Cuthbert from [ANNE OF GREEN GABLES](#). Author Lucy Maud Montgomery intended for Marilla to be a source of tension and obstacle for Anne, not a plot-swinging major like the four mentioned below. You might call her, an "antagonistic force" or temporary antagonist, remaining an irritant long enough to provide verve to the story and suitable growth arc to the protagonist.

Marilla begins as a woman with the personality of a falling guillotine. Only a barely perceptible sense of humor shows itself. Marilla's state of being clashes markedly with Anne's romanticism and imagination. She scolds and criticizes Anne, and like Javert of *Les Misérables*, is equally harsh on herself. Even when she finds herself agreeing with Anne's brazen thoughts, she rebukes herself, and whenever she feels a fleeting rush of affection, she quickly suffocates it. Later, she changes, but she played her role long enough to help keep the reader on the page while at the same time provoking the evolution of Anne's character.

And what decent discussion of antagonists in literature fails to comment on the role of Tom Buchanan in [THE GREAT GATSBY](#)? Tom falls fourth on the intensity list. He doesn't qualify as a dangerous zealot or a vengeful junkyard-zilla, but without Tom's endearing personality, Fitzgerald's novel of love and loss falls to pieces.

Playing in a love triangle that includes his wife, Daisy, and Jay Gatsby, the wealthy Buchanan displays himself time and time again as an arrogant and bullying schmuck, enough that by the time Fitzgerald needs us to cheer for Jay, and desire freedom for Daisy, we are more than

ready to do so. In comparison to Buchanan, Jay Gatsby, despite his faults, appears like a Lancelot, while Daisy, despite her shallowness, becomes the distressed damsel. If Buchanan did not exist, or if Fitzgerald had depicted him as a decent fellow, the faults of Jay and Daisy would have burned in high relief, and as readers, our sympathy for them would be zero. Fitzgerald's only chance would have been to render them both irrevocably detestable, as Emile Zola did for his murderous couple in [THERESE RAQUIN](#)--so much so that as a reader you turn the page in hopes they will both soon be wearing prison orange (or whatever color of rag they wore in those days).

Next comes the infamous Javert of [LES MISERABLES](#) by Victor Hugo. Unlike the first two antagonists, Javert's primary flaw might be defined as dogged zealotry, and at times, he behaves as hard on himself as on others. After the character Valjean, a victim of mistaken identity, appears in court and loses both his business and his position in Montreuil-sur-mer, he escapes long enough to hide his fortune. He spends more time in prison, working aboard a ship. Eventually he escapes again and retrieves the character Cosette from the evil Thenardiers. Then begins a decade of hiding, moving from place to place, always staying just ahead of the implacable Javert. Will Valjean save the farm and live to tell the story? Are we not concerned enough for brave Valjean that we want to know?

Regardless, no Javert equals far less misery, and what else? ... No story.

A close second to Assef below, for reasons of sheer despicableness, is good ole boy Bobby Ewell of [TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD](#) by Harper Lee. Shunned by the entire town, and terribly embittered, Ewell's *raison d'être* consists of being antagonistic towards every living thing. As Atticus Finch does his best to defend Tom, the rancor and hatefulness exhibited by Ewell at the trial manipulates the emotions and fears of those present, raising the heat on Tom to lynch mob intensity. Ewell is determined to see Tom hang, and following the trial, Mr. 666 stokes up his inner dragon for yet another bellow. He seeks revenge on those who desired a fair trial for Tom, and doing harm to Scout and Jem seems like a great way to destroy Atticus.

Without Bob Ewell, would you have ever heard of Harper Lee?

Rising like a bad moon to the bottom of the list is the human monster known as Assef, antagonist from [THE KITE RUNNER](#) by Khaled Hosseini, a novel that has sold millions of copies in dozens of languages. A vicious and bigoted childhood acquaintance of the likable characters, Amir and Hassan, he torments them whenever the mood strikes, but devolves to subhuman status upon attacking and raping Hassan. And at such time the Taliban gain control of Afghanistan, he gravitates to their culture, thus placing himself in a position to indefinitely torture others he considers inferior. As a brutal cherry on the sociopath milkshake, Assef turns the character Sohrab into his sex toy, and Amir must defeat Assef to bring Sohrab home.

Assef certainly doesn't possess the globe-spanning ambitions of Lord Voldemort from Harry Potter, but what if you handed this megalodon a magic wand? Power equals opportunity equals "enthusiasms" as Al Capone might say.

Bottom line here: writers of manuscript-length fiction must create and deploy a suitable antagonist, allowing them to catalyze the plot line and throw obstacles in the way of the protagonist and other characters, or at least become an "antagonistic force" of some type, like Marilla Cuthbert, a source of tension and character development. Or perhaps, you need maximum verve in the novel and wish to create characters who assume the roles of both a Marilla and a Bob. Whatever you do though, plan to make them an integral part of the story, or rather, allow them room they need to define the story.

COMING OF THE "AGON"

First and foremost...

The aspiring author must conceive and plan the steps of central conflict, the major source of drama that drives through the core of the novel from beginning to end and which zeniths with an important climax, the "falling action" of denouement to follow. This is true for nearly every genre-- thrillers, suspense, science fiction, fantasy, historical, etc.--with the exception of the most literary of works.

Conflict, tension, complication, drama--all basically related and serving to prevent a reader's eyes from straying. Since the early days of literary time, serving up a big manuscript of quiet is a sure path to damnation. So what is the best way to prevent this? What is the first and most important structural step to avoid quiet and fixate the reader?

Consider "conflict" divided into three parts, all of which you should ideally have present in the novel. First, the primary conflict which drives through the core of the work from beginning to end and which zeniths with an important climax (falling action and denouement to follow). Next, secondary conflicts or complications which can take various social forms (anything from a vigorous love subplot to family issues to turmoil with fellow characters). Finally, those inner conflicts the major characters must endure and resolve--which may or may not be directly related to the main plot line (but at least an important one should be).

At the B.C. dawn of drama, conflict was known as the *agon* (the central contest - according to Aristotle). In order to hold the interest of the audience (or reader), a protagonist must strive to overcome an opposing force (the antagonist), thus creating a primary conflict--whatever form that may take. The outcome of the contest cannot be known in advance, and according to later critics such as Plutarch, the struggle should ideally be "ennobling" in some manner, even if death follows. Is that always true these days?

Since the early days of literary time, serving up a big manuscript of quiet is a sure path to damnation.

Regardless, first and foremost, the aspiring author must therefore conceive and plan the primary conflict, the major source of drama that drives through the core of the novel from beginning to end and which zeniths with an important climax, the

"falling action" of denouement to follow. This is true for every genre--thrillers, suspense, science fiction, fantasy, historical, etc.--the most literary of works perhaps being an exception.

Consider the nature of conflict as presented in the novel hook lines below:

The Hand of Fatima (historical fiction)

A young Moor torn between Islam and Christianity, scorned and tormented by both, struggles to bridge the two faiths by seeking common ground in the very nature of God.

Summer's Sisters (women's fiction)

After sharing a magical summer with a friend, a young woman must confront her friend's betrayal of her with the man she loved.

The Bartimaeus Trilogy (young adult fantasy)

As an apprentice mage seeks revenge on an elder magician who humiliated him, he unleashes a powerful Djinni who joins the mage to confront a danger that threatens their entire world.

The above diverse examples define classic drama that creates conflict with real stakes. Note that it is fairly easy to ascertain the stakes in each case above: a young woman's love and friendship, the entire world, and harmony between opposed religions. Note too that each of these hook lines contains what we refer to as the CORE WOUND. Important! Especially if you intend to become commercially published.

In conclusion, if you cannot make the stakes of your novel clear via a properly written hook line, the odds are you don't have any.

SIX ACT TWO GOAL STRUCTURE

What makes for good drama is a constant.

To begin, we combine Siegal's "nine act structure - two goal" screenplay (very much like the Syd Field three act except that the "reversal" from Field's structure joins "Act 5" in Siegal's version) with the Field classic three act. The Two-Goal Structure, Siegal maintains, creates more dynamic plot tension due to the insertion of PLOT REVERSAL later in the story. We concur.

NOTE: "Plot Point" is defined here as a major occurrence that emphatically changes the course of the story. In the genre novel as a whole, we see three to five major plot points depending on various factors: a first PP that begins the rising action, second PP defined by the first major reversal, a third PP defined by a possible second major reversal, a climax PP, and a theoretical PP residing in the denouement, i.e., we think the story is going to resolve a certain way after climax, but a surprise happens that resolves it in a way not expected.

Algonkian Writer Conferences developed the Six Act Two-Goal novel planning outline for all writers of novel-length dramatic fiction, regardless of genre, as well as narrative non-fiction. The point is to utilize a tightly plotted act structure, similar to that used by screenplay writers, to effectively brainstorm competitive and suspenseful plots for the genre novel (fantasy, SF, YA/MG, mystery, thriller, crime, historical, women's fiction, etc.). Upmarket or literary fiction utilizing strong plot lines also benefit (see examples below).

In the opening of a story ignited directly or indirectly by the antagonist, the protagonist(s) are focused to embark on their primary task, challenge, journey, or struggle (first major plot point), and thus follows a "first major goal" to win that struggle, thereby initiating the second act of the story (Syd Field model); however, by the middle of the second act or later, the protagonist(s) realize they have pursued the wrong goal. A second goal is now needed. The protagonist(s) are therefore forced to alter their course and struggle to accomplish a new and presumably more productive means-to-an-end.

To put it simply, storming the walls didn't work and now the Trojan Horse solution is needed. Finding the wizard wasn't sufficient, now the little band of heroes must steal the Wicked Witch's broom. Acquiring a reasonably priced rest home for her mentally unstable father failed, now the impoverished daughter must prepare a room in her basement. Attempting to flee got his knees pulped by a sledge hammer, now the captive author must connive a more subtle and deceptive means of escape.

🚩 The fusion of the Siegal and Field models we outline below thus becomes a tighter six act model for the novel or narrative nonfiction. However, before you begin using the SATG, take note that *your most important elements* to sketch and produce from the onset are your:

- [High Concept Story](#)
- [Protagonist Hook](#) and [Core Wound Defined](#) (+ [General "P" Definition](#))
- [Antagonist](#)
- [The Novel "Agon"](#)
- [Rich and Potent Setting](#)

NOTE: we use examples of novels, stories and films below that will likely be familiar to the widest range of readers. These include **ANTIGONE, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, THE HUNGER GAMES, HUCKLEBERRY FINN, ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, GLADIATOR, THE GREAT GATSBY, WAR OF THE WORLDS, CATCHER IN THE RYE, CITIZEN KANE, HARRY POTTER, DA VINCI CODE, THE MALTESE FALCON, THE SUN ALSO RISES, COLD MOUNTAIN, THE WIZARD OF OZ, and MISERY**. But make no mistake, the rules governing the art of fiction, or good storytelling, remain steady regardless of genre, and have pretty much been fixed since Apollonius of Rhodes wrote about the Argonauts. And if you happen to be one of those writers who believes that writing a novel "your way" or simply "from the heart" or "only with my character's direction" means avoiding or denying the critical elements of commercial fiction and good storytelling found below, it's best to move on quickly from this page and seek the Elysium of your desire. All best wishes to you.

ACT ZERO

Backstory to Set Up the Tale

🚩 You must carefully forge your backstory before you begin. Understand the issues below. This does not directly appear in the story except by use of flashback and via other methods to [DELIVER EXPOSITION](#):


- Writers set up the disaster that is coming in the story.
- Forces need to already be in motion in order to create conflict for the characters.
- Usually the emphasis for the backstory will be on the antagonist, but even protagonists carry baggage into the story.
- Years and years of planning might have gone into the collision course.

ACT ONE (Page 1 - 30+)

Issues of The Hook: Protagonist Intro - Antagonist First? - Inciting Incident - Extreme Importance of Setting - Establishment of Characters - The MacGuffin - In Media Res - Crucial Sympathy Factors - Something Bad Happens - Exposition - Theme?

What needs to be done from the start? Why is the hook of Act I critical to this novel and to being taken seriously as a writer?

- The author showcases their [BEST PROSE AND NARRATIVE SKILLS](#). Opening scenes clearly use show-don't-tell effects to render the protagonist and major characters as necessary. Scenes themselves have clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Point of view is rendered masterfully on both a distant and close level. Narrative and story progression don't feel overly derivative, but rather fresh and suspenseful, definitely engaging. 🚨 And btw, Algonkian Writer Conferences recommend you consider utilizing the [SCENE STORYBOARD GUIDE](#) at this point to sketch important scenes ahead of time (crucial).
- Act I foreshadows the primary external conflict or complication (related to the protagonist goal in ACT II) to come.
- [SYMPATHY FACTORS](#) in the first 20 pages, or fewer, are critical for connecting the reader with your protagonist. We must see the character playing out their role in active scenes. We learn about them, their strengths and weaknesses, idiosyncrasies and flaws, and we learn these things by virtue of their actions, various internal concerns and conflict, and in the way other characters react to them in real time (vital--set up [SECONDARY CHARACTERS](#) whose role, at least in part, it is to reveal the traits and inclinations of the protagonist).
- 🚨 Conflict begins on one or two of three levels (primary story conflict, inner conflict(s), and interpersonal conflict). [THREE LEVELS OF CONFLICT](#).
- 🚨 Setting is established (and it must be one that works [TO CREATE VERVE AND OPPORTUNITIES](#)).
- IN MEDIA RES may be employed here ("beginning in the middle"), ie, beginning where it most benefits the story, at a point of action, turmoil, or during a lively or curious event, etc.

- Something bad, irritating or tension-causing usually happens (Chief Bromden gets electro-shocked in the CUCKOO'S NEST or Jake debates his impotency with his ex-girlfriend in THE SUN ALSO RISES) or has just happened (murder victim found in the mayor's plum tree).
- An INCITING INCIDENT may take place that sets in motion events leading to the FIRST MAJOR PLOT POINT (see Act II below). In the movie, GLADIATOR, Commodus murders his Emperor father (Inciting Incident) which inevitably leads to the Emperor's general, Maximus, realizing the murder. He defies Commodus and faces execution (Plot Point) as a result. In King's MISERY, the author protagonist gets in a car accident and is rendered helpless (Inciting Incident). Kathy Bates finds him and imprisons him in her house (Plot Point). In ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, McMurphy is sent to the asylum as a result of a fight (Inciting Incident) and later bets the inmates that he can shake up the Big Nurse and not get sent to the shock shop (Plot Point).
-  The author cleverly [PARCELS IN EXPOSITION in a variety of ways](#), via narrative, dialogue, characters, flashbacks, etc. NOTE that all major exposition must be delivered before or during the scene wherein the FIRST MAJOR PLOT POINT takes place. All information necessary to understand the story going forward must be known. Pardon the cliché, but exposition horse before the plot point cart at all times. In THE SUN ALSO RISES, Jake delivers the final round of exposition about his love, Brett Ashley, to his rival, Robert Cohn, just as Robert is making it known he wants Brett for himself. Jake reveals Brett's background and future plans (Exposition), and Robert indicates his plans for pursuing her (Plot Point).
- [THE MACGUFFIN](#), if any, might well be introduced or foreshadowed as an object (or even goal) which catalyzes the plot line, or at least assists creates a source of mystery or tension (THE MALTESE FALCON or the mysterious head scar on HARRY POTTER).
- Something called THEME might well get a foothold here. Does the author have a message or a bigger point she or he wishes to portray in the plot, or by means of the character struggles, their conflicts and arcs, or perhaps by means of the setting itself? All the above? And theme doesn't have to be the exclusive province of literary or upmarket literature. Regardless, here are some [great examples of theme from the dark classics](#). Please read and consider writing a "theme statement" for your own novel. It can't help but inform your work and make it richer and more relevant to the reader.

❗ The [ANTAGONIST AND HIS OR HER MINIONS](#) (if any), are introduced to a meaningful degree, along with more characters as necessary, or sidekicks of the protagonist.

Note to Writer: don't create a minor or major character who doesn't somehow play a role in the development of the plot(s) and/or the protagonist arc. And they must *create a presence* on the stage of the page, either by virtue of their personality, position, attitude of the moment, or all of the above. You must consider and weigh and sketch each character carefully. Imagine they are all in a film. Will they seem gratuitous or vital to you? Sufficiently energetic or too quiet?

The [PRIMARY ANTAGONIST](#) might remain a mystery (Lord Voldemort in HARRY POTTER), or be introduced first (the Big Nurse in CUCKOO'S NEST or the Opus Dei albino in DA VINCI CODE or the Wicked Witch in WIZARD OF OZ) to produce dramatic concern once protagonist accepts the goal.

NOTE: The above is a very important dramatic effect. If you understand to a meaningful degree the power of the antagonist, whoever she or he may be, *then instinctive concern for the protagonist enters the reader's mind* as soon as she or he accepts the goal in ACT TWO (see below).

ACT TWO (Page 10+ - 50+)

More Hook: Write the Story Statement - Establishment of Major Goal - Primary External Conflict or Complication Begins - First Major Plot Point and Plot Line - Protagonist Psychology - Rising Action

What's the mission? The goal? What must be done? Created? Accomplished? Defeated?

Defy the dictator of the city and bury brother's body (ANTIGONE)? Place a bet that will shake up the asylum (ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST)? Do whatever it takes to recover lost love (THE GREAT GATSBY)? Save the farm and live to tell the story (COLD MOUNTAIN)? Find the wizard and a way home to Kansas (WIZARD OF OZ)? Note that all of these are books with strong antagonists who drive or catalyze the plot line going forward.

Note to Writer: If you can't write a simple story statement like above (which builds into your hook/log line) then you don't have a work of commercial fiction. Keep in

mind that the PLOT LINE is an elaboration of the statement, of the primary complication. Also, look over the brief summaries of films and novels in the [SAMPLE LOG LINES PDF](#). These contain the simple statement, but more elaborated into a short hook.

📌 Necessary Preparation Steps for the Author: (members utilize the AAS technique guides)

- Write the story statement. Make it clear.
- Brainstorm necessary complications, reversals, and conflicts on all levels.
- Write a short synopsis to reveal the major elements and clarify.
- Sketch the plot line(s) with notes on the proper settings.
- Write the hook/log line and listen to how it sounds.

The FIRST MAJOR PLOT POINT therefore takes place that establishes your protagonist's overall goal. In other words, the course of the action or plot changes, often drastically, and usually with a change of setting. Success seems possible.

The RISING ACTION of the story truly begins with the launch of the primary external conflict or complication. A means to achieve the goal is decided. The work begins, the war begins, the feet hit the bricks, the plan to reunite the lovers is initiated. The graph has begun to rise and it won't stop until after the CLIMAX.

In other words, the protagonist commits to the goal(s). But why? What is the motivation? What are the internal and external issues involved? She or he may go willingly into the situation because the alternative is worse, or to help an apparent victim. She or he may undertake the task not realizing the true dangers or complications ahead, out of ignorance. Another character might trick or push the protagonist into situation.

ACT THREE (Page 50+ - 250+)

Plot Line Evolution: Minor Reversals - Complications - Three Levels of Conflict - Major Reversal Time - Plot Points - The Martians are Winning

The dramatic pursuit of the goal evolves.

❗ The FIRST GOAL (the means to the end) within the master goal (the final desired result) is pursued (see STORY STATEMENT above), but this will eventually lead your protagonist to a firewall or dead end, or what is known as the MAJOR REVERSAL in the parlance of our times (Dorothy gets to Oz, but no Kansas until the broomstick is fetched). Members should utilize the AAS craft and technique guide modules.

NOTE: This act pulls out all the stops to create tension, angst, conflict, and issues for the protagonist and appropriate characters to resolve:

- MINOR REVERSALS TAKE PLACE: protagonist(s) struggle, perhaps score small victories of one sort or another, but these are almost always reversed. For example, McMurphy organizes the inmates and theatrically pretends to watch the World Series in defiance of the Big Nurse, but she makes her will known later and punishes him (ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST). The Wicked witch makes Dorothy and company take a poppy snooze right on the verge of OZ, and later, the Guard at OZ tells them no one gets in, no way, no how!
- MINOR COMPLICATIONS TAKE PLACE: in other words, things happen that have a notable negative physical or emotional impact on the protagonist or those he/she cares about. These are not as strong as minor reversals, but action must be taken to overcome them. McMurphy takes the inmates out for a boat ride, but conflict at the dock with the boat captain and a need to make a quick escape takes place (ONE FLEW OVER). Meanwhile, Scarecrow hassles with crows, Tin Man is rusted, Lion overcompensates for cowardice, and Witch throws fireball. And know that "minor complications" can be fairly serious. In [WAR OF THE WORLDS](#) the major character had to bludgeon an insane curate to prevent him from giving away their hiding place to the Martians.

Whether upmarket or genre, MINOR COMPLICATIONS combine with MINOR REVERSALS to continually spike the narrative and story. It can't be easy for the protagonist and/or her companions. If too easy, you inevitably build to classic *mid-novel sag*. Tension runs out, wheels spin, and an inexperienced writer pads the middle with lumps of dull narrative and quiet situation. Ugh. "Best Wishes" rejection letter on the way. Off to a minor eBook publisher who will publish you if you have more than 100 Facebook members.

❗ Note: as a bonus, complications and reversals also assist greatly in maintaining all three levels of conflict (see above).

Also, prior to climax, we may have a smart and strong reversal or complication

which serves to introduce a twist or an unexpected event in the story (sometimes called a MIDPOINT CLIMAX).o

Pinch Points Reveal and Reinforce the Antagonist Aims

Pinch Points: an example or reminder of the nature and implications of the antagonistic force that is not filtered by the hero's experience. We see it for ourselves in a direct way as a scene that provides a glimpse into the villain's mind. The antagonist reaffirms his or her goal to delay, injure, stop, crush, or kill the protagonist. The intent is manifest and the concern for the protagonist is elevated.

There should be two and situated near the 3/8 mark and the 3/5 mark in the manuscript. In ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST a pinch point takes place at the 3/5 mark when the Big Nurse informs the assembled hospital staff just what kind of cruel fate is in store for McMurphy.

❗ Crisis Point or MAJOR REVERSAL = Second Major Plot Point

We've already noted what happened to Dorothy. In Stephen King's MISERY, after the captive author protagonist has his knees sledge-hammered by Kathy Bates (God, that hurt!) to prevent him from trying to escape again, he knows he's been using the wrong means to pursue the master goal (ie, to escape). He must now reboot and choose another path, a second goal to achieve the master goal (escape). To accomplish, the author conceives a new plan of theatrical cooperation with his captor, the new goal within the master goal being to trick her into passivity and lure her into a trap whereupon he can knock her senseless.

In general, at this point, backstory issues, mysterious strangers, twists and turns and events all point out that your protagonist is on the wrong track, and the antagonist graph is rising. The Martians are conquering Earth and the Big Nurse is slowly tightening a noose around McMurphy's neck.

Once more, success seems possible.

❗ INTERNAL CONFLICT IS ON THE INCREASE ALSO. Of course, and so is interpersonal conflict. All three levels of conflict are rising! But back to the protagonist for a moment ... Why should she or he turn back now? Why doesn't he/she? What's at stake? Is there a DILEMMA? What makes your protagonist realize the unavoidable importance of her/his original goal? What gives it new meaning? Does someone die? Do the stakes raise? Does reputation suffer or

threaten to diminish? We must have an answer. This is true drama. Storytelling at its finest.

ACT FOUR (Page 200+ - 375+)

Second Major Plot Point - New Rising Action and Suspense - Conflict Levels - Climax - Victory at a Cost

🔔 Opens with the SECOND MAJOR PLOT POINT as protagonist pursues the new and truly productive goal (the author of MISERY decides to write the novel Kathy wants in order to enact his new scheme to escape). The characters get that final clue, the missing piece to the puzzle, which allows them to make the necessary changes to successfully complete the plot line.

- Success seems more possible than ever despite MINOR REVERSALS OR COMPLICATIONS which may continue to take place.
- The final clue or missing piece to the puzzle is found.
- Possible surprise or twist takes place (the traitor is revealed--or this is reserved for CLIMAX or DENOUEMENT)
- All three conflict levels continue to build, however, some interpersonal conflicts may be resolved by this point.

This builds to CLIMAX, and the protagonist will usually win out over the antagonist, but victory or success must come at a price (such as the death of a favorite character: the sheriff in MISERY is killed by Kathy just before climax).

🔔 Climax should be the most intense plot point in the story, but the intensity and nature of that intensity depends on the needs of the genre and the nature of the story. While the climax is the moment when the decisive event occurs, plot development is a process that occurs throughout your novel (see above). As we've noted, the reader must see how main character behaves at the start of the novel, and understand how her/his nature is challenged by the main goal. In HUCKLEBERRY FINN, Huck thinks about going against morality of the day and writing Miss Watson where the Phelps family is holding Jim. Instead, he follows his conscience and he and Tom free Jim, and Tom is shot in the leg in the attempt (victory at a cost).

You can also have a double climax. For example, in HARRY POTTER, when the heroes find and escape with a magical horcrux, that's a climax, but a climax is when Harry

finally defeats the chief antagonist, Lord Voldemort.

After the climax, you must show the reader the outcome, and how it is good or bad for the main character. Important!

ACT FIVE (Page 300+ - 400+)

Denouement - Loose Ends Wrapped - Theme Wrap - Conclusions - Resolutions - A Final Surprise?

Denouement wherein all loose ends resolved, a final surprise perhaps, hint of the sequel perhaps, but readers on their way with the emotions the writer wants them to feel (Fitzgerald actually saved final exposition regarding Gatsby for the denouement following Gatsby's death).

Internal Resolution and With Theme or No

What does the protagonist and possibly other characters learn as a result of climax? How does this manifest itself going forward? How are things different? How are they changed, especially the protagonist?

📌 From SPARKNOTES, we have a slice of theme from TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD:

The most important theme of this novel is the book's exploration of the moral nature of human beings--that is, whether people are essentially good or essentially evil. The novel approaches this question by dramatizing Scout and Jem's transition from a perspective of childhood innocence, in which they assume that people are good because they have never seen evil, to a more adult perspective, in which they have confronted evil and must incorporate it into their understanding of the world.

As a result of this portrayal of the transition from innocence to experience, one of the book's important subthemes involves the threat that hatred, prejudice, and ignorance pose to the innocent: people such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are not prepared for the evil that they encounter, and, as a result, they are destroyed.

So we beat on, boats against the current...

PROTAGONIST SYMPATHY FACTORS

Have you ever won a Pulitzer for literature?

If not, then proceed.

Look at the percentage of novels on the shelf right now that concentrate on creating a character the reader will become concerned with immediately. Quite a few? A novel hook with an interesting, unique, and sympathetic character will make agents sit up and take notice. This is vital to avoiding a rejection slip. A few classic examples of what we're talking about as follows below. Note that all points listed appear in the first 10 to 15 pages.

"The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" by Mark Haddon

Christopher John Francis Boone

- A first-person narrative from an autistic 15-year-old protagonist: "My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,057."
- He finds a dead dog with a garden fork sticking out of it and describes the scene in a detached, emotionless manner, until: "I had been hugging the dog for four minutes when I heard screaming." So this autistic child has a heroic capacity for caring and sympathy. He tells us he likes dogs because they are faithful and "they do not tell lies because they cannot talk." This gives us a sense that the character is moral--which becomes all the more poignant and sympathetic when he is unjustly accused by police of killing the dog.
- He decides to write a murder mystery about the incident. When his teacher Siobhan suggests that a murder mystery about a human might be more compelling, the boy protests that some dogs are cleverer and more interesting than some people. Steve, for example, who comes to the school on Thursdays, needs help to eat his food and could not even fetch a stick ... Thus the protagonist is revealed as a keen and objective observer of the world around him, and in hilarious fashion.

Summary

Talented and unique - Possesses a handicap - Shows compassion towards others -

Possesses a moral sense - Undertakes a task that requires brains and bravery

"The First Five People You Meet in Heaven" by Mitch Albom

Eddie

Eddie is a wounded war veteran, an old man who has lived, in his mind, an uninspired life. His job is fixing rides at a seaside amusement park. The protagonist is old and infirm, yet polite and optimistic.

- As a kid, he fought to protect his older brother. Scrappy, brave, and protective.
- He likes kids, and they like him. He gives them candy and makes animal figures for them from pipe cleaners. These children are not the offspring of relatives or friends. They are kids that know him from the amusement park where he works. It is hard not to be sympathetic toward someone who likes kids and is kind to them.
- He is generous. He gives his last two \$20 bills to a dishwasher so the man can buy something for his wife.
- . On his 83rd birthday, a tragic accident kills him as he tries to save a girl from a falling cart.

Summary

Possesses a handicap - Protects the weak/shows courage - Generosity and compassion towards others - Brave and self-sacrificing

"The Secret Life of Bees" by Sue Monk Kidd

Lily Owen

Anecdote in fictive past: When Lily was four, she witnessed a fight between her mother and her father and intervened when she saw a gun in her mother's hand. In the scuffle of the fight, the gun went off; Lily was blamed for her mother's death.

Anecdote in fictive present: Lily awakens her father to see the spectacle of swarming bees in her room. When they arrive in her room the bees have vanished and her father, a mean and uncaring man, threatens to severely punish her if she ever again awakens him to anything less than finding the house in flames.

Physical descriptions: Lily's hair is black, like her mother's, but is cowlicky and she looks unkempt because she's never had a woman in her life who could guide her in how to take proper care of herself. She's a fourteen-year old white girl, has almost no chin, but does have Sophia Loren eyes, even though this attribute isn't enough to get her noticed by even the loser-guys. She wears ill-fitting clothes she makes for herself in home etc. class at school because her father won't let her buy any new clothes.

Personal Attributes: She's clever, imaginative and bright. The swarm of bees fascinates, rather than frightens her. One of her teachers tells her that she's very intelligent and she shouldn't settle for any career short of being a professor or writer. This sets her to reevaluating possibilities in her life because, prior to this, her highest aspiration had been to attend beauty school and become a hairdresser.

Summary

Brave and self-sacrificing - Victim of an antagonistic personality - Pitiable due to struggle to compensate for abusive antagonist - Possesses special gifts

"The Life of Pi" by Yann Martel

Piscine Molitor Patel

General Background: He was raised in Pondicherry, India, the small, formerly French-occupied section of India, at a zoo where his father was founder, owner, director, head of a staff of fifty-three, and which Piscine viewed as "paradise on earth." He was educated at the University of Toronto where he double-majored in religious studies and zoology.

General Concern: The first two lines in the book, bring instant concern for him: "My suffering left me sad and gloomy," and goes on to say, "Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought me back to life."

Attitude toward Life: He has suffered a great deal in life, and reports and he has

learned to adjust to the pain of being alive by accepting both the folly of success and the slight one feels when success slips from reach. He concludes that the reason death always hovers nearby is because of its love for life and we get the sense he loves life. He appreciates the abundance of resources he has access to and we're to assume this is a love cultivated through great deprivation.

Personal Attributes: He's a hard-working, determined person who is very bright, very observant, and infinitely patient. He was the only one in his family who learned how to swim, but he was determined to learn because of his great respect for the man who wanted to teach him and who was responsible for his name, which he shares with a famous Paris swimming pool. He excelled in school and while gathering data for his degree in zoology, he concentrated on observing the sloth in its natural habitat.

Victim of "suffering" - A fighter - Introspective/observant/wise - Unique personality

"Bel Canto" by Ann Patchett

Roxane Coss

Special Attributes: Roxane is a gifted opera diva. She possesses a voice of crystalline clarity so richly textured everyone who hears her sing can instantly appreciate the wonder and beauty of her vocal talent. It matters little the background of the listener. They may have come to her performance with a well-trained ear or they may have no more understanding of music than can be gathered from a life spent slogging through the mud of a harsh jungle environment; they may have been listening to music all their long-lived lives, or they may be young children staying up past their bedtimes; they may be women, men or adolescents—no matter, gratitude for having heard her is universal among those who have had the privilege of hearing her perform.

Reactions of Others: Men desire her. All of the men in attendance at the concert long to be included in the kiss given her in the dark by her accompanist. One of the most powerful businessmen in Japan has flown half-way around the world to be in her presence even as he dislikes traveling, dislikes celebrating his birthday and the occasion is his birthday, and dislikes being with large groups of people he doesn't know, which is the current venue. Over the five years that he's been aware of her talent, he has sought out her performances around the world. She obviously has a

magnetic pull on people. Her accompanist willingly places himself as a shield between her and the invading guerrillas. Not until he is poked with guns does he relinquish his protective covering of her body.

Physical Attributes: On the floor, her hair spread out around her in such a wondrous array, each terrorist makes a point of walking past her just to look at her beautiful hair. Her perfume is delicate yet intoxicating, again noticeable by the guerrilla soldiers even on this night when the air is pungent with the near-presence of death.

Personal Attributes: She is generous with her talent and offers to sing in the dark before the assembled audience becomes aware of the horror of the circumstance they're in. As she lies on the floor, she removes the hairpins from her hair and places them on her stomach in case others can use them as weapons, giving us a sense that she is also a bit brave, another sympathetic character trait.

Summary

Unique talent - Magnetic - Cherished by Others - Generous - Courageous

"Third Degree" by Patterson and Gross

San Francisco Homicide Lieutenant Lindsay Boxer

- The protagonist is a successful woman in a traditionally male occupation (homicide detective), and she has earned the respect of her male colleagues.
- She owns a dog and talks to it as if it were a roommate. She uses her body to shield the dog from harm in a dangerous situation.
- She is brave; she goes into a burning building to save strangers. She risks her life to save a young child.

Summary

Strong and Independent - Loves Dogs - Caring and Courageous

SETTINGS ARE 60%

When considering your novel, whether taking place in a contemporary urban world or on a distant magical planet in Andromeda, you must first sketch the best overall setting and sub-settings for your story.

Wasn't it F. Scott Fitzgerald who said something like, "Setting is 60% of what makes your novel stand out"? A great setting maximizes opportunities for interesting characters, circumstances, and complications. Therefore, with a dash of unleashed imagination and a dose of sufficient research, nothing provides a stronger novel foundation than a great setting. Fact. One of the best-selling contemporary novels in recent memory, THE HUNGER GAMES, is driven by the circumstances of the setting, and the characters are a product of that unique environment as well as the plot.

But even if you're not writing SFF, the choice of setting is just as important, perhaps even more so. If you must place your upmarket story in a sleepy little town in Maine winter, then choose a setting within that town that maximizes opportunities for verve and conflict, for example, a bed and breakfast stocked to the ceiling with odd characters who combine to create comical, suspenseful, dangerous or difficult complications or subplot reversals that the bewildered and sympathetic protagonist must endure and resolve while he or she is perhaps engaged in a bigger plot line: restarting an old love affair, reuniting with a family member, starting a new business, etc. And don't forget that non-gratuitous sex goes a long way, especially for American readers.

And not only must you choose the overall best setting, but you must consider sub-settings that come into play for particular scenes. For example, if your overall choice of setting is India, you have it made. You might choose a sub-setting for a scene that includes a particular village wherein a large snake is sleeping in a tree and thus creating an absurd spectacle in the form of an ongoing conflict between Muslims and Hindus over the spiritual meaning of the snake's behavior.

As noted above, a great setting maximizes the potential for great characters, unique circumstances, and story complications of one kind or another.

Of if your character is in Scotland on a cold and dull day, place him or her in a scene during a "blackening of the bride" ceremony wherein the future bride is trashed and sloshed with everything from tar to Scotch whiskey. Will your character have any internal issues with this? Yes? Whatever creates inner or interpersonal conflict is a

bonus too, don't forget.

If nothing else, create a setting or sub-settings that assist with the development of conflict between characters. If your character is an office worker in an otherwise stereotypical setting, place them in a special surprise meeting with certain types of ambitious, reckless or sociopathic personalities who combine to ignite an unavoidable moral dilemma.

Set it up so that the tension crackles. Setting fixtures don't have to be inanimate!

By the Way, Does Your Setting Possess the Following Qualities?

Dynamic Evolution Over Time

One might quibble over the difference here between "set-up" and "setting"... Suffice to say, the author chooses a setting (a time and a place) that comports with a plot allowing for story enhancing social, political, cultural, or character-focused evolution in the fictional environment. Consider a novel filled with quarreling and toppling kingdoms (GAME OF THRONES), or a terrible secret uncovered that generates a killing machine to grind one man down (THE FIRM), or the coming downfall of a whole way of life for millions (THE UNVANQUISHED).

A New World of Wonder

Publishers like it when your novel takes readers into a world they're unfamiliar with. The freshness of new places, climes, cultures, people and things creates an irresistible draw for many. Witness the popularity of EAT, PRAY, LOVE. Would it have been so engaging if the character had not traveled to exotic climes, but instead ate, pray, and loved in Podunk, Idaho? THE KITE RUNNER is another example. A whole new world, way of life, characters we could never have met otherwise.

The Potential for Energy

As noted above, a great setting maximizes the potential for great characters, unique circumstances, and story complications of one kind or another. Now, any idea what might best suit as an example for this category? How about THE POISONWOOD BIBLE?

An overzealous Baptist minister drags his wife and four daughters deep into the heart of the Congo on a mission to save the "unenlightened souls" of Africa. During this time, Belgium is about to give the country its independence, and a popular election will be held to select the new ruler. A purge of Westerners is expected once

independence is won. All of this coupled with the presence of superstition and conflicting customs creates a dangerous and weirdly dynamic setting for the American mission family. Consider, would anyone have read this novel if the author, Barbara Kingsolver, had set the story in Canada? Perhaps, but the color and energy would be lost, certainly polar opposite of what Kingsolver's setting, in that time and place, allowed.

Now, please go back over your settings and scenes and rewrite accordingly. You can't have too much energy or tension on the page. Be as aggressive with your work as possible.

Brilliant Fiction Narrative in Four Stages

From Drab or Quiet to Can't Put It Down.

What's one of the best ways to ensure a publishing contract? Master the art of writing fiction narrative, of course. But what does that mean, and are you sure you know the difference between relatively quiet narrative and cinematic, verve-packed narrative? Are you setting your standards high enough? Are you aware of the level of craft and attention to detail necessary to make you into a great writer? And btw, why shouldn't you strive to be a great writer? All it takes is work.

🔴 New writers set standards for themselves while often remaining ignorant of just how high their standards must be raised in order to become as competitive as possible in the current literary or commercial book marketplace.

Rather than tell, let's show examples of how to take reasonably good fiction narrative and transform it by making it as competitive and energetic as possible. We will add imagery, metaphor, emotion, more active verbs, and better sentence structure. And BTW, for this exercise we're going to channel Ray Bradbury and Eudora Welty at the same time in order to reach a final stage of *pretty damn good*. But don't let this freak you. They learned the hard way, took their lumps like everyone else, and rewrote and rewrote and rewrote *just like everyone else*.

Let's begin with a hypothetical chunk of speculative fiction narrative. The imagination needs a boost and the passive voice is obvious. No emotions or tension either, therefore characters flatter than they should be. The writer could also benefit by injecting a bit more meaningful detail.

THE ORIGINAL CHUNK

(Good enough for Tor.Com)

Senna and Father usually set the traps together, because it was she who had the knack of following animals to their habitat. Father was blind to it--he could never see the trails that marked the passage of his future meal. But to Senna, it was, and always had been, part of what her eyes could see. The newer the path, the easier she could see it.

As a toddler, Senna had quickly learned what the signs meant: little leavings, like drops of water. Besides the wetness and the small size of the drops, there was a sort of colorful glimmer to each one. She could tell at a glance the difference between a human and an animal, or between the different species.

MORE IMAGINATION AND COMPLEXITY ADDED

(a second enhancement draft, good enough for authors with a huge fan base)

Senna and Father usually set traps together, because it was Senna who possessed the knack of seeing paths the animals always used.

Father was blind to it. He could never view the thin shimmering trails in the air that marked the passage of living creatures through the world. But to Senna, it was, and always had been, part of what her eyes could see. The newer the path, the bluer the shimmer; older ones were green or waned to yellow; the truly ancient ones tended toward red.

As a toddler, Senna had quickly learned what the shimmering meant, because she could see everyone leaving trails behind them as they went. Besides the color, there was a sort of signature to each one, and over the years, Senna became adept at recognizing them. She could tell at a glance the difference between a human and an animal, or between the different species, and if she looked closely, she could sort out the tracks so clearly that he could follow the path of a single person or individual beast.

MORE ACTIVE VERBS AND REFINED SENTENCES

(third or fourth draft -- eliminate any last vestiges of passive)

Senna and her father set the traps together, for Senna possessed the unique ability to see the trails of the animals they hunted.

Father never saw the thin and shimmering trails in the air that marked the passage of living creatures through the world. His blindness to it seemed like a failure to him. But to Senna, her "trail eyes," as she called them, felt natural and effortless, always a part of her vision. The newer the path of the animal, the more blue the shimmer. Older ones glowed in hues of green or waned to yellow, and the truly ancient ones softened to a dark red.

As a toddler, Senna quickly learned what the shimmering meant, because she saw everyone leaving trails behind them as they walked or ran. Besides the color, a signature of sorts attached to each one, and over the years, Senna became adept at recognizing them. She knew at a glance the difference between a human and an animal, or between the various species, and if she looked closely, she could sort out the tracks so clearly that following the path of a single person or individual beast came easily.

MORE INFUSION OF IMAGINATION, NUANCE, AND EMOTION

(draft five or six -- towards a major award - National Book or Nebula?)

Senna and her father set the traps together, for Senna possessed the power to see the trails of the animals they hunted--often dangerous trails that led the two of them into wounding thickets or up the slick trunks of tamarand trees, following wild Cholu monkeys that set traps for predators like themselves.

Father never saw the thin shimmering trails in the air, scattered all around and leading every which way, looking as if interweaving spiders had drawn impossibly gigantic webs. He could not mark the passage of living creatures through the world, and blindness to it seemed like a failure to him. Senna knew he felt jealous. Her instincts often contradicted his own hunting wisdom, and that especially irritated him. But to Senna, her "trail eyes," as she called them, felt natural, her ability effortless and always part of her vision. The newer the path of the animal, the more blue the shimmer. Older ones glowed in hues of green or waned to yellow, and the truly ancient ones softened to a dark red.

As a toddler, Senna quickly learned what the shimmering meant because she saw everyone leaving trails behind them as they walked or ran. Besides the color, a unique scent attached to each one, and over the years, Senna became adept at recognizing them. Many a time her father watched in a befuddled daze as his daughter stooped to one knee and lightly sniffed the air, breathing molecules in one part per million infused with the gossamer thread of trail. To her, humans smelled a bit salty and raw, and most animals too, but with a scent of warm earth about them. She sorted the tracks so keenly with her eyes and nose that following the path of a single human or beast came easily.

Father could only fume, or act annoyed, depending on the hour and his mood. Senna avoided him if his mood darkened, and she feared that further development of her power might make him feel even more obsolete and angry for her power grew each day. She knew that soon, she would detect the odors with her eyes alone, the hue of the trail invoking the scent within her.

THE METHOD

Do the analysis on the fiction narrative examples above and learn for yourself what it takes to make a huge difference in the quality of your writing. Note how the potential conflict with the father developed and caused complication and therefore tension, and note also the non-passive voice, and more importantly, the injections of imaginative imagery and circumstance, as well as more development of setting (e.g., the thickets, trees, monkeys, etc.).

Experiment with gradually evolving your own block of sample narrative through the four

stages. Be aggressive with your work. You'll be glad you did, and so will all your future readers.

DEAD WHALES CAN'T WAVE BACK

Don't worry about your title... Huh?

Not long ago, I attended a panel at a mega-large writer conference. It consisted of authors who had recently been published (small presses, mainstream imprints, e-presses). There were about 150 people in the room. Following a desultory lurch into relevancy on the part of the panel, one poor neophyte stood and asked the assembled if he should worry about his novel title before becoming published. Did it really matter? He'd received way too many opinions and desired a final tiebreaker. And the consensus answer? No. You don't have to be concerned, and besides, the publisher will most likely change it anyway...

I sat there dumbfounded. So basically, these people told this guy that pitching his novel or nonfiction with a crappy, foolish, or hackneyed title was perfectly fine. Not to worry! Call it whatever you want. How about THE WHINE OF ROMAN DOGS ON CELTIC WINDS? Yeah, that's a good one!... Must I spend any more space telling you why this was not only not perfectly fine advice, but perfectly stupid and self-defeating?

A bad title is like a warning siren going out ahead of your pitch, whether it be an oral pitch or query letter. It makes a horrible whining sound of warning, and it seems to be saying to those who read or listen:

This is a terrible writer, stop listening, stop reading, run screaming!

Regardless, what is your breakout title? How important is a great title before you even become published? Very important! Quite often, agents and editors will get a feel for a work and even sense the marketing potential just from a title. A title has the ability to attract and condition the reader's attention. It can be magical or thud like a bag of wet chalk, so choose carefully.

Go to Amazon.Com and research a good share of titles in your genre, come up with options, write them down and let them simmer for at least 24 hours. Consider character or place names, settings, or a "label" that describes a major character, like THE ENGLISH PATIENT or THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. Consider also images, objects, or metaphors in the novel that might help create a title, or perhaps a quotation from another source (poetry, the Bible, etc.) that thematically represents your story. Or how about a title that summarizes the whole story: THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES, HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS, THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP, etc.

Keep in mind that the difference between a mediocre title and a great title is the difference between THE DEAD GIRL'S SKELETON and THE LOVELY BONES, between TIME TO LOVE THAT CHOLERA and LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA between STRANGERS FROM WITHIN (Golding's

original title) and LORD OF THE FLIES, between BEING LIGHT AND UNBEARABLE and THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING.

DEEP AND FRESH TRAITS FOR MAJORS

More to know than you might guess.

Secondary characters in a story, novel, or screenplay, both major and minor, must be utilized to serve the story in several important ways. They deliver crucial exposition at the right time ("She's *not who you think* she is."), create complications and interpersonal conflicts that spice or jolt the narrative ("You can't shut me up!"), play a role in ushering the protagonist down the plot path ("If you don't leave now, the game will be lost.") or make it easier for the author to reveal facets of the protagonist's background or personality ("Have you told her you served time in prison?"), become an actual obstacle to the protagonist ("You'll die if you go there."), or serve as an interpretational viewpoint for the reader that better defines or magnifies the jeopardy, setting, or circumstances ("The Master of Dartmoor awaits, and the hounds will be released!")--or some combination of all the above.

In general, secondary characters in a story exist to push the plot forward. Following on above, allow them to generate plot-related interpersonal conflict as often as possible. It's no fun if everyone gets along.

Regardless, back to the main point. One can introduce and dynamically portray secondary characters in such a manner as to make them more dimensional as the story progresses. Some authors actually recommend that as a writer you create a list of virtues and vices (or negatives) and apply them to each of your secondary characters in order to render them less than flat and predictable; however, that process can be an arbitrary one. In fact, traits or behaviors should manifest themselves as the circumstantial and psychological dynamics of the story evolve. Inventing a list of good and bad traits ahead of time and attempting to stick to them, in this context, might well prove counterproductive.

Instead, by considering the five approaches below, you will add more depth and complexity to your secondary characters and truly get to know them much better. And shouldn't you? Your sympathy and empathy for your own creations will pour onto the page (just don't drown the reader). However, you are well advised to have a VERY GOOD concept of your plot line(s), major dramatic complication(s), theme, and sets ahead of time. Why? Because all your characters will react, role play, and be defined within those contexts. It just makes sense. How can they exist in the vacuum of the blank page? They will gasp for the air of meaning and suffocate!

In general, secondary characters in a story exist to push the plot forward. Following on above, allow them to generate plot-related interpersonal conflict as often as possible. It's no fun if everyone gets along.

Going forward, brainstorm a copious amount of thoughts and notes. You might not translate all the information to the page, but it will be on hand just in case. And now, as follows, from the relatively straightforward to the more complex. What is the "Initial Attraction" of the reader to the character? How to create a character who gains the reader's interest or concern in a reasonably short amount of time? The techniques below work for novels, shorts, stage and screenplays as well.

- Make them sympathetic by revealing they are, in one way or another, victims of unfairness, a tough life, recent bad luck, or problems of one kind or another (Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is adversely affected at school by her father's decisions, whereas Harry Potter is tortured by the Dursleys), e.g., bad accident, onset of illness, impoverishment, loss of a precious thing, etc. This IA factor may or may not be related to the "core wound" (see below). One can fall prey, so to speak, to of any number of things regardless of subconscious makeup born of a past tragedy or perceived failing.
- Utilize the tried and true method of placing the character in a form of jeopardy, i.e, threat of physical and/or emotional harm that is reasonably serious or potentially devastating. The clock is ticking for them too. Will they be exposed? Humiliated? Defeated? Captured? Die a terrible death? It would not be difficult for this factor to interact with personal stakes (see below). A defined obsession could well lead to impending dire jeopardy as the clock ticks.
- Create a character who possesses likeable traits or pursuits, e.g., possesses a quippy or quirky personality, bestows gifts of one kind or another, one of a kind expert (inventor, scientist, wizard, balloon race champion, etc.), gives to charities, protests against injustice, reads poetry to blind children, does good things for people under adverse circumstances. Nothing gratuitous, however. Allow this trait to play into the story. Perhaps it even creates trouble or heartache for the character? Why should results always be positive?

But wait. Does a character have to be "likeable" to stir ongoing interest in the reader? Of course not. And what is the perfect example of this? None other than GOLLUM, that lovably loathsome creature from Lord of the Rings, also known as Sméagol. Talk about creating

conflict, being a victim of a powerful force, issuing threats. The suspense never lets up as long as he's on the page.

Use of Personal Stakes and Backstory

What uniquely matters to any particular character? Why? What or who do they care about? Do they have a tangential or full blow subplot situation that engages or distracts them, e.g., does old Mr. Sarbanes, the last living investigative reporter in Scottsdale, have a grandchild he's putting through college? Is he struggling to keep his job?

In the novel, *Piper Robbin and the American Oz Maker*, the secondary character, Alcaeus, a resurrected Greek philosopher, is cursed by the rapid onset of a plague, but is determined at all costs to remain alive just long enough to witness the end of the world. It is important to him above all things. But why?

The best way to develop these "situational stakes" for a secondary character in the story is to first consider the character's backstory. Write down a history for the character--background, family relationships, social class, schooling, relevant watershed events. Allow this to play into their current personal stakes.

The Core Wound and the Dynamic of Desire

Explore your character deeply. Consider conscious motivation stimulated by both memory and subconscious pain. The "core wound" drives the character in certain unique ways, perhaps leads them on a journey to prove themselves. It's resolution, if it ever comes, will make them happier, healthier, or more in tune with the world around them. Does Citizen Kane come to mind? Of course, he failed to achieve resolution, and therein resided the ultimate tragedy.

However, you are well advised to have a VERY GOOD concept of your plot line(s), major dramatic complication(s), theme, and sets ahead of time. Why? Because all your characters will react, role play, and be defined within those contexts.

Fundamental and popular core wounds include loss of a parent, a broken heart, an ultimate mistake (the character could spend a lifetime trying to make amends), a big secret (the revelation of which could ruin or harm the character), or perhaps a perceived terrible failure in the character's past (a primary desire forever denied by a

moment's hesitation or a small mistake).

From *Psychology Today*:

"Core wounds tend to be things like a sense of not being enough, of being unlovable to a parent, of feeling stupid, dirty, unwanted, or ugly. No matter what your core wound may be, you can guarantee that your wound influences who you are and how you behave."

and

"Every core wound is based on a basic knowledge that we are unacceptable as we are, so we have to adjust and change to be perceived as good. It influences our self-esteem and the very fabric of our thoughts."

And one core wound is usually enough. As famous screenplay writer Peter Russell points out:

"Tony Soprano had one big wound — my mommy hates me. But a bunch of desires came out of that — I love prostitutes, I love working at a strip club, I love hurting people, I love to be violent, I love to run things, I love being a boss, I love being a dad."

For Robert Olen Butler, Pulitzer winner, novelist, screenplay writer, and distinguished professor at FSU, the central character issue involves the "dynamic of desire." As he states in an interview online:

I use the word "yearning" with my students because it suggests the deepest level of desire, which is where fiction gets to. So fiction is the art form of human yearning. You can understand it because the one craft element that we most associate with narratives is plot. Plot is simply yearning challenged and thwarted.

So what is this telling us? Might this "yearning" be related to the core wound? Could it be? You're the author. You decide.

The Art of Contrast or Contradiction

The character develops a certain pattern of behavior, lures us in, then suddenly behaves in a manner that appears inconsistent or variant, surprising, though not in a way that is ultimately confusing. It cannot just be arbitrary. There must be an underlying reason. The simplest way to create a complex character is to contradict who a character appears to be. A secondary method is to have the character desire two things in conflict--the inner clash thereby created, reminding one of the classic inner devil vs. angel fighting for dominion of the soul.

According to author DAVID CORBETT:

"A contradiction is something about a person that piques our interest because it betrays what we expect, given what else we know or have observed."

And further as general categories:

1. Contradictions Based on Physical, Ironical, or Comic Juxtaposition.

For example, a homeless girl in full makeup and perfect hair; big guys named "Smalls"; or a guy in a suit drinking out of a sippy cup.

2. Contradictions Based on Our Need to Serve Multiple Social Roles.

As Mr. Corbett Says, "The tension created by these two antagonistic impulses--to control our behavior so we 'get along' and to let go and 'be ourselves'--forms one of the core conflicts of our lives."

3. Contradictions Based on Competing Morals or Goals.

For example, most people want to earn money, but they'd also rather be free than go to work.

4. Contradictions That Result from a Secret or Deceit.

Where keeping the secret leads the character to do things they wouldn't otherwise do.

5. Contradictions Based on Conscious Versus Unconscious Traits.

For example, a character can be consciously mean to their spouse's friend because they're unconsciously attracted to the friend.

6. Dispositional Contradictions.

For example, a character can be violent in some circumstances and tender in others.

These contrasts and inner conflicts engage interest because the reader is curious as to which side will manifest itself next. Also, they create suspense since we'd like an explanation of the contrast or contradiction, and of course, they portray character complexity and depth.

The Sketch Bullets

Once you've considered the above, here are additional important brainstormers for fully

fleshed major secondary characters (minor secondary most likely won't require this much detail).

- **PHOTOS AND PHYSICAL:** You select from Internet photos of those you believe exemplify the physical form/attitude of the characters. Next, jot down the physical facets a bullet at a time, one page for pics and bullets.
- **ORIENTATION:** Practical matters of existence. You orient this secondary character in time and space, i.e., you give them a job, a current reason for being, a place they inhabit, people they know, activities they participate in. Basics of what, where, when, how, why.
- **LIFE GOAL:** What does this person wants most in life: peace? power? freedom? dignity? love? Is this ostensible goal related in any way to the core wound? Should it be?
- **PSYCHE PROFILE:** You work up a psychological profile: strongest desire(s)/dislike(s), intelligence level, emotional profile (dark or light as a whole, easy or slow to anger), attitudinal qualities (e.g., biases towards objects/people in the environment that create cognitive issues), belief system (atheist, Hindu, Republican). Again, this will be related in one way or another to their core wound, and to their history, backstory elements, but not always. A character could be born a bastard regardless of nurture factors.
- **SOCIAL REACTION PROFILE:** How do they react to others in social situations? You sketch a short anecdote that reveals this person by demonstrating how she or he behaves/reacts to a defined stimulus in the context of a social situation. Something has happened, something is said that creates tension, desire, confusion, ergo the anecdote portrays this person at their best or worst. **HINT: CONFLICT!**
- **THE CHARACTER ARC:** Given your knowledge of the major complication and story, you flow-sketch the emotional and cognitive evolution of the character from beginning to end. If she or he starts off as a ignorant louse, where to go from there? Will they epiphanize, change, require repeated motivation? All major characters evolve as the story progresses. It's mandatory, whether in fiction or film. Consider historical factors, core wound factors, immediate circumstances, role of the character in the story.

You have work ahead if you hope to accomplish the act of great secondary characters. But approach the task with passion and appropriate doses of ambition. Strive to be unique within the bounds of convention. Give freedom to your imagination and be aggressive with its application.

We will all love you for it!

DIALOGUE – NEVER A GRATUITOUS WORD OR BORING MOMENT

For starters...

Let's place this in a context rarely mentioned elsewhere. At such time dialogue becomes difficult or perplexing for writers to produce, it's usually because they have failed on some level to create interesting characters in the first place, or because they do not properly understand the role of each relevant character in the scene (please stop and [read this article now](#) if you've not already done so), or both. To complicate further, the writer may not actually understand the [role of the scene](#) in the novel. Put these three conditions together and artful dialogue becomes impossible regardless of other factors.

KEY CONCEPTS: screenplay emulation, dialogue as art, the LED, major functions of dialogue, delivery of exposition, dialogue arc, character style, tags and ellipses, provocations and disagreements, the foil character, dialogue samples.

Initial Admonitions

But let's assume the first three conditions above have been met. So where to go from here? First, a few admonitions for neophytes and middle-stagers:

1. Best not to attempt dialogue until you understand that dialogue is art, not real life. Art imitates life only insofar as necessary. In the world of art, characters say what they must and always make it clear. Unless you're obsessed with David Mamet's early work, strongly recommend not placing speech on the page that mimics actual human blathering (btw, on the subject of Mamet, strongly recommend a close reading of the brilliant [Glengarry, Glen Ross](#)).
2. Do not write novel dialogue without having first read, studied, and experimented with good screenplay dialogue. Download and read over screenplays relevant to your genre, then also watch the films, or at least a few scenes that correspond to the script. This is vital. In general, the best dialogue written these days can be found in screenplays or teleplays - not that great novel authors don't produce brilliant dialogue now and then, and we'll see a few below, but a classy smart screenplay is more likely to meet the goals for our purposes here. Later you can make useful comparisons between the two forms (you'll benefit hugely from this).
3. Don't fail to realize that screenplays teach us how to say THE MOST with THE FEWEST words. This is also vital. Again, MOST with the FEWEST. Novel dialogue should always have a reason for existence, never be gratuitous, and never overstay its welcome on the page.
4. Refrain from drafting dialogue on the novel page until you have first drafted

prototype dialogue in your literary experimentation document (LED). What do we mean? Quite simply, you maintain a separate word document for the purpose of fictional experiments conducted by you prior to insertion in the actual novel. Here you sketch a sample scene that includes chosen characters engaged in dialogue. First, create a good reason for them to converse in the context of the plot line and make certain to include elements noted below (i.e., conflict, exposition, etc.)

Functions and Forms in Brief

📌 Dialogue's major functions succinctly stated as follows (examples below):

- Advance the plot line or core conflict ("We must intervene by noon tomorrow, or we wait three months.")
- Serve as characterization (see [examples here](#))
- Create conflict or provocation (overt or implied)
- Engender suspense ("...and no one has ever gone inside and lived...")
- Create or support minor complications ("We have a problem, people.")
- Deliver exposition ("The wheeled city, driven by steam and 5,432 gears, grinds now towards Belgium.")

📌 To satisfy the above requirements, for example, dialogue may acquire the following forms:

- Expression of fear or apprehension over a circumstance or event ("Did you see that? By the gods, we're done!")
- Sexual mating play: posturing, advances, overt and covert ("Kiss me, you fool.")
- Arguments or disagreements of varying degree ignited by viewpoint disagreements or personality clash ("Hell is too good for you.")
- Provocative topics introduced or continued (Dr. Yen replied to the student, "The soul, even the personality... all a fraud. They really don't exist.")

Critical for Both Screen and Novel

Enter late, leave early. No different than novel plotting, best to begin dialogue *in media res*. What do we mean? From masterclass.com on the subject of writing sharp screenplay dialogue: "Small talk is prevalent in real life, but it can be dreadfully boring to watch two people chat about the weather and other pleasantries on screen. One way to rectify this is to enter the conversation as late as you possibly can. This technique can you help you write better dialogue by allowing you to skip the boring, introductory remarks and unnecessary follow-up questions and get straight to the heart of the scene." WE couldn't have said it better!

📌 Avoid dialogue that sounds stale. Dialogue can devolve into overly familiar patterns, as if you're imitating a bad television scene. Exorcise with extreme prejudice. Best to negate this possibility ahead of time via an energetic and unique setting populated by intriguing

characters.

❗ When utilizing dialogue to deliver exposition, make certain it's accomplished at a time and in a place that makes sense relative to the story flow, i.e., delivered artfully rather than clumsily. See [notes on exposition here](#) for more details. Note classic expo delivery by Jordan Baker, Robert Cohn, and Harding.

❗ Refrain from inappropriate use of dialogue, especially irrelevant dialogue, by minor characters. From [screencraft.org](#): "Every line of dialogue in the film has to matter and move the story and characters forward. Giving lines to characters "in the room" for the mere sake that they are in the room is a very common mistake that takes away from the rest of the dialogue that should be in the script. They are there to support the lead characters and the story. If what they are saying isn't accomplishing that, it should be cut."

❗ Like characters and plot, dialogue also has a beginning, middle, and end - it's own arc, so to speak. Consider this carefully. What must be addressed and resolved? What must be introduced, but end with a mystery? From [screencraft.org](#): "Each scene of dialogue has to build to a climax, each story act of dialogue has to build to a climax, and each screenplay's dialogue has to build to that ultimate climax at the end."

❗ Insofar as possible, give the leading and major secondary characters their own dialogue style, e.g., Felonious Mack is a nervous petty criminal who hesitantly speaks with lines of clipped speech in contrast to the magnificent Jezzie Belle who presents herself as flamboyant and outgoing.

❗ Punctuation purists senselessly quibble over the use of em dashes (e.g., "You should close it and -") to signify speech interruption, and ellipses "..." to signify pauses, but only in the context of novel writing. Screenplay writers use both of these, as appropriate, and it works perfectly. Truly, it's unrealistic not to include artful pauses and interruptions in the course of dialogue. In summary, do what works, but wisely.

Dialogue Samples from Novel and Stage

From *Freaky Deaky* by Elmore Leonard. A police Detective, Chris, is staying at his father's apartment after getting kicked out by his girlfriend. This initiates an understanding of the relationship between son and father, delivers a bit of exposition, and concerns a specific topic of interest relevant to the plot line. Leonard's tags ("said") are kept simple and sparse. Also, the dialogue obeys the rule of "enter late," i.e., it opens without preliminaries, just jumps right into the subject at hand. Chris as "a lot of trouble with women."

His dad said, "You seem to have a lot of trouble with women. They keep throwing you out."

"I do what she wants, she comes up with something else, I don't talk to her."

"I don't know what it is," his dad said, "you're not a bad-looking guy. You could give a little more thought to your grooming. Get your hair trimmed, wear a white shirt now and then, see if that works. What kind of aftershave you use?"

"I'm serious."

"I know you are and I'm glad you came to me. When'd she throw you out, last night?"

"She didn't throw me out, I left. I phoned, you weren't home, so I stayed at Jerry's."

"When you needed me most," his dad said. "I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"Actually," Chris said, "you get right down to it, Phyllis's the one does all the talking. She gives me banking facts about different kinds of annuities, fiduciary trusts, institutional liquid asset funds... I'm sitting here trying to stay awake, she's telling me about the exciting world of trust funds."

"I had a feeling," his dad said, "you've given it some thought. You realize life goes on."

"I'm not even sure what attracted me to her in the first place."

His dad said, "You want me to tell you?"

From *Piper Robbin and the American Oz Maker* by Warwick Gleeson. Piper Robbin is having a talk with her father in their Brooklyn apartment as they prepare to enjoy take-out and a movie. Note the difference in tone compared to the Leonard sample above, as well as the more vibrant energy that makes the Leonard characters seem almost flat in comparison (detective mystery vs. science fantasy genre). Note also the topics discussed are provocative and curious by their very nature. This passage establishes relationship between the two characters, allows the reader to experience their personalities, and parcels in necessary exposition. Narrative interjection is not overdone, just enough to render appropriate imagery relevant to the characters. Tags are simple, and we have a few em dashes and ellipses. And what else? A bit of friendly conflict between the father and daughter.

"Impressive in a primitive way, *mon amour précieux*," Edison Godfellow said of Manhattan one night while using the remote control to locate a suitably ridiculous movie on ComFlix prior to consuming Ms. Song's khor stew, "But like a mound of ants in comparison to London."

Piper rolled her eyes. "Your old magical super city, eh?"

"Yes, my own Oz," he said, followed by a whimsical smile. "I spent years planning each and every molecule."

"But what does that matter now?"

"Next to nothing," Edison said, verging on gloom.

"And how much magic to erect those evil towers, Dad?"

"Enough to solve the debt of Ireland."

"And how many Englishmen did you piss off?"

"Thousands, but they grinned once I created flying cars."

Piper gave him the Bronx cheer.

"Daughter, how is it you can behave so immaturely after more than twenty centuries?"

"Dad, sometimes it's you who act like a child. Think of the good you could have done in the world with all that magic... And by the way, you've spouted off about London at least five times over the past week. Do you really need to rabbit-hole your shit?"

"Psychoanalysis is a long dead pseudo-science, Piper, and you should know—" Enough was enough!

She interrupted him with her signature snap: small white hands palm up above her mango head, arms elbows out and pushing high, her expression a big smiley face—all achieved in a quarter of a second.

In reaction, his eyebrows pinched ever so slightly, as if feeling a surge of pain. "I loathe that silly snap thing," Edison said. "Must you further enhance your preposterous role as an American?"

"I'm having fun, Dad, and for the first time since jazz was invented. Can't you see?"

"But your speech, the language you damage is not—"

"Brooklyn talk is dumb good. Brooklyn is my muther-f'n music that *talks to me*."

"Please, Piper... You attempted a farcical identity restart many years ago in Hawaii. It failed miserably."

"That's only cause King Kamehameha got too thirsty for my butt. He ruined everything. I couldn't let it go."

"Recall that once you lived as Grand Sorceress of the Holy Roman Empire. You commanded every room you ever entered with power and magnificence. Magicians feared you. Kingdoms groveled before you."

"Yeah, yeah, and I can return to those groveling moments whenever, but it all bores me, kinda like a plate of cold putz and cheese."

"Putz and cheese?"

From *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams (the following dialogue creates suspense as it helps define the character Laura, and her relationship to her mother, Amanda; it also supports the major complication, i.e., the problem with the social environs)

"Laura, where have you been going when you've gone out pretending that you were going to business college?" Amanda asked.

"I've just been going out walking."

That's not true." Amanda said.

"It is. I just went walking."

"Walking? Walking? In winter? Deliberately courting pneumonia in that light coat? Where did you walk to, Laura?" "All sorts of places—mostly in the park."

"Even after you'd started catching that cold?"

"It was the lesser of the two evils, Mother."

"From half past seven till after five every day you mean to tell me you walked around in the park, because you wanted to make me think that you were still going to Rubicam's Business College?"

"It wasn't as bad as it sounds. I went inside places to get warmed up."

"Inside where?"

"I went in the art museum and the bird houses at the Zoo. I visited the penguins every day. Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately, I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel Box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers."

"You did all this to deceive me, just for deception?"

"Mother, when you're disappointed, you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum!"

From *Private Contentment* by Reynolds Price. A man and a woman stop beside a creek to rest and talk. Elements worth noting include the value in this context of clipped speech, the lack of tags due to both characters being clearly delineated (we know who is talking), the artful delivery of exposition (about the woman), the presence of tension between the two, and the role of the man as a foil character. In other words, he exists to manifest and reflect the qualities of the woman.

"Let's don't stay here, please," she said.

"Got homework to do?"

"Latin, but that's not why."

"Scared of Nazi bombers?"

"I used to be. When the war first started, I thought every plane passing over at night had me in the bombsight. Now I doubt even Germans would want this place."

"Seems nice to me."

"It's better right down by the creek."

"I could build a fire here—"

"I said I couldn't stay here."

"Lead the way, lady."

"Don't make fun. This is where I was miserable."

"What happened here?"

She walks over and kneels beside the creek bank, dips her right hand into the water. "Is it cold? he said."

"No, warm for some reason. You can sit down here."

"Thank you. I'm tired."

"I knew you'd complain."

"I just told a simple truth."

"I used to love it here."

"You said you were miserable."

"That's why I loved it. I came here and talked to what couldn't talk back: rocks, leaves, lizards, frogs."

"What would you say?"

"I'd ask for things—a life like everybody else."

From *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. Who are we to tell James Joyce how to write, but a few of the tags and adverbs would probably be deleted by contemporary editors; however, the presence of these does nothing to dilute the intensity of the drama. Rather than lecture on the socio-political problems of Ireland, Joyce places his characters at a Christmas dinner table and let's them go at it. Mr. Dedalus is the provocateur of the conflict that ramps up to violent frequency. As a bonus, we are treated to historical exposition concerning Ireland. Also, note the added narrative interjection to match the dinner mechanics, as well as each distinctive personality and the dynamics that bring them to life: Dante, Mr. Casey, and Mr. Dedalus.

"There's a tasty bit here we call the Pope's nose. If any lady or gentleman..." He held a piece of fowl up on the prong of the carving fork ... "I'd better eat it myself because I'm not well in my health lately."

He winked at Steven, and replacing the dish cover, began to eat.

There was silence while he ate. Then he said:

"Well now, the day kept up fine after all. There were plenty of strangers down too." Nobody spoke. He said again:

"I think there were more strangers down than last Christmas." He said this then, receiving no reply, remarked bitterly: "Well, my Christmas dinner has been spoiled anyway."

"There could be neither luck nor grace," Dante said, "in a house where there is no respect for the pastors of the church."

Mr. Dedalus threw his knife and fork noisily on his plate.

"Respect!" he shouted. "Is it for Billy with the lip or for the tub of guts up in

Armagh. Respect!"

"Princes of the Church," said Mr. Casey with slow scorn.

"Lord Leitrim's coachmen, yes," said Mr. Dedalus.

"They are the Lord's anointed, Dante said. "They are an honor to their country."

"Tub of guts," said Mr. Dedalus coarsely. "He had a handsome face, mind you, in repose. You should see that fellow lapping up his bacon and cabbage on cold winter's day!"

He twisted his features into a grimace of heavy bestiality and made a lapping noise with his lips.

"Really, Simon," said Mrs. Dedalus, "you should not speak that way before Steven. It's not right."

"Oh, he'll remember all this when he grows up!" exclaimed Dante hotly. "The language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own house."

"Let him remember too," furiously cried Mr. Casey to her from across the table, "the language with which the priests and the priest's pawns broke Parnell's heart and hounded him into his grave. Let him remember that too when he grows up!"

"Sons of bitches!" cried Mr. Dedalus. "When he was down they turned on him to betray him and rend him like rats in a sewer. Lowlived dogs! And they look it! By Christ, they look it!"

"They behaved rightly," cried Dante. "Honor to them!"

WRITING NOVEL SCENES A TO Z – DRAMA, SEX, AND SASS

So now you're writing the novel, or rewriting it, or preparing to?

There is so much to consider your head has exploded and now you're groping for the parts. Nevertheless, we strongly recommend in this phase somewhere between false confidence and mortifying epiphany that you wisely execute your novel a scene at a time. No better organizing principle than this. Forget chapters, for the moment. Know that each scene serves a purpose, often more than one, e.g., pushing the plot forward while introducing a major secondary character. Each scene also evolves with its own beginning, middle, and end (see the steamy example below).

Btw, if you've not yet done so, great idea to absorb the [Six Act Two-Goal Novel](#) before continuing. Also, please review the [First Ten Steps](#), as well as our crucial articles on [setting](#), [antagonists](#), and delivering [exposition](#). Why? Because the points below will make way more sense if viewed in the proper context.

KEY CONCEPTS: story premise, storyboard, dramatic plot instances, novel elements, protagonist vs. antagonist, inciting incident, character evolution, genre novel analysis, inter-scene narrative, sex scene in three parts.

Most Important First Scenes

For starters, below are the first five dramatic plot instances that will appear in your genre novel-in-progress as you develop the novel based on a defined premise and with an aim towards creating a tale just as suspenseful and engaging as any great film.

Note that scenes might not appear in the exact order presented below (except in the case of inciting incident before first major PP). The protagonist might walk onto the stage first or immediately following portrayal of the antagonist, or not be present until after the inciting incident, etc. Nonetheless, these five plot instances occur in their own customized scene (sometimes more than one); and never forget that every major scene, and nearly every minor one, drives plot momentum and complexity in both novels and screenplays as well:

📌 **PORTRAYAL OF ANTAGONIST** - We witness [antagonist power and influence](#), in whatever way it's made manifest in the context of the story, e.g., the Opus Dei albino hunts his target in the DA VINCI CODE; Assef torments his victims in THE KITE RUNNER; Javert displays his powers and ruthless fanaticism in LES MISERABLES; the crazed slasher in SCREAM dispatches his first victim... NOTE: the plot instance below can easily be contained within this plot instance also, however, we believe it more powerful if they're distinct.

📌 **ANTAGONIST IN POSSESSION OF MAJOR GOAL** - What will the protagonist and antagonist

struggle to possess or control as the story moves forward? The mafia capo ruthlessly rules the casino; the Big Nurse controls the asylum; Tom Buchanan dominates his wife Daisy; a tyrannical King owns the "Sacred Life Stone."

🔴 PORTRAYAL OF PROTAGONIST - The protagonist appears on the page or in the film and the reader knows instinctively she or he will be matched against the antagonist (esp if the antagonist is seen first). Thus, the fate of the protagonist is foreshadowed and "dramatic irony" is manifest, i.e., the reader realizes potential doom, tragedy, or failure even before the protagonist does (thus greatly increasing concern and suspense). For this scene and others that follow keep in mind the [protagonist sympathy factors](#)--important for the first scenes!!!

🔴 INCITING INCIDENT SCENE - The initial plot instance that sets in motion an inevitable course towards the first major plot point. Katniss takes her sister's place in THE HUNGER GAMES; the general decides to search for Private Ryan in SAVING PRIVATE RYAN; the disappearance of Amy in GONE GIRL engages the town.

🔴 FIRST MAJOR PLOT POINT SCENE - Following the INCITING INCIDENT, the protagonist, in one way or another, declares or indicates they will engage in the challenge, fight, or struggle to defeat, curtail, or foil the antagonist; thus, the core rising action or conflict of the novel is launched, as well as beginning the second act of a film: the Hobbits begin their journey to destroy the Ring; Gatsby makes it clear he will reclaim Daisy; Sarah Conner joins the struggle against the Terminator.

Scene Writing by Steps

Now, a couple of points about scene writing in general. Unless you're a veteran, strongly recommend the following advice.

1. Storyboard the scene. What does that mean? In other words, sketching on paper the layout of the scene with major characters and objects to assist with spatial placement and movement as necessary. This could ideally involve a bit of artful drawing combined with scene notes. In your scene notes, include the major characters and the particular set details (where, what, who). State the purpose of the scene in one or two lines and know its relation to the overall plot line going forward, e.g., from the points above, you would state "Inciting incident" and go from there.

Don't overlook all the novel elements that must be established in and around these first five dramatic scenes, and that includes the bulk of [necessary exposition](#), [setting details](#), introduction of [major characters](#) and [important secondary ones](#), establishment of the [primary conflict](#) or "agon," and more. Refer to the [Six Act Two-Goal](#) for additional information.

2. Chart and establish all the major plot instances that follow on the first five above, e.g., your first major reversal. List them and add notes for each one as you consider their role in the novel. Just know, they're not set in stone yet. Editorial development will follow. Refer to the [Six Act Two-Goal](#) for additional information.

3. Following on above, and as additional guidance, locate the inciting incident and first major plot point scene in at least three of your favorite genre novels. Analyze these scenes, note how they develop, and begin to write your own experimental scenes based on our notes here, and what you've observed in the examples. THIS IS IMPORTANT! If you begin in this manner, you'll not only get it straight but build confidence in your own ability. The successful development of these crucial first scenes will serve as a vital guidepost going forward.

4. Within the first 50 pages of the novels you've chosen, also note via your careful analysis all the scenes that adjoin, support, and complement the five major dramatic scenes already noted above. Make a list of them and write down the purpose they serve in the novel. THIS WILL BE INVALUABLE to you going forward. Trust us!

Also, overview the types of "glue narrative" (or pre-scene and post-scene narrative: example below) you find between distinct scenes. What purpose do they serve in the novel? Write down your glue narrative observations gathered from the novels you're reading.

5. Character Evolution - as part of the process of sketching and developing your first scenes, take note of [character development](#) and roles as the story chugs forward, momentum increasing. Consider the point-of-view character in the particular scene (if written third person POV, this character might well vary from scene to scene) and their predisposition, character traits, back story, and anything else that might be relevant. Why? Because the viewpoint of this character will inevitably bring a certain tone and filter to the scene.

See the WE notes on this here. Also, keep in mind that quite often, whatever happens in the scene will bring some degree of change to the character in question--small or large. What will it be? Why will it matter? What purpose will it serve?... Keep in mind too [the character's overall arc](#) throughout the novel. Is the scene supporting it, or perhaps, is the scene changing it? That can happen.

6. Once you've drafted a few scenes, up to and including your INCITING INCIDENT, return to them after a few weeks (see [Self-Editing Technique](#)) and verify proper application and emphasis of all the major elements. Do you see the cinema? Do you feel the momentum? Is the exposition parceled in properly? Is the suspense there? Is the setting serving its purpose? Is the point of view correct? Are all these scenes developing character and pushing the plot forward at the same time?

BTW, here is another article on [advanced scene development](#). Worth a read.

Inter-scene Narrative and Sex

"Glue narrative" also known to us as inter-scene narrative. Like scene narrative, it delivers the major elements we've discussed so far (exposition, setting, etc.), but outside the framework of an actual scene. It's not live action narrative that makes you feel as if the characters and circumstances are evolving dynamically in front of your eyes, no, rather it mimics a near omniscient or "sweeping" narrator style, immersing the reader in a panoramic world of time shifts, brief flashbacks, energetic exposition, and wide-angle camera vistas--whatever is necessary to relate the story outside the confines of the formal scene.

Quite often, the narrative in question possesses an anecdotal quality to it, whether related in first or third person, and more often than not, dialogue is absent (though exceptions exist, e.g. a short anecdotal flashback wherein a character is heard speaking one or two lines).

The example below:

Senna and her father set the traps together, for Senna possessed the power to see the trails of the animals they hunted--often dangerous trails that led the two of them into wounding thickets or up the slick trunks of tamarand trees, following wild Cholu monkeys that set traps for predators like themselves.

Father never saw the thin shimmering trails in the air, scattered all around and leading every which way, looking as if interweaving spiders had drawn impossibly gigantic webs. He could not mark the passage of living creatures through the world, and his blindness to it seemed like a failure to him. Senna knew he felt jealous. Her instincts often contradicted his own hunting wisdom, and that especially irritated him. But to Senna, her "trail eyes," as she called them, felt natural, her ability effortless and always part of her vision. The newer the path of the animal, the bluer the shimmer. Older ones glowed in hues of green or waned to yellow, and the truly ancient ones softened to a dark red.

Father could only fume, or act annoyed, depending on the hour and his mood. Senna avoided him if his mood darkened, and she feared that further development of her power might make him feel even more obsolete and angry, for her power grew each day.

[transition to live action scene - set-up then into dialogue]

With the arrival of summer, the two of them journeyed once more in search of the Cholu monkeys, knowing full well the dangers, but Cholu fur brought huge rewards at the marketplace in Ulaanbatar, the closest town.

Father insisted on taking the lead during their foray as they ascended into highland country where the tamarand trees thrived in the cooler temperatures of the Massanutten foothills. Senna agreed without a word, just nodded. Over the past year,

she'd begun to change her mind about hunting the Cholu. She found the practice rather cruel, despite the rewards. She could have sworn that a Cholu once tried to speak to her as it was dying. But the gods knew, talking Cholus or no, Senna and her father desperately needed coin to stay alive--the kind only Ulaanbatar provided.

"We will bag a dozen Cholu this time out," her father said.

"I'm not sure we should," Senna said, her voice weak with anticipation of the consequences.

"What do you mean?"

Above, you see a distinct difference between inter-scene and following scene narrative that creates a stronger camera-eye focus.

And now, a short sex scene by Jennifer Weiner from her novel WHO DO YOU LOVE? Noted below, the beginning, middle, end. Man's point of view, and it ends with his fantasy:

BEGINNING (set-up, light the match, emotional response, reflection)

They walked in silence through the parking lot. When they got to his car, he hugged her, holding her tightly against him, an embrace still on the right side of propriety, one that could still be considered friendly, but only just. When they broke apart, her face was flushed, her eyes shining.

"I hope it won't be another three years before we see each other again."

MIDDLE (decision, action, emotion escalates, narrative verve escalates)

Instead of answering, Rachel reached for him, putting her small, warm hand on the back of his neck, lifting her lips to his. They kissed, first lightly, then more urgently, his tongue in her mouth, her hips tilted against his, her breasts against his chest, her whole body sending a message that was undeniable.

"Want to come up?" he asked.

She'd left her bags in his apartment, with the understanding that they'd pick them up after dinner and he'd take her to the hotel she'd booked. More than once, when they'd been talking, he'd offered her his bed, saying he'd sleep on the couch, and Rachel had turned him down, politely but firmly.

Without a word, she climbed into the passenger seat, smiling at him, saying, "Yes."

They started kissing again. Her tongue fluttered against his, and his hands were deep in the softness of her hair, and it was like time unspooled, carrying them right back to when they were teenagers.

END (verve and action ebb, resolution, reflection)

He pulled her against him, thinking that he'd never get her close enough, that if he

could fold her inside of him, like a mother tucking a baby into her coat, he'd do it. He'd keep her warm, he'd keep her safe, he'd keep her with him, always.

STORYBOARD YOUR NOVEL SCENES

If you're working on a commercial fiction or narrative non-fiction manuscript, you will benefit if you view your project as possessing three layers of increasing complexity:

Layer I: Overall story premise and plot. These involve top level decisions regarding major characters, the overall setting, plot line evolution, dramatic complications, theme, reversals, and other, as defined in the Six Act Two-Goal Novel guide (see below).

Layer II: The actual scenes in the story, as well as the nature of the inter-scene narrative. Consider your story generally composed of units of scene, each scene performing specific tasks in the novel, always moving the plot line(s) forward and evolving the character(s). Each scene contains an opening set, an evolution of middle, and conclusion. But whether scene-based, or inter-scene, this layer comprises the matter and techniques that clarify and evolve the matters of Layer I.

Layer III: The narrative composition and delivery of your scenes and inter-scene text. This includes proper point of view(s), overall tone, the quality of the narrative prose in terms of sentences, cinema, emotion display, metaphor, and more.

But for our purposes here, let's focus on Layer 2.

Examining the progress of a protagonist or major character as they struggle and strive through the story within the context of any given scene, we can divide the vast majority of scenes into three general types. As you seek to storyboard each scene in the manner of a film director--sketching out visual setting and structural progression--carefully overview the notes below before you begin.

Types of scenes as follows:

1. Goal-to-Failure (for protagonist or other character)

- Goal
- Conflict or Complication
- Failure or Victory at a Cost

Goal: *What does your protagonist or other major character(s) desire or wish to accomplish?* What circumstance do they wish to come about? What objective do they want to achieve? Whatever they want should relate directly or indirectly to the progression of the major plot line(s) (or subplot). The Goal must be clear to the

character and the reader (otherwise we have FINNEGAN'S WAKE). This assures you will write scenes with a point that relates to the bigger story, as well as create a character who is actively engaged, not just a victim or bystander. Very important!

Conflict: *What are the obstacles your character faces?* If he/she doesn't struggle in some manner for the goal, if no conflict of any kind present, you risk a dull read (esp if you're wrting high-impact genre fiction). Set your sights on at least two obstacles to overcome in any given scene. If only one, make it a BIG ONE, i.e., as appropriate for the setting and genre, as well as the role of the scene in the story.

Failure, Calamity, or Victory at a Cost: *the character might come close but fails ultimately to reach the goal; reaches it only in part (and with difficulty), or achieves it but at a real cost* (another character perishes, or another problem created, e.g., King Arthur is rescued but becomes a zombie as a result, etc.). You have to keep the page turning, regardless of the genre.

2. Goal-to-Success (for antagonists)

- Goal
- Conflict or Complication
- Success or Victory (perhaps in unexpected way)

Same as above, except in this case, the antagonist might score a victory or three. It can't be a cake walk for them, and a downside effect might well be evident, however, victory nonetheless. And if the reader knows, but the protagonist doesn't, you have a great situation of DRAMATIC IRONY in the works that creates extra suspense.

In order for Isabel to align with Roberta's enemy, Joanie Cunningham, to get Roberta fired from her new management job as director of the Government for Citizens Project, Isabel must make a deal with Joanie that compromises her or forces her to give up something important to her. And if the reader likes Roberta, and knows this is coming, they fear for their beloved character.

3. Reaction-to-Decision (for any character)

- Reaction
- Dilemma
- Decision

If a Goal-to-Failure (GTF) scene occurs, your character's forward movement has been reversed or at least hampered or complicated. A scene that reacts to that condition or fact is almost always necessary.

Reaction: What is the emotional and consequential reaction to the failure that took place in the previous scene? The conflict is lost and the protagonist sits on the bank of a metaphorical river, pondering fate and life. She or he is angry, hurt, confused, dyspeptic, all of the above. Keep in mind that emotional states progress, for example, from anger to despair to resolve.

Dilemma: As a result of the GTF have you created a new circumstance with zero or few good options? Options with potentially negative outcomes? Options that might not be workable? Your protagonist or major character (POV character/narrator or no) must be facing a significant dilemma. The reader wonders what can possibly happen next. What seems to be the lesser-of-the-evil options?

Decision: How does the protagonist return to the dinner table or the skirmish line as a proactive character? Does the decision carry risk? Does it create new suspense? If so, how? There must always be potential downside, and perhaps in more than one way, or in a way the protagonist doesn't expect but the reader does. And what is the nature of the new goal to achieve the primary goal? If the author in MISERY has his kneecaps pounded to pulp by Kathy Bates (major reversal), he makes a decision to escape his captor in a new way, by pretending to cooperate long enough to lure her into a trap.

There is more to writing successful scenes, but once you've used the three above to lay the storyboard foundation for your scene, you can't help but be well on your way to writing competitive narrative and story.

FOUR LEVELS OF THIRD PERSON POV

Let's get to the point.

Yes, we know *CATCHER IN THE RYE* and *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* and *THE GREAT GATSBY* could never have been famous novels without the engaging first person voice of their protagonists. And yes, first person is fashionable now in select genres (only because certain successful novels in the near past were hacked out in first person, e.g., *GONE GIRL* and *THE HUNGER GAMES*, thus leading New York publishing to illogical conclusions and a very poor memory for history--think *HARRY POTTER* or *THE BOOK THIEF* for starters); however, multiple third person is the best and most cinematic way to relate a dynamic work of fiction, as will be demonstrated. Unless you know you cannot earn the brass ring without remaining a prisoner of first person voice, becoming skilled with third person variations is strongly advised.

The "Filter of Traits" - Personalities, Viewpoints, and Tone

Before getting around to the demonstration of brilliantly effective third person in action, let's examine just one of the many benefits (see list below) to utilizing the viewpoint in question.

Consider, the nature of any given 3POV narrative is dependent to a large extent on the personality of the 3POV character the author has chosen to filter and interpret the fictional environment. Therefore, by purposely placing a certain character with a specific "filter of traits" in the presence of a phenomenon that must be described or experienced (event, object, social situation, etc.) you thereby render it via the subjective lens of that character's mindset, biases, emotion, and perspectives.

A superstitious individual might imagine, for example, a dark hand of God blotting the sun in anger and see falling rain as tears; whereas the non-superstitious observer might focus instead on the sadness of a small child, her bright clothing soaked, or the frantic motions of the staff attempting to clear food off the table before it becomes spoiled by rainwater. The superstitious character might suffer more cognitive dysfunction, interpret smiles as wolfish or manipulative or death-like, the more intelligent character marveling at light and youthful appearance of the person smiling, the crinkles around the eyes, the cause of the light mood.

The examples are endless, but as you see, varying characters employed as 3POV cameras or interpreters will yield different results when placed in the same circumstance.

📌 Note also the "filter of traits" can quite effectively set a tone for the scene, or for the work as a whole, depending on the presence of the character in the novel. Certainly, the type of superstitious and/or paranoid personality noted above could easily create an ongoing dark and frightening tone in the narrative.

Narrative Examples of the Four Levels

For purposes of this study, we define four levels of third person point of view (3POV) as follows:

- Author-POV
- 3POV Distant
- 3POV Close
- 3POV First-Close

The Author-POV or APOV, refers to the author, the detached or "omniscient narrator" who steps in now and then to set the scene or make artful commentary at the right time (just *please* don't address the reader directly because that is so irritating and breaks the reader's immersion into the fictional dream).

3POV Distant or 3POV-D occurs at such time the narrative focuses on specific characters and we watch their actions like a live camera actively filming them.

3POV Close or 3POV-C takes us into the character's head and camera viewpoint shifts to the character, i.e., we see or experience, for the most part, only what the character is viewing or experiencing.

3POV First-Close or 3POV-FC dives deeper into the character's head and effectively mimics first person POV, but naturally without the usual limits of first person POV because the author can cut from the 3POV-FC and pull all the way back to APOV.

Let's look at three samples of what we're talking about from a novel published by [Del Sol Press](#) entitled WORLD MAKER - THE ASCENSION OF ROMANOVA.

APOV to 3POV-D to APOV

The following never quite makes it into 3POV-C, but verges on it. Note how the APOV returns at the conclusion:

(APOV) WHEN ONLY A CHILD OF NINE, ONE OF EARTH'S most powerful sorcerers, Zolo Bold, did something that haunted him the rest of his life. He sniffed a bee up his nose.

But no ordinary bee.

(3POV-D) After a night of howling steppe winds and falling stars spilled from The Big Dipper, he saw a white flower, like one of those stars, stemming out the next morning from a vendor's cart in Samarkand. While his mother strained to subdue him, Zolo nonetheless hopped and hummed with delight. Much to his surprise, he could smell the mind-softening scent of the blossom even from many feet away, competing bravely with the loud odors of the city market. In his mind, it seemed so radiant and mysterious that it overshadowed all the other flowers, even the enormous Silk Road orchids rumored by Christian monks to be death robbers, and the many and exotic blooms whose seeds came from Ulaanbaatar in faraway Mongolia.

When the flower merchant, a man with an ox-sized stomach, no nose, and the thinnest head Zolo had ever seen, turned to heckle a customer, Zolo Bold--whose name means Crazy Fox--saw his chance. He gently slipped from his mother's hand and took a few steps, leaning forward to smell the rose. He could not help himself, for never before in his life been in the presence of such a sky born flower. But just as his nose brushed the soft white petals and the scent filled his head, something else did too: a sharp and crawly thing.

It followed the air up his right nostril, and once lodged, began to squirm.

Zolo shrieked and jumped into the air!

His entire nose buzzed and the sound of it curled into his throat and out of his mouth. A nearby child, smaller than him and holding his mother's hand, heard the bee voice and pointed, yelling "It's bee boy! Bee boy!"

(APOV) In the years to come, Zolo Bold, the great enemy of the dark feared from Istanbul to Cathay, would remember that boy's terrified face and always attach to it all mention of the word "bee" ...

APOV to 3POV-FC to 3POV-C

Next step. Note how the lines between levels can become blurred, but once the reader accepts the reality of the 3POV narrative style, it seamlessly blends:

(APOV) After what seemed like hours, the two of them drew near their tent. (3POV-D) Zolo broke away from his mother and ran towards it as fast as he could. Once inside, he dove onto his sleeping place, made of quilted blankets, and thrust his arm beneath them. Groping around, he soon found the object he searched for: a tiny stone statue of an ancient warrior known to him only as Alexander.

He gripped the figure tightly and whispered his own quick prayer for protection. Many years before, a wandering Kazakh traveler, late of Istanbul, had given it to him as a gift and told him that Alexander once possessed the good fortune and power to rule many nations at once, that he was beloved of all gods; (3POV-C) and little Zolo

imagined a being of such power would make a formidable ally. He mumbled prayers to Alexander only on special occasions, not wishing to upset Allah, or his parents.

(3POV-D) But at the moment, his mother paid no attention. She stared out the tent into the desert, her body unmoving, as if something she saw paralyzed her.

(3POV-C) to (3POV-FC) While his mother stood in the corner of his eye, facing away from him, Zolo held Alexander close and whispered a prayer in his head:

*God Alexander,
Help my mother find my father.
I implore you.
Make my family whole again
And I will make sacrifice
To you for all my days.*

(3POV-C) He held Alexander for a few more moments, staring at his soft profile and face and wondering how such a soft-looking god could rule so many nations. But he believed it to be true nonetheless. The wanderer from Istanbul had appeared like a man of wisdom and iron, and in his eyes, Zolo saw the truth.

[NOTE: if the narrative had described the prayer rather than having us see the thoughts in Zolo's head, we would have stayed in (3POV-C)]

3POV-D to 3POV-FC

Note the transition from 3POV-C to 3POV-FC. The narrative narrows down to the actual thoughts of the 3POV character, also using italicized lines which directly mimic first person interior monologue:

(3POV-D) The old woman stared at Senna, her eyes fixing on her, never straying until she walked to within a few feet of the table. Her two escorts, still masked, let go of her and returned to the performance. The old woman's eyes dropped to the floor and Senna looked her over. (3POV-C) There was nothing special about her. Her face resembled a water-starved desert of lines and cracks, as one would expect. But suddenly, Senna heard someone speak to her: *Sing the body young.*

(3POV-FC) A voice? From the old woman? ... No.

The voice belonged to a man, though it sounded a bit strangled ... *Sing the body young.* Again! Was it in her head? She looked around. Nothing. Only Hermine and Théodo acting witless as usual, and not even seeing this old woman.

O poder é a vida ea morte, Princess Senna.

She knew that language. Galician, yes. A rare language of Spain, heavily influenced by Roman empire. It translated to "The power is life and death."

Her fingers pricked for a moment and she realized the source of the voice: *Mirza Yesun Temur*. It must be him!

Meu segredo está oculto.

My secret is hidden. She strained her eyes for him. Zolo, Willie, or whoever was right. *Tricks, illusions*. And what did the words mean? And why? ... *Sing the body young*. The words intruding into her mind forced her to look at the old woman again. Now her eyes lifted and bored into Senna, and Senna's face began to burn and felt as if dozens of small fingers walked lightly over it. *What in Beelzebub's name?* The woman's eyes implored Senna to act, as if a terrible thing were about to happen. But what?

Summary of Arguments for 3POV

- 3POV can be just as immediate and intimate as first person (see 3POV-FC example above), but without the usual constraints of being always boxed into what the first person narrator sees/experiences, sans their personality as a continuous filter. 3POV allows for multiple filters and tones, as well as first person intimacy with more than one character (multiple first person can achieve the same thing, but with more difficulty).
- If you as the author need to deliver exposition or other critical information you will have more hoops to jump through if you are confined to the viewpoint of a first person narrator who may or may not logically be capable of delivering said information. While Jodi the first person narrator is talking to Mary, Bobby has just lit the fuse a mile away. How can Jodi tell us this?
- Related to above, you can effectively describe events via the APOV and other 3POV characters even though your protagonist isn't present.
- Allows a universal or authorial voice to more easily and quickly, under a wide variety of circumstances, to define reality for the reader. The reader suspends disbelief and accepts what the author narrator is telling them, whereas first person statements and observation run the risk, in certain situations, of sounding more like opinion.
- Advantages of dramatic irony. The reader learns about upcoming circumstances that will adversely affect the protagonist before the protagonist realizes this fact. This creates suspense and heightens reader concern.

- Allows for establishment of "epic perspective" (see the opening above with little Zolo).
- Cinematic advantages. For example, in *THE ALCHEMYST* by Jonathan Stroud, we witness a scene of violence taking place in a book store. We see it through one character's viewpoint, in the store, as it plays out, then we switch to a second character outside the store, witnessing the effects of the violence from outside. Like a film, the author is able to cut back and forth and give far more dynamism to the depiction of the scene.
- Another cinematic advantage is that the APOV can start the action sometimes more readily than the first person who may get mired in TELL TELL rather than SHOW SHOW.
- Ability to jump into the heads of other characters enables author to quickly and efficiently switch settings and circumstances and thus add more variety and energy, as well bring a different tone and interpretation to the work as needed, e.g., consider the difference between the POV of a child and an elder experiencing the same circumstance.
- It's easier to physically describe the 3POV view-point character(s) - the author can simply just say straight out how they appear, or even use the camera angle of another 3POV character to render the image.

Now that you've seen the viewpoint in action. Now that you've read the advantages, you are advised to experiment with your own examples before moving on to the timeless white page of the novel in progress.

EXPERIMENTS IN HIGH IMPACT NARRATIVE – JERZY, RALPH, ITALO, AND GRAVES

Once more, the classics speak to us.

What is one of the primary reasons novels get rejected? The narrative is too passive. It ultimately falls flat, quiet, dull. Details are insufficient, metaphors lacking, a dearth of energy obvious, and naturally, circumstances on the page are predictable. So what to do? We believe in learning from great authors whose shoulders we stand on. Therefore, we've developed a means of addressing this issue.

We wish you to seek inspiration from the prose extractions below and utilize them for purposes of defeating passivity via emulation. In other words, you will intentionally choose and compose fictional subject matter for your novel that entertains, frightens, or enthralls the reader. And how? By creating a circumstance, place, thing, or event that is unique and curious *by virtue of its very nature*.

Let's engage in a few writing "prompts." You must prod the imagination and peel the onion. By the way, in the context of your own novel, your task will be much easier if you've [chosen an overall setting](#) that lends itself to vibrancy and engagement in the first place.

From Robert Grave's "Claudius the God"

Graves was a genius at utilizing set and circumstantial details to create verisimilitude in this novel of Romans battling ancient Britons. Note this unusual event and the associated imagery. Also, note the profound and engaging use of "delayed cognition" technique. Read the paragraph carefully. The author intentionally postpones the full explanation of the primary phenomenon we encounter in this scene, thereby creating suspense in the narrative. The reader can't wait for the truth.

"A British outpost was stationed in the pine copse at the farther end, and as the moon rose these watchful men saw a sight and heard a sound which filled their hearts with the utmost dismay. (Graves doesn't come right out with what this is, but rather introduces a sight and sound "which filled their hearts with dismay." As the reader completes this sentence, a dramatic question, an enigma is created.) A great bird with a long shining bill, a huge grey body and legs fifteen feet long suddenly rose through the mist a javelin's throw away and came stalking towards them, stopping every now

and then to boom hoarsely, flap his wings, preen his feathers with his dreadful bill and boom again. The Heron King! They crouched in their bivouacs, terrified, hoping that this apparition would disappear, but it came slowly on and on.

At last it seemed to notice their camp-fire. It jerked its head angrily and hurried towards them, with outspread wings, booming louder and louder. They sprang up and ran for their lives. The Heron King pursued them through the copse with a fearful chuckling laughter, then turned and slowly promenaded along the edge of the marsh, booming dully at intervals...

(Not until the next sentence does the reader learn the true nature of the Heron King.)

The Heron King was a French soldier from the great marshes which lie to the west of Marseille, where the shepherds are accustomed to walk on long stilts as a means of striding across soft patches too wide to jump. Posides had rigged this man up in a wicker-work basket... head and bill improvised of stuff-covered lathes and fastened to his head. He knew the habits of herons and imitated the walk with his stilts..."

- 🕒 Graves turns reality on its head. First the monster, then the exposition. Following on the Graves example above, consider using your imagination to invent a rather fantastical circumstance (in the context of your own novel) with the delayed cognition technique. In other words, portray a phenomenon with a surprise true identity, and depict this circumstance through the viewpoint of a character who is surprised or shocked by it, then use your narrator to explain the true nature as Graves did above.

From Jerzy Kosinski's "The Painted Bird":

"From behind the cemetery appeared a mob of village women with rakes and shovels. It was led by several younger women who shouted and waved their hands ...The women held Ludmila down flat against the grass. They sat on her hands and legs and began beating her with the rakes, ripping her skin with their fingernails, tearing out her hair, spitting into her face. Lekh tried to push through, but they barred his way. He tried to fight, but they knocked him down and hit him brutally. He ceased to struggle and several women turned him over on his back and straddled him. Then the women killed Ludmila's dog with vicious shovel blows."

① Using the example above, write a short vignette that describes a group of human beings engaged in a task both energetic and filled with conflict. Use characters from your own novel. Invent as necessary. As we've said, and will say again, imagination is your best friend. Be aggressive with it.

"Here and there I saw ax cuts on tree trunks. I remembered that Olga had told me that such cuts were made by peasants trying to cast evil spells on their enemies. Striking the juicy flesh of the tree with an ax, one had to utter the name of a hated person and visualize his face. The cut would then bring disease and death to the enemy. There were many such scars on the trees around me. People here must have had many enemies, and they were quite busy in their efforts to bring them disaster."

① Write a second short vignette describing a single visual phenomena of sufficient complexity that will surprise the reader with its unusual nature, and which also makes a statement on the human condition. Be original! This should be something unusual and taken from your novel. If you don't have it, improvise.

From Ralph Ellison's "The Invisible Man":

"On Eighth Avenue, the market carts were parked hub to hub along the curb, improvised canopies shading the withering fruits and vegetables. I could smell the stench of decaying cabbage. A watermelon huckster stood in the shade beside his truck, holding up a long slice of orange-meated melon, crying his wares with hoarse appeals to nostalgia, memories of childhood, green shade and summer coolness ... Stale and wilted flowers, rejected downtown, blazed feverishly on a cart, like glamorous rags festering beneath a futile spray from a punctured fruit juice can. The crowd were boiling figures seen through steaming glass from inside a washing machine ..."

From Italo Calvino's "Under The Jaguar Sun"

"Waiting for evening to fall, we sat in one of the cafes under the arcades of the zocalo, the regular little square that is the heart of every old city of the colony -- green, with short, carefully pruned trees called almendros, though they bear no resemblance to almond trees. The tiny paper flags and the banners that greeted the official candidate did their best to convey a festive air to the zocalo. The proper Oaxaca families strolled under the arcades.

American hippies waited for the old woman who supplied them with mescaline. Ragged vendors unfurled colored fabrics on the ground. From another square nearby came the echo of the loudspeakers of a sparsely attended rally of the opposition. Crouched on the ground, heavy women were frying tortillas and greens."

🔔 With inspiration from both Ralph Ellison and Italo Calvino, imagine you are a camera sweeping across a big set with many different items included. Describe a place and note colors, movement, sounds and smells. Include bits of things, details of the set, types of people and their activities. Be vibrant with your description. Find something unique about the place you describe, and if you can't do that, find or invent a place wherein a unique or anomalous thing exists.

Big doses of imagination. How many times do we need say it? Living there, you'll be free, if you truly wish to be.

A GREAT DAMP LOAF OF DESCRIPTION – EXPERIMENTS IN FICTIONAL IMAGERY

Prepared for appropriate frustration and tapped out fingers?

Using our favorite "stand on the shoulders of the classics" approach, we're going to examine the role of detailed character description when it comes to enhancing prose narrative. We've touched on this previously with our [High Impact Narrative](#) article and a caboose of [Enhancement via Nabokov](#), but we're not done yet. Let's look at various examples and techniques.

A GREAT DAMP LOAF

From Annie Proulx's "The Shipping News":

"A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair rucked back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face."

Note that Proulx first makes a single statement of character impression before moving on to details, i.e., "A great damp loaf of a body." Note also, "shaped like a crenshaw." Consider your setting and choose an aspect of it to create a comparison to your own character. If your character lived in a desert town you might say, "his face unshaved for days, rough as prickly cactus."

"Ed Punch talked out of the middle of his mouth. While he talked he examined Quoye, noticed the cheap tweed jacket the size of a horse blanket, fingernails that looked regularly held to a grind stone. He smelled submission in Quoye, guessed he was butter of fair spreading consistency."

Consider and sketch a few metaphors to physically describe a unique character you've created. If you don't have one, perhaps you should get one ASAP? In any case, the more interesting the appearance, the easier your job. Begin with a single statement of impression and include simile or metaphor based on your novel's unique setting (is it sufficiently unique?). Note the above is third person POV.

WATCHING THE MOUTH WITH ITALO

From Italo Calvino's "Under the Jaguar Sun":

"Right in the midst of chewing, Olivia's lips paused, almost stopped, though without completely interrupting their continuity of movement, which slowed down, as if reluctant to allow an inner echo to fade, while her gaze became fixed, intent on no specific object, in apparent alarm. Her face had a special concentration that I had observed during meals ever since we began our trip to Mexico. I followed the tension as it moved from her lips to her nostrils, flaring one moment, contracting the next, (the plasticity of the nose is quite limited -- especially for a delicate, harmonious nose like Olivia's -- and each barely perceptible attempt to expand the capacity of the nostrils in the longitudinal direction actually makes them thinner, while the corresponding reflex movement, accentuating their breadth, then seems a kind of withdrawal of the whole nose into the surface of the face)."

"Right in the midst of chewing..." The character is engaged in an action. Focus on one physical attribute, then another. "As though" what? Consider, she or he, looks "as though" or "as if"? Where are the eyes? What are they doing? Is the face twitching, moving? How? And now, time to [unleash the PNE](#) here. Look it over carefully. This is an ideal brainstorming prompter for prose narrative conception and description - the perfect onion peeler.

Apply at least [five PNE questions](#) to your character's face and overall appearance. Take your time and think about it carefully... Note the example above is first person POV, but third person POV works as well.

UPDIKE'S MOTHER IS ANGRY

(from John Updike's "The Centaur")

"A glance at my mother's mottled throat told me she was angry. Suddenly I wanted to get out: she had injected into the confusion a shrill heat that made everything cling. I rarely knew exactly why she was mad; it would come and go like weather. Was it really that my father and grandfather absurdly debating sounded to her like murder? Was it something I had done, my arrogant slowness? Anxious to exempt myself from her rage, I sat down in my stiff peat jacket and tried the coffee again. It was still too hot. A sip seared my sense of taste away."

Now describe a character who is familiar to you, like a family member, and depict them in a charged emotional state. Also, add at least one rumination like Updike did above, i.e., "Was it something I had done, my arrogant slowness?"

CHABON AND NEFF'S HUNSECKER LOOKS PACINO

From Michael Neff's "All the Dark We Will Not See"

"First of all, Mr. Basil R. Hunsecker acted and looked the stereotypical bad boss: a middle-aged prick in three-piece gray and tacky pink tie who disturbingly resembled Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon* (narrow head and brooding Italian look), only an older version, with a thinner face, pock-marked cheeks, and big, protruding, blue-bone eyes that sucked in everything and contrasted in an irritating way with his sallow brown skin—as if he were the victim of one too many spray tans. His odor, somewhat unique, like cooked shellfish marinated in mildew. What Manny didn't know was that Hunsecker remained the owner not only of a rare, painful, and mummifying disease that ate away the body fat between his skin and muscles, but also of more than one post-pubescent social trauma, his memory way to full of punky kids screeching at him: Hey, pizzaaa face, you fucking shithead pizzaaa face!"

From Michael Chabon's "Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay"

"Then a hand as massive and hard as an elk's horn, lashed by tough sinews to an arm like the limb of an oak, grabs the boy by the shoulder and drags him back to the wings... "You know better, young man," says the giant, well over eight feet tall, to whom the massive hand belongs. He has the brow of an ape and the posture of a bear and the accent of a Viennese professor of medicine. He can rip open a steel drum like a can of tobacco, lift a train carriage by one corner, play the violin like Paganini, and calculate the velocity of asteroids and comets, one of which bears his name."

Apply the techniques and lengthy description of Neff and Chabon to describe a unique or outrageous individual of your own creation. Be bold and imaginative with your strokes. Use metaphor, simile, the wallop of a single first impression. Feel free to make the character move and speak if you wish. Be aggressive and prototype your sketch first.


Now, are you on your way to becoming a masterful prose stylist? Perhaps, but this is just the beginning.

THE PROSE NARRATIVE ENHANCER – PEELING FOR DETAILS

You are a writer.

Among other things, it is your task to faithfully explore and conjure your fictional world. You have below the perfect means for initiating this process. When it comes to creatively writing descriptive narrative, or simply generating conceptual thought regarding a specific object/ person/ place/ event/ condition in the novel, the question prompts below are indispensable. They prod you, the writer, into peeling the layers, into going deeper than you would have imagined possible.

REMEMBER, EVERYTHING THAT EXISTS HAS VARIED DIMENSION AND FORM DEPENDING ON THE OBSERVER. Things exist in the mind as hazy memory, and in reality as measurable matter; they also exist in a place and time, betwixt and between, in dark and light. They affect us in varying ways. Imagine the difference between an object foreign to you and one familiar and sentimental - a child's toy, for example.

 Keep in mind the results below were derived from pages of notes. The method here is to use the questions to brainstorm every aspect and nuance that comes to mind, jotting down all results without hesitation. Once done, your answers and tangents can later be tweaked, rearranged, and rewritten into usable form, and quite often so much product develops that you'll never have need for every bit (as you'll see below). Even an object simple as a woman's dress (viewed in a natural setting) possesses angles and facets you might never have imagined or thought to notice. Let's take a look.

The first five questions are foundation. The balance of question prompts serve to peel and enhance the subject even further.

The Dress

Q: What of appearance? How to describe?

A: at a distance, a small cloud, one that the sun will soon dissolve; like a shadow of leaf on the bottom of a pond; like striking a match in a night-black and windowless room, the flame thereof made nervous by breath; a soft attraction with feet to carry it, arms to straighten it; sometimes a bell or a letter of alphabet between the trees, only for a moment.

Q: Where does it occur?

A: Between the peaks of the Blue Ridge; on the banks of the Ohio; in your eyes; on a lake at night, between a short pine and a high moon; inside us; between A-berg and B-ville.

Q: What is the origin?

A: the timid, nervous, and forgotten fashion designer who graduated from Hell's Kitchen onto Broadway; the spume and spray of ancient silk worm; the weaving by furrowed hands, brown

hands, who as they toil dream of magazines and the privileged godling women who live there in pink-sherbert worlds of beach and sea.

Q: What does it do? What is the effect?

A: it yields to wind, colors her with youth, bestows her with a vivacity she could never have had otherwise, sheathes her in confidence, sprays outward, blooms, effloresces, bell-shaped; fuses a memory just long enough to be harbinger of a long regret, an enduring bitterness and despair later - whenever it resurfaces.

Q: Who does it affect?

A: Emile and the gang couldn't stop talking about it. They made undulating, downward motions with their hands, as if tracing a fall of water over stones. Ms. Eliza, well, you could only say that she was shocked by it. Margie Tillman searched through every store from Santa Maria to San Luis Obispo to find one just like it. The entire town quaked and thrilled and blustered to the shape of the dress, to the song of the dress.

Even More Dress - Secondary Level

Q: Does it have an edge, a geometry, a form?

A: amorphous, fluid flutter, as if wash on the line, three hours of cloud at once...

Q: A mass, texture? What is the composition?

A: light as light, as breath, whitesoft; woven angel hair, etc.

Q: What does it stand in contrast too? How?

A: to the shadows of the valley, to the sky, to my gloom, to her discouragement, to the scowls and dark thoughts of those who envy it.

Q: How does it bend and warp and effect the space about it?

A: it obscures/hides the space, quiets it, as a giant step of dawn that dissolves the grey, pushes other space to the corner of the eye where it is quickly forgotten, blurring, dilution; or an energizing of the environs instead ...

Q: What is the poetic purpose of it?

A: to be flowed upon by shadows of leaves, a crumble of brown and sun-yellow moving across it; to create loss where no loss existed, to create a yearn for youth where it was once forgotten, to recall a time of happiness once unable to be recalled.

Q: What are its advantages and disadvantages, psychological and physical?

A: It fosters illusions which take hold and germinate, expand to become mythos, assure a future tragedy of realization of a truth of age and life more mundane and mean than could ever have been thought possible.

Q: What is the ripple effect, i.e., what causal chain does it set into motion?

A: The envy sets in motion a long term resentment which later manifests itself in pettiness or hatred. The wonder and symbolism causes an elation that soon finds the owner, on that particular day, lifting face to the sun and sky, giving thanks for life.

Q: It evolves to become? What is the climax/denouement? What condition, form will it assume at this time?

A: snagged a bit at a time on dried winter, scattered in wasted lots like cold paper, scrubbed in black grease and squeezed by painful hands to a tiny knot; frayed to a hundred threads and snagging knots, to litter, to confetti, to jaundiced shreds like dying leaves, earthbound; singular and perspiring as memory from the skin, evaporating to the steam of dumbled beings, loosed to the wind, the memory breaking apart bit by bit or else dislodged into the blood, released as energy, a radioactive half-life decay of dress...

NARRATIVE ENHANCEMENT VIA NABOKOV

A snapshot below from the Algonkian Writer Conference Competitive Fiction Guide on the subject of learning the craft of narrative enhancement from a variety of successful authors. This example features Nabokov.

Nabokov's narrative in *Lolita* pushes forward largely due to his gift for discerning meaning and detail in everyday life (which is necessary since Humbert H. is a hard character to cheer on) and reporting it with the flair of a phenomenal writer. Basically, however, you can break Nabokov's categories into observations, ruminations, and fantasy. Here we see examples as Humbert wanders a department store looking to buy underwear for Lolita:

Narrator observes the behavior and quirks of others: "The painted girl in black who attended to all these poignant needs of mine turned parental scholarship and precise description into commercial euphemisms, such as *petite*. Another, much older woman in a white dress, with a pancake make-up, seemed to be oddly impressed by my knowledge of junior fashions; perhaps I had a midget for a mistress ..."

Fantasy: "I sensed strange thoughts form in the minds of the languid ladies that escorted me from counter to counter, from rockledge to seaweed, and the belts and the bracelets I chose seemed to fall from siren hands into transparent water."

Reporting bits and bits, things upon things: "Goodness, what crazy purchases were prompted by the poignant predilection Humbert has in those days for check weaves, bright cottons, frills, puffed-out short sleeves, soft pleats, snug-fitting bodices ... Swimming suits? We have them in all shades. Dream pink, frosted aqua, glans mauve, tulip red, oolala black."

Ruminations on the ability of objects and organizations to affect human life: "There is a touch of the mythological and the enchanted in those large stores where according to ads a career girl can get a complete desk-to-date wardrobe, and where little sister can dream of the day when her wool jersey will make the boys in the back row of the classroom drool."

Surreal metaphors: "Lifesize plastic figures of snubbed-nosed children with dun-colored, greenish, brown-dotted, faunish faces floated around me. I realized I was the only shopper in that rather eerie place where I moved about fish-like, in a glaucous aquarium."

The type and quality of narrative here is obviously dependent to a large extent on the personality of the narrator continuously engaged in filtering and interpreting the environs. The narrator chooses to focus on things which interest him, comments on behavior he finds odd or objectionable, reveals his fantasies, etc. So what do you as a writer learn from this? By placing a specific character with well defined traits at an event, or in the presence of something which must be described or experienced, you render that event or object in such a way as to reflect the character's mindset, biases, emotion, beliefs, and perceptions.

Also, when considering the creation of complex narrative filtered through the mind of a suitable character, you would be well advised to use the Nabokov approach we see above. In other words, before you begin to write the scene, first sketch the scene and its parts, then brainstorm each nuance and part by creating a fantasy, an observation, an associative flow of thought, etc. Keep a journal of these author ruminations and parcel them into the scene as necessary at such time you write the first draft. Later, this manner of brainstorming a narrator's mind will come naturally to you.

Therefore, choice of character viewpoint when rendering an entire work, or a scene, or a chapter can be critical. Consider carefully!

It could make the difference between a mediocre novel and a great novel.

BOOT "WAS" FOR MORE VERVE

DO NOT ALLOW "TO BE" VERBS TO DOMINATE YOUR NARRATIVE

Overuse of "was" and "were": an all too common feature of many young manuscripts. Yes, Janet Evanovich might use them a lot, or another author like Orson Scott Card, sure, but why do you wish to copy them? You're not Evanovich or Card, so the odds you can get away with instances of passive writing are much slimmer. Besides, why not write prose narrative that possesses more verve due to the liberal application of stronger verbs and more interesting sentence structure? Even Janet could benefit now and then!

Let's make a comparison. And keep an eye on "had" and "have" also:

"Her love for the Kensai had driven her mad at times and there were moments when she had desired that this emotion was less overwhelming, but that would have made her ambitions for them less realizable. She knew also there was no way to know what form her love would take or if it might actually hinder her in some manner, and had resolved herself to view her mission of seeking a new homeland for the Kensai as one of irrevocable obligation, not to be disrupted by the reckless nature of her passions. Yet she had not arrived at this conclusion easily. She was worried and confused by another pressing concern. While finding a new homeland for them was the ultimate goal, returning the remains of Leopold II to Belgium was a task she had not forsaken."

And now a version of the narrative minus too much was/were and had/have:

"Love for the Kensai drove her mad at times, and she often wished that her emotions behaved in a manner less overwhelming, but if her wish became true, her ambitions for them would become less realizable. She also knew she could never predict what form her love would take, or if the power of it might actually hinder her. She therefore resolved to view her mission of seeking a new home for the Kensai as one of irrevocable obligation, not to be disrupted by the reckless nature of her passions. But this resolution did not come easily. Though finding a new homeland remained the ultimate goal, she swore to herself not to forsake the task of returning the remains of Leopold II to Belgium."

Your solution: do a universal search-and-replace for all instances of "was"/"were"/"had"/"have" ... and while you're at it, check for too many uses of "would"/"but"/"that" as well as any other words you might overuse. And do this before you begin your third draft.

THE SUBLIME INNER VOICE BY GAIL GODWIN

Interior Monologue

Over the years, author Gail Godwin has excelled at observing and commenting on the human condition via her characters. To a significant extent, the power of her narrative depends on her ability to create interesting personalities whom she then dissects. Overall, this narrative of interior monologue serves as a model for aspiring authors looking to do something similar with their own characters.

The following excerpts are from her classic novel, *Evensong*, the story of Margaret Bonner, the pastor of a church in a small town, and how she interprets and reacts to the people in her life. And btw, though this is in first person, the method can easily be translated into third person also.

"Would Gus and Charles, as involved in their building and doctoring as Adrian and I were in our school mastering and pastoring, be able to live up to the words better than we were doing? I hoped so. I hoped so for their sakes. I sketched a Celtic cross in the left-hand corner of the card and began shading in the background. What had happened to Adrian and me? In my more pragmatic moods, I tried to settle for the practical explanation: our jobs were making so much of us that we had not time left to make much of each other. But by nature I wasn't a pragmatist; I was a digger, a delver into complexities."

"At the bottom of my father's Slough of Despond, I now realized, had bubbled a dependable tiny wellspring of lugubrious self-love: somehow he had been at ease lolling in his melancholy. Whereas at the bottom of Adrian's despondence, I had discovered, lay a flinty bedrock of self-hatred. But if my father had been something of a loller, my husband was a fighter: his whole history testified to this. He'd work hard and achieve a profession, then heed a call to a fuller use of his potential, bravely pull himself up by the roots, and expand his skills: from Chicago to Zurich, from Zurich to seminary, from seminary to the church, from church to this experimental school in the mountains of western North Carolina. "A falling short of your totality" was how he had defined sin on the day I met him in my father's garden, and he was still at work trying to fill out his own totality. But then there'd be an emotional setback—the death of my father, the death of our unborn daughter, the death of Dr. Sandlin—and, whereas anyone would be plunged into grief, he plunged beyond grief, right back down to that hard, cold floor of self-hate."

"As I laid aside the new sermon note card before I cluttered it with doodles, my gaze was arrested by old Farley's moon painting, which hung between the two windows in my study: Every time I looked at it I of course thought of Madelyn and the changes she had wrought on our family simply by walking into our house and being Madelyn Farley and walking out again the next morning with my mother."

"But the painting itself remained a rich source of contemplation for me. That round white disk riding the night sky between its trail of bright clouds had been created on a dark, freezing porch by an ill-humored old man who in his last years had become fixated on the moon. Why? Because its fast-rising, elliptical variations were so hard to trap in pigment and water? Or were all his moonscapes (conscious or unconscious) an exercise in self-portraiture: obsessive studies of a cold, hard, cratered, dark thing, like himself, that nevertheless had been endowed with the capacity to reflect light and beauty?"
